

Rider

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MOTORCYCLING AT ITS BEST

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Passes *by the* Dozen

The Bosenberg Swiss & French Alps Tour.

by Clement Salvadori

photography by the author and Gary Depp

Whisking over three dozen Alpine passes, through the Black Forest, past the vineyards of Germany and France, 2,200 sunlit miles in 12 gorgeous days of riding—that was last July's Swiss & French Alps tour, orchestrated by Bosenberg Motorcycle Excursions.

I do pronounce that tour to have been a success. However, anybody who is thinking of taking an organized motorcycle tour should be aware that there are a whole lot of bits and pieces which go into the making of a good trip, and some have nothing to do with the tour operator.

When you choose a motorcycle tour, all you are doing is pinpointing the places you want to go and the dates you want to do it.

B.M.E., run by ex-Milwaukeean Leon Heindel, was offering four different tours in 1995, and I chose this one because I wanted to do some tootling about in the area outlined in his brochure. After all, the highest paved road in the Alps is in the French portion, and riding over that would be justification enough

for any trip...at least according to my perverted reasoning.

Nine other people had the same idea; the route outlined and the dates had appealed enough that they sent in their hard-earned dollars. We had two couples and six solo riders, plus the tour leader on his machine and the baggage vehicle.

The choice of motorcycles was eclectic. Five Beemers, from a K75RT to an R1100RS, two very different Hondas, a Gold Wing and a VFR, and a Ducati 900SS. That is another of the big factors in deciding on a tour: What motorcycle am I going to get?

Some riders want the same as they ride back home, like the VFR rider. Others want to try something entirely new—the fellow who chose the Ducati. B.M.E. does try to indulge the wishes of its clients.

Which is not to say the clients are always overjoyed with what they choose—the *Ducatisto* did find the riding position to be a bit on the strenuous side after a few hours. Ah, well, you make your bed, and then you sleep in it.

These tours begin at the nearest

Below: A view of Switzerland's Lake Brienz from the Hostellerie Lindenhof, one of the author's hotels. The manager is a motorcyclist. Right: Riquewihr, France: In the old days the guards could drop the portcullis to keep out unwanted visitors. Bottom: High Alpine passes remain patched with snow even in the summer.



airport, in this case the sprawling affair that serves the city of Frankfurt am Main—that's Frankfurt on the Main River, as opposed to Frankfurt an der Oder (River), which is way over on the eastern side of Germany. The Frankfurt airport is efficient, especially the new Terminal 2, where most international flights arrive. Apparently it has been many years in the building, and an excellent job has been done. Even the baggage system works.

The first day of a tour is always hectic for the leader, what with greeting incoming clients, arranging for the various motorcycles, and getting everybody to the first night's lodging.

