

Analyzing an Alpine Experience

Bosenberg Motorcycle Excursions'
Classic Alps tour.

story and photography by Clement Salvadori

Absolutely magnificent! Blasting off the Grimsel Pass, dropping down to Gletsch, Switzerland, with the great Rhone glacier looming menacingly off to the east, a quick run through the narrow Rhone River canyon to Ulrichen, then abruptly climbing 4,000 feet in eight miles to the Nufenen Pass, followed by shooting downward over a mile to Airolo. And that is just a slow morning in the Alps.

These mountains sweep from the French Riviera in a huge 700-mile arc all the way east to Slovenia and the Adriatic Sea. Hundreds of passes cross them, from the 14,500-foot Sesiajoch hiking trail between Zermatt, Switzerland, and Alagna, Italy, which we did not attempt, to the highest paved road, going over the 9,100-foot Stelvio Pass, which we did ride. We dozen riders, plus two passengers, we bagged a lot of passes.

Slam back up over the St. Goddard Pass, down to Andermatt, Switzerland, over the Furka Pass...these are roads unlike any you have enjoyed before. Riding the Alps, whether it is on Honda's ST1100 or Harley's Fat Boy, or whether the mountains are in Switzerland, Italy or Austria, is a luxury that all of us should treat ourselves to at least once. If you like that sort of riding, of course.

And it is easily done with a package tour—presuming, of course, the belief that a few thousand dollars is not terribly expensive for two weeks of biking bliss. This tour was put on by Bosenberg Motorcycle Excursions, run by Milwaukee, Wisconsin, native Leon Heindel, and called the Classic Alps.

Instead of describing my trip, I will now dissect the tour operation itself. After all, haven't we read plenty of stories about the Alps already?

Initial Contact

How did the 12 participants hear about Bosenberg? Leon has a small, personalized operation, and has chosen not to get into an expensive advertising war, relying primarily on the Internet. He ran his first tour back in the spring of 1989, and is now approaching his 50th. On this tour, Victor, one of the American participants, was the best advertisement Leon could possibly have; he had been on exactly the same tour the year before, had an incredibly good time and re-upped. A pair of Brazilians who signed up had friends who had been on BME trips. Most of the others had found the BME website, liked what they saw and signed on. The clients come, and that is what counts.

Once the deposit had been made to secure a place, Leon sent out a rather complete package, with brochures on places we would visit, a map and a thick "Tour Information Booklet."

Airport Pickup

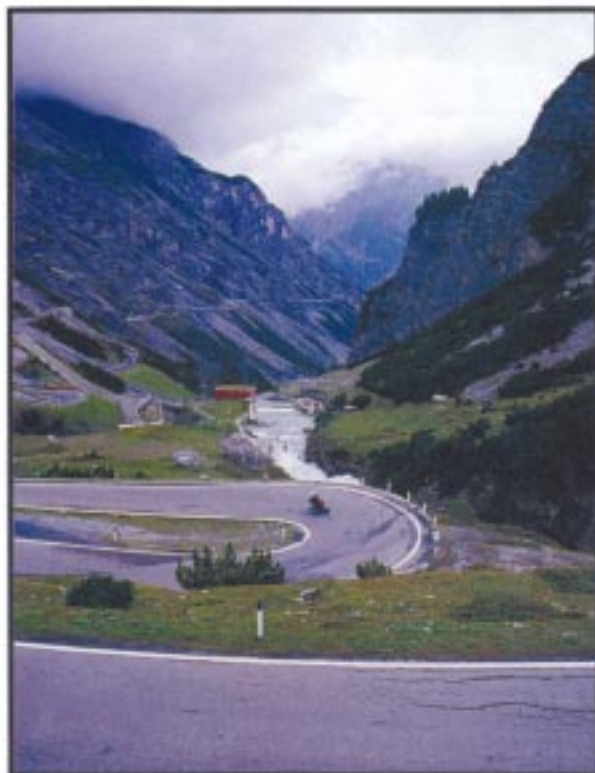
So here you are, flying into a strange country and not knowing 10 words of the language. I landed at Terminal 1 at the Frankfurt/Main Airport in Frankfurt, Germany, a very efficient airport, went to the clearly marked meeting place, sat down, and within five minutes Leon was shaking my hand. Another member of the group was there as well. Leon popped us into a van, which held

several other clients, and away we went.