Bosenberg Motorcycle Excursions picked us up, in ones

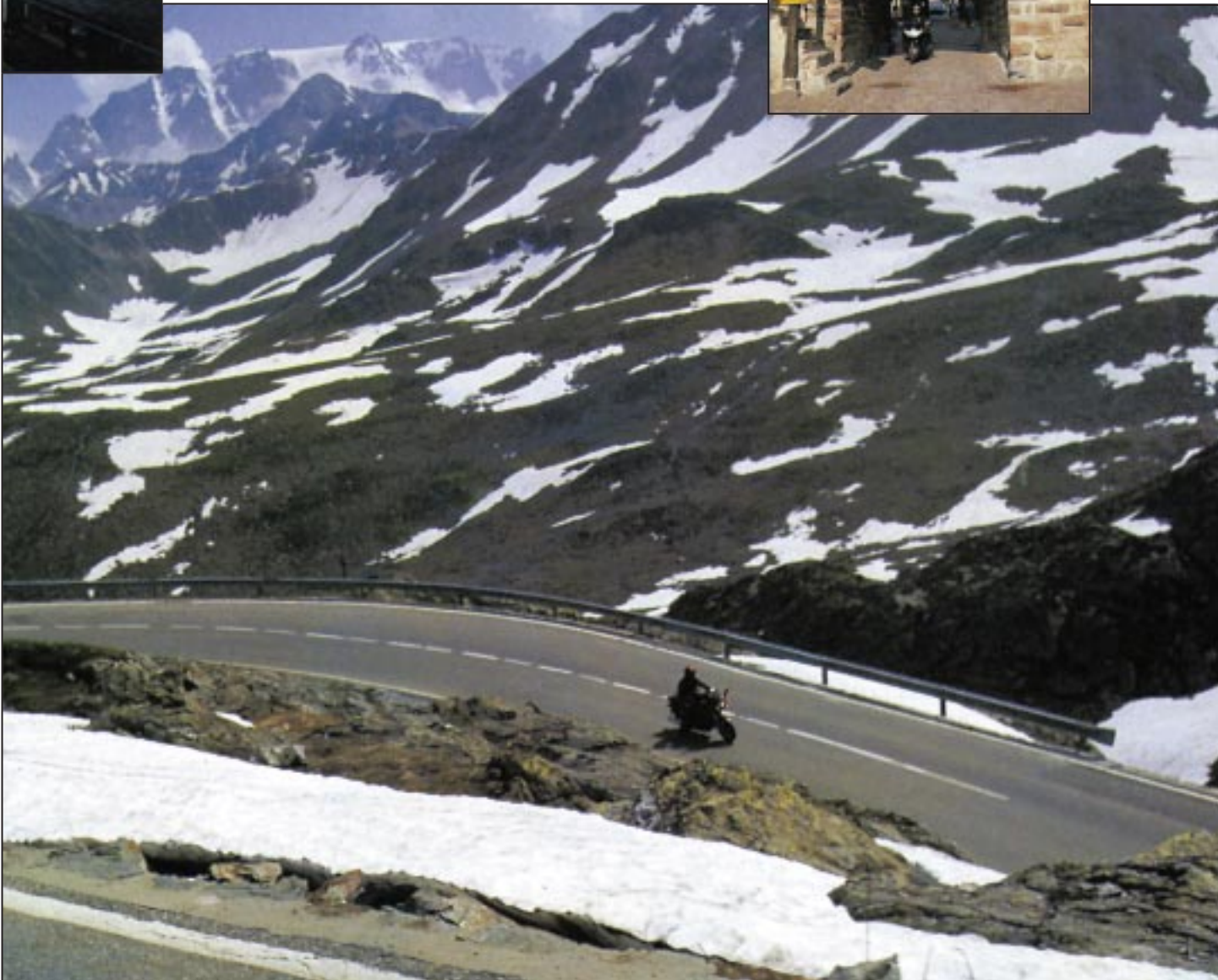
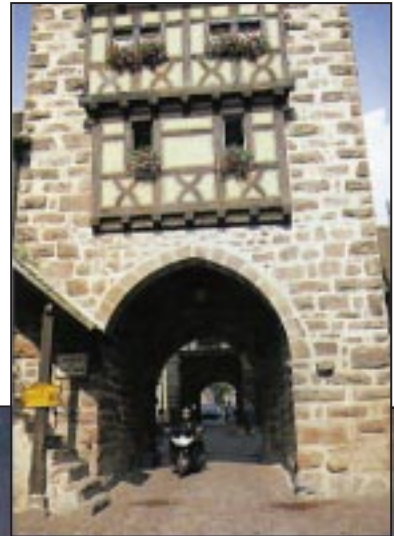
and twos, as we emerged from customs. Naturally, there is the occasional snafu, and the two Canadians spent some time cooling their heels as Heindel had gotten caught up in other travails. However, by the third day of the trip, they had forgiven everything because they were having such a good time.

By late afternoon we were all gathered at a country hotel in the middle of vineyards along the Nahe River, near the town of Bad Kreuznach, the motorcycles parked out front. We had as festive a dinner as our jet-lagged bodies allowed, with most everybody being pretty whacked out.

The first Great Unknown in a motorcycle tour is: How is the group of strangers going to mix? That's a good one. It can go well, or disastrously. Years ago I was with a tour of seven people that broke into three distinct groups, two of which

exhibited considerable animosity for each other. As a sociological test tube, it was fascinating; as a good tour, it left a lot to be desired.

Our ages on the Bosenberg tour ranged from 25 to 55, a pleasantly youthful lot, including a solo woman rider. Professions ranged from engineer to entrepreneur, fireman to computerologist. And, *mirabile dictu*, we all got along just fine. It was one of those happy mixes.





Above: Up along Germany's Rhine River a whole lot of castles have been built; this is Schloss Rheinstein, near Bingen. Right: Doug cleans his helmet at a public fountain in France.

We went to bed that night, well-dined and well-wined. I awoke about midnight, and found myself listening to the pitter-patter of raindrops of the roof. Oh, dear!

Second Great Unknown: The weather. The tour operator is not, I repeat, *not*, responsible for the weather. He does try to schedule his tours in the months that promise the most sun and least rain, but there are no guarantees.

It turned out that Heindel had been properly tithing the weather gods, and they had just been out to remind him of their existence. The morning broke blue and bright, the roads well-



washed, and that was the last bit of rain we saw for the trip, other than a brief shower on the last day, just to notify us mere mortals that there are forces far greater than we can imagine.

After a full German breakfast, with lashings of cheese and cold cuts, eggs and cereals, yogurt and jams, and a half dozen different breads,



Top: An Alpine road, a motorcycle, a good hotel for the night—paradise can be found on earth. Above: Group shot: (left to right) Gary and Lyn, David, Lori (sitting on sign), Mark, Doug (sitting on top of sign), Richard, Leon, Leon and Rita.

we had the first of our daily morning briefings. These are an essential part of any tour, and it behooves those who wish to explore on their own to pay close attention. Heindel would outline the main route for the day, suggest optional excursions, places to lunch and, most important of all, where that night's lodging was located.

Naturally not everybody is keen on reading maps, and those anti-cartography types would rely on somebody in front who did know, or thought he knew, the way.

Host Heindel also hammered away at the safety factor—a sensible thing to do.

Here he was with 10 unknown quantities, most of whom had never been to Europe before, turning them loose on strange roads with powerful motorcycles. We would, Heindel asked, do the freight-train frolic for half a day, just so he could be assured that we were becoming accustomed to the narrow back roads and the new machines. Once we got to the French border, we would have lunch together and then be free to either stay with him, or to go off on our own.

Speaking of borders, with the European Community now getting organized, there wasn't even anybody to look

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at a passport as we crossed most frontiers; it's

like going from state to state in this country. The only place where there was even a perfunctory presence was at the crossings into Switzerland, which is not an EC member.

This beginning of the trip was going to be a oenophile's delight, as we were headed down through some of Germany's most famous wine-growing regions, along parts of the *Deutsches Weinstrasse*. Then it was into the Alsace region of France, along the fabled *Route du Vin*, home to the pinot noir and other savory grapes.

But no sampling until your bike is safely locked up for the night.

We had lunch on the terrace of a café at Schweigen,

right on the border with France, and the specialty of the house was sausage made of pig tripe. Pretty good stuff. Really.

Those who chose to stay with Heindel had the advantage of all his considerable knowledge, as he would stop at appropriate spots and explain the local history. Those of us who hastened through the countryside were also enjoying ourselves immensely, though in a different way.

Our Gold Wingers were an impressive couple, a perfect pair for going off on their own. He would charge down the little roads at a major rate of speed, while she was reading the map in anticipation of the next crossroads. At one point he came upon a tiny

Peugeot in the foothills of the Vosges Mountains. Inside this tin box, moving along at a modest pace, papa was obviously expounding at length upon the glories of France, while mama was tending to her knitting, and the two kids in the back were bored silly.