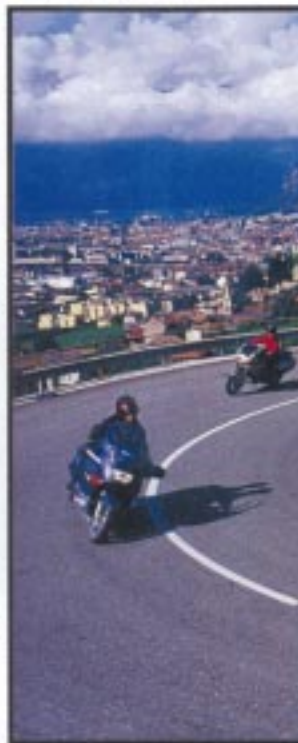
BME also offers the opportunity to arrive a day or more earlier in order to get acclimatized, with Leon picking you up at the airport; the added hotel expense is picked up by the client, of course. The Classic Alps is a 12-day tour (which fits nicely into the standard American two-week vacation notion), and just about everybody arrived at least a day early.

Motorcycle Selection

BME prides itself on being able to offer just about any marque and model available in Germany. As a point in fact, the majority of Leon's business is motorcycle rentals, arranging bikes for people who fly in and want to go off on their own. He used to have his own small fleet of BMWs, but sold that off when he realized that clients often had other preferences. Our group chose five BMWs, five



Previous page: Rothenburg ob der Tauber, a medieval German city. Left: Coming up the southwest side of the Stelvio Pass in Italy.



Left: Pool tables are very good for marking maps.



Bill and Marge from Bountiful, Utah, sample a rustic path in the Austrian Alps.



Hondas and one Harley; our leader rode a BMW. Insurance fees against motorcycle damage are paid directly to the dealers who provide the bikes, with a (roughly) \$1,400 deductible for the bigger machines.

Accommodations

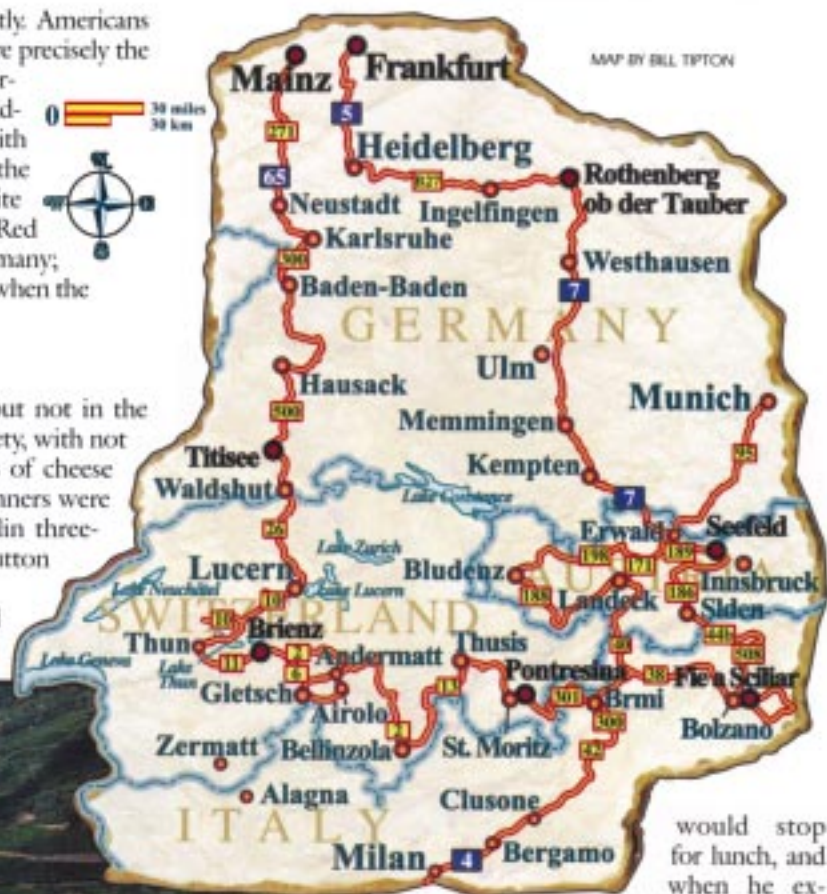
I had no complaints. Our first night was spent at a newish hotel on the outskirts of Mainz, Germany, situated in a large park, with a lovely beer garden attached. Commuter trains passed not far away, but railroad noise is a fact of life in much of urban Europe, whilst it is a rarity in the United States.