Suddenly this great green Wing swept by the little car, rather like a clipper ship overtaking a coastal carrier. Papa jerked on the wheel, and the children came alive. Then the Ducati thundered past, followed by the VFR, and two small faces were smearing the windows in dribblish awe, cheering us on. Since we all had German license plates, papa would be cursing the *sales boches* for interrupting his lecture, not the Americans.

We spent a night at Riquewihl, a medieval town that has successfully avoided damage during centuries of war. Nice hotel, nice dinner, with lots of white table linen, silverware and glasses. And sinful desserts, looking more like sculptures than edibles.

This aspect of the trip is where the operator can be seen at his most canny. He's got to foot the bill for your room every night, and your dinner most nights. He both wants to impress the heck out of you, and make sure that all the proceeds don't get eaten up. After all, Hein-

del is in the business of selling organized motorcycle tours, which means he should also turn a reasonable profit.

Our hotels on the trip ranged from middling to very nice indeed, and the meals to match. Usually the evening menu was pre-arranged, other times we had a choice. Like the second night on the road, at the Hotel Schiff on Lake Murten, in Switzerland. It was a gorgeous setting, right on the water, and I chose the Lord's Menu (Lord as in nobility, not spirituality). It consisted of seven courses, beginning with truffled pâté, working up to a main dish of grilled lamb chops, and ending in a visual flourish of sweet things that tasted equally as good as they looked. *Burp!*

Forget all this mundane stuff. Let's get down to riding. If you just wanted to pig out and sleep under eider-downs, you could have signed up for Buster's Bus Bash. We did this for the roads. Or at least I did.

The serious Alps loomed up after we left Murten. Day three, and I was primed. I pulled the VFR and R1100RS into my wake, and in one brisk day of riding we tucked the Jaun Pass, Col du Pillon, Col de la Croix, Pas de Morgins, Col du Corbier, Col des Gets, Col de la Colombiere, and Col des Aravis under our saddles. Eight passes—not bad.

After a while one gets into the rhythm of Alpine riding, mile after mile, hour after hour, curve after curve. It's almost mesmerizing, the

focus on the asphalt, the glimpse of snowcapped vistas, the rapid overtaking of slower vehicles. We would stop on every mountain pass, have a soda, look at the map and take off.

We spent two nights at a hotel near the French resort town of Megeve, swimming pool included. But I think the only person who actually made use of the pool was our bag-handler, who had some medical-school exams to do when he returned. The rest of us were out on the roads, seeing the sights.

Now it was serious Alps. It is less than 200 crow-flying miles from the French Riviera to Lake Geneva, but those miles are packed with mountains. This is where old Hannibal had to get through with his elephants 2,200 years ago, and that feat has been talked about ever since.

It's a lot simpler now, as roads have been built, improved, paved. Subsistence farming and animal husbandry, long the only occupation for the mountain natives, have given way to tourism. Not obnoxious tourism, just enough to give the vacationing city folk a feeling that they are in tune with nature, and still have access to flush toilets.

We had a free day while staying in Guillestre, and I headed out for the Col de la Bonette with the VFR rider and Heindel. A grand ride, it was. We hustled up the valley of the Chagne River, over the Col de Vars, down to St. Paul, staying briefly in the valley of the Ubaye River, and then cutting off onto a small road to start climbing La Bonette. These roads were originally made to defend the border with Italy back in 1914, when France did not know which way the Italians would swing in that great war. They eventually came in on the French side, but by then a lot of work had been done.

Bosenberg Motorcycle Excursions

So how did a hard-working boy from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Leon Heindel, get involved in organizing motorcycle tours?

That's not easy to say. We should go back over 40 years, to April of 1952 when a small ad in *Cycle* magazine promoted a 78-day tour of Europe. Times were very different and people could get away for nigh on three months.

For \$1,165 this is what you got: Passage to England on a huge liner, perhaps the *Queen Mary* or *Queen Elizabeth*. A brand-new Triumph Thunderbird 650; this was not a rental, but yours to keep. And then two months of traveling around western Europe, seeing England, France, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Denmark, Switzerland and Italy, chase van carrying baggage, all hotels prearranged. And at the end you and the bike sailed back in a leisurely fashion to New York.

Life has become more hectic, more expensive. But the fun of touring Europe on a motorcycle is still there, even if you jet over and back, spending two weeks riding instead of two months.

Heindel was introduced to Germany as a U.S. Army cavalry officer; he decided he liked the place, and running motorcycle tours was a way to make a living. His girlfriend, Elli, lived in a village beneath the Bosen hill; hence, Bosenberg Motorcycle Excursions.

For 1996 B.M.E. offers three different tours: French & Swiss Alps (12 days, rider \$3,245/passenger \$2,545/single room supplement \$395), Classic Alps & Dolomites (12 days, 2,985/\$2,285/\$265) and Castle & Grapes & German GP (nine days, \$2,375/\$1,775/\$235). Heindel also runs many hand-crafted specialized tours.

Airline tickets to Frankfurt are at your expense, but the tour cost includes airport pickup and departure, all hotels and breakfasts, all but one or two rest-day dinners, baggage wagon, etc.

Tour price includes rental of a BMW F650 or mid-size Honda. Upgrades on motorcycles are available, as B.M.E. has access to some 25 models from BMW, Ducati, Harley, Honda and Triumph. Cost of an upgrade for a 12-day tour runs from \$195 for a BMW R1100GS, to \$575 for a Harley Softail. A mandatory damage deposit runs from \$1,000 to \$1,400, depending on model, payable by credit card when you pick up the bike and (one hopes) refunded upon return of undamaged bike.

Heindel doesn't want the business to get too big, and does go on every tour himself. If you want full information, contact B.M.E. at: Mainzerstrasse 54, 6550 Bad Kreuznach, Germany; 011-49-671-67312. Fax: 011-49-671-67153. ☺ *Clement Salvadori*

We got to the Col de la Bonette, and then went up to the Cime de la Bonette, a circular loop which climbs

even higher and gives a magnificent view of the Sessriere valley. It is a goal for all European motorcyclists,

and several dozen bikes rolled up as we clicked our Kodaks. It was a gorgeous sunny day, and off in the distance we could see the scratchings of roads we wouldn't get to ride...at least not on this trip.

From France we went briefly into Italy via the Little St. Bernard Pass, to spend a night in the mountains above Aosta. Back into Switzerland over the Grand St. Bernard, and down to the long valley which separates the Pennine Alps from the Bernese Alps. Here you could either choose to strap your bike on a flatcar and take a train through a tunnel to the other side of the Bernese Alps, or ride over the Grimsel Pass. Heindel was good at providing these little options.

We had a free day at Lake Brienz, and took the opportunity to ride over the Susten Pass (twice), the St. Gotthard Pass, the Nufenen Pass and the Furka Pass. This was going to be our last real bash at the Alps, as the next day we were moving on to our last border crossing.

The next day it was back to Germany, coming down off our mountain high at a luxurious hotel on the shores of Lake Titi in the Black Forest. It was a good way to wind down from eight days of bagging passes.

We returned to Bad Kreuznach, dropping off bikes along the way. The last day was a free day, with Heindel laying on transport for those who wanted to take a boat trip along the Rhine River, and to explore old castles. Saturday night we had a blow-out farewell dinner.

Sunday we all went our different directions. And we all had fond memories. Heindel had laid on a good trip, which had been enhanced by perfect weather. The collective egos mixed well. No breakdowns, no accidents.

It was a pretty fine outing. ☺

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