Throughout the trip our rooms varied greatly. Americans are accustomed to hotels where all the rooms are precisely the same, while in Europe many of the more interesting hostels have been created out of old buildings; one person might get a gorgeous room with a great view, another might be situated over the kitchen; it is the luck of the draw. My favorite hotel was that of the next to last night, at The Red Rooster in Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Germany; the rooms were a bit small, but so were people when the place was built back in the 14th century.

Food

Sometimes when I travel, I lose weight, but not in the Alps. All breakfasts were of the Germanic variety, with not only cereal, eggs and regular fare, but heaps of cheese and sliced meats as well. Yumm. And eight dinners were provided, which might not be of the Michelin three-star variety, but more than sufficed for a glutton such as myself.

Lunches were at individual expense, and ranged from bratwurst on a roll to epicurean



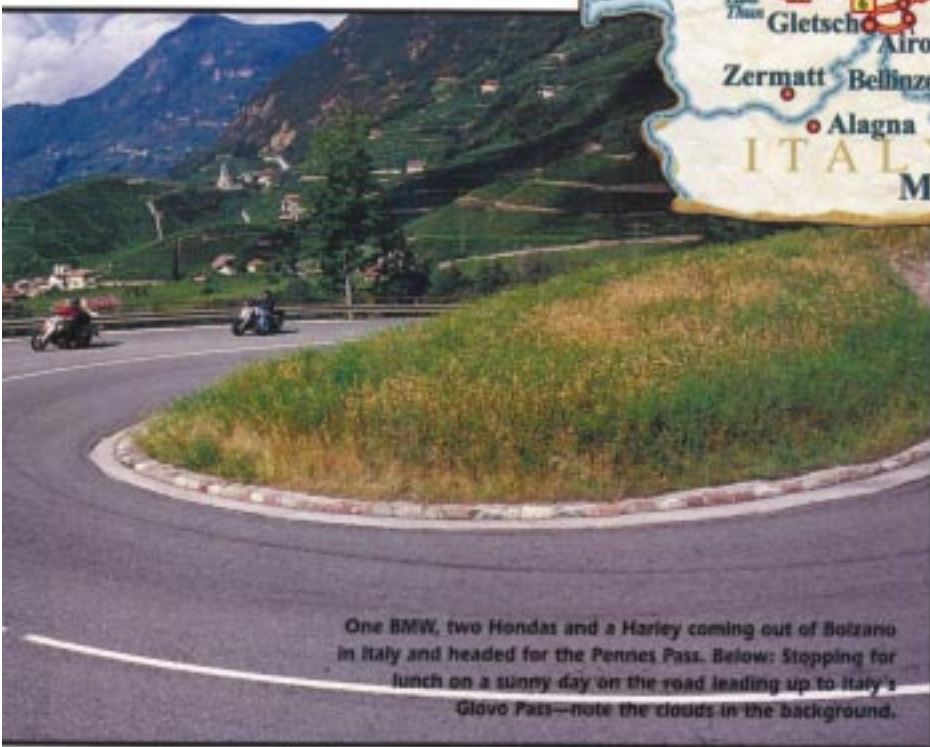
would stop for lunch, and when he expected to arrive

at the next hotel. Then he would outline the alternate (and longer) routes for those who wanted to put in more miles. Following Leon gave you a running narrative of local background, while choosing an alternate meant you would get lost occasionally, but have a grand time figuring it out for yourself. Usually five or six bikes went with Leon, three or four of the faster riders zipped away together on the longest, twistiest ride possible, and the others rolled off on their own.

Support Staff

The backup was efficiently managed by Elli, Leon's lady friend of many years standing. She handed out bottles of water and chocolate bars in the morning, drove the van and towed a three-rail trailer...just in case, but we never needed it. She asked us to leave our bags in the room when we checked out, as that way she could be sure that she had indeed gotten all the luggage; she then took the big road to the next hotel, and our suitcases would be awaiting us in our rooms upon our arrival. Life does not get much more comfortable than this.

The van also held a variety of tools, oil, coolant, chain lubricant, rags and tire repair stuff. The riders were respon-



One BMW, two Hondas and a Harley coming out of Bolzano in Italy and headed for the Pennes Pass. Below: Stopping for lunch on a sunny day on the road leading up to Italy's Glovo Pass—note the clouds in the background.

outings. Evening libations were tacked onto room numbers, and ranged from bottled water to local beer and expensive wine.

Briefings

The all-important post-breakfast gathering, with marking of maps and all that, is a fact of every tour. Leon tended not to be brief in his briefing, but it is in the nature of this man to wax effusive about the history of the places we were going through. Each of us had been sent a 1:500,000-scale map which covered our entire route through four countries; I prefer a somewhat larger scale, like 1:350,000 or better, but that would have meant carrying several maps.

Leon would describe the route he would take, where he





Here we are, trooping out of Fie a Sciliar, on the western edge of the Italian Dolomite Range.

Last Day

This is always a dubious time, especially for those who have crashed or dropped their bikes. The dealer who rented the machine wants a pristine bike returned, the dropper thinks that a little paint to cover the scratches on the saddlebag should suffice. We had one crashed (but rideable) Honda CBR900RR (due to railroad tracks in the rain), and the rider did not object to the estimate. Several bikes with drop marks were treated fairly.

All in all, it was a good last day, with wine and impromptu speeches at dinner at a hotel near the Frankfurt airport. And next morning Leon bade us all a fond *auf Wiedersehen* as he ferried people away.

Then there were the imponderables, such as:

The Weather

We ran late in September, and enjoyed some excellent weather. We had one day of serious rain, but that was during a layover in the Dolomites, when riding or not was up to individual decision.

Group Interaction

The 12 people on the trip, coming from three different continents (Australia, South America and North America), were all there to ride, and mixed quite well. Fortunately the Brazilians spoke English, as none of the others spoke Portuguese. I find that the more disparate the group, the more interesting the evenings.

Rider Competence

Leon has no way of really knowing how well (or badly) his clients will ride, and skill level ran from adequate to very good. Best of all, riders understood their limits, and did not embarrass themselves. Except for a couple of minor instances.

Conclusion

I had a good time. How could I avoid that, what with 1,700 miles of riding, mostly in the Alps? Zipping over Austria's Silvretta Pass on a sunny day, and going not once, but twice, over the little-trafficked Hahntennjoch—be calm, my heart. And while I am a sucker for Alpine riding, I do believe the other 12 people thoroughly enjoyed the trip, too. Some riders had planned this trip for six months, others had come on the spur of the moment. I don't think anybody would trade that experience, and imagine that most of them will return to the Alps at some point. And how many will choose to do a Bosenberg again? Only time will tell us that. ☺

For more information on Bosenberg Motorcycle Excursions contact Leon Heindel, Mainzerstrasse 54, 55545 Bad Kreuznach, Germany; 011-49-671-67312, fax 011-49-671-67153; email: bosenberg@compuserve.com; website: www.bosenberg.com.

sible for checking oil levels and tire pressures, but with the bikes coming out of a shop freshly prepped, minimal attention was needed. However, after a thousand miles, it was wise to look at the oil, especially on the BMW Boxers.

The Itinerary

It is really hard to go wrong in the Alps. But we had to get there first. Being headquartered near Frankfurt meant an initial 200-mile run down to the Black Forest, but that gave the riders a day to get accustomed to their bikes as they loitered along the Deutsche Weinstrasse (German Wine Road) in the Rhine Valley. All quite tasty and worthwhile. Then it was Alps, Alps, Alps, until the penultimate day when we headed back north from Austria and did another 200-mile ride.

Most days were in the 100- to 150-mile category, and I promise that 150 miles in the Alps, bagging half a dozen passes in the process, is a long day. Three days were layovers, one each in Switzerland, Italy and Austria, when riders could do as little or as much riding as they wished, returning to the same hotel; I liked that approach.