

# LADOL





# CE VITA

SELF-CONFESSED SOLO EXPLORER **BILLY JOHNSON** TRAVELS TO ITALY FOR A GROUP TRAIL RIDING ADVENTURE IN THE APENNINE MOUNTAINS. BUT WILL SHARING A JOURNEY HELP HIM DISCOVER THE SWEET LIFE, OR AS THE ITALIANS SAY, LA DOLCE CE VITA?



Exploring remote trails in the Apennine mountains was a thrilling experience



I've been lucky to explore some pretty spectacular locations around the world by motorcycle, but one glaring omission has been Italy, despite the fact I've always dreamed of riding there.

So, call it coincidence, serendipity, or fate, but as I was mulling over how I could squeeze in a trip to Italy before the end of the year, I couldn't quite believe my eyes when I received an offer from motorcycle tour company Edelweiss Bike Travel offering me the chance to do just that.

The team there asked if I'd like to join them on a new tour offering exactly what I'd been dreaming

of: six days of adventure riding through Italy on a mixture of sublime tarmac roads and unpaved mountain trails.

An offer like that is too good to refuse, but I admit there was a nagging thought at the back of my mind. You see, I'd never been on a guided group tour before. I've always been someone that prefers to adventure alone. The feeling of freedom, the chance meetings of interesting people, the ability to decide where you want to go at any given moment makes solo travel so exciting for me.

So, despite the fact the riding sounded perfect on my Edelweiss tour, I did wonder how I would

## WHO'S WRITING?



Hailing from Australia, Billy Johnson is the Staff Writer for *Adventure Bike Rider*. He'll take adventure in any form, but exploring the world on two-wheels is hard to beat.

Despite his humble beginnings pottering around the bush on clapped-out beaters back home, now Billy has had a taste of things that start in G and end in S, he struggles to ride anything without heated grips and an easily adjustable windscreen while commuting in the English weather.

But point him towards a desert, mountain, or jungle and he'll swing his leg over anything in his search for adventure.



get along in the company of five complete strangers when I'm used to travelling by myself? And would it be a real adventure? There was only one way to find out.

## EXPERT PLANNING

I defy any red-blooded adventure biker not to get excited about the plan the touring experts at Edelweiss had concocted for us. I was to fly into Bologna and then spend the next six days criss-crossing the Apennine mountains along the spine of central Italy, before arriving in Rome.

For much of this route, we'd follow the Adventure Country Tracks (ACT) Italy route, which is like the Trans Euro Trail, but designed with big adventure bikes in mind. In short, it would be a handpicked selection of the best forest trails, military roads, farm tracks, and old pilgrimage paths you can ride, all through some of the most scenic and sparsely populated areas of Italy.

Before long I was sitting on a British Airways flight to Bologna, helmet in the overhead locker and jacket shoved under the seat. There were only two things on my mind as I boarded the monorail from the airport: mortadella sausage and ragu, two famous exports of the Red City.

I knew of a cracking deli that served mouth-watering mortadella sandwiches with a pistachio sauce, and before long I was sat in a piazza, sandwich in hand, watching old men smoke cigarettes, young lovers embroiled in passion, and street hustlers pushing sunglasses, all giving a theatrical performance of daily Italian life. Few countries consistently live up to one's expectations the way Italy does.

I could've sat in the piazza all night, but I had an appointment at a swanky hotel south of the city. As I arrived, I met Edelweiss guide Tom who took me to meet the rest of the group. Working alongside him was Andreas, a quick-witted and cheery German enduro rider. And, amongst the punters, there was Victor from Texas, Claude from Germany, Jurgen from Switzerland, Kees from Canada by the way of the Netherlands, and myself.

We were a diverse group, with different backgrounds, different occupations, vastly different ages (me, the youngest at 24, and Kees putting a casual five decades on top of that), but all united by the love of riding and seeing the world. The wine flowed and I satisfied the second thing I'd been thinking about all day, a gorgeous tagliatelle al ragu. Despite being a group of strangers, the conversation flowed, and the anticipation for the next few days was palpable.

## THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

The next morning, we assembled outside for the first of our daily briefings. Andreas had scouted the route earlier in the year, but because of heavy flooding, there was no guarantee the roads we were planning to take would be in the same condition.

With the route marked on our Michelin maps, we headed to our bikes. One of the most impressive features of Edelweiss tours is the sheer variety of motorcycles you can choose to ride, and the full spectrum was on display that morning.

There was the ubiquitous BMW R 1250 GS, an F 800 GS, a Triumph Tiger 900 Rally Pro, and a two KTM 890 Adventure Rs. Next to them stood a gleaming Ducati Multistrada V4 S. Come on, I was in Italy. How could I not choose the Ducati?

The guides were going to take turns leading each day while the other drove the support van, and it was Tom who was riding first. We followed him out of the car park, and within minutes we were on a fabulous stretch of tarmac that led up to the famous Futa Pass, a road that draws motorcyclists from around the world.

It was a blissful morning, leaving the industrial north of Italy behind in favour of the rustic farmland and pristine forests of

The scenery in wine country around Montepulciano felt like being in a living watercolour painting







Central Italy. We stopped at a bustling biker cafe amongst hundreds of other motorcyclists riding everything from Vespas to Panigales, and after a well-earned espresso, we hit the road again. Already, the quality of the tarmac was enough to justify the tour, but to think that we were soon going to head off-road and explore gravel trails had the group positively buzzing with excitement.

## GENTLY DOES IT

After we left the Futa behind us, we found ourselves on quiet, well-graded gravel roads through technicolour autumnal forests. This gentle introduction gave us plenty of time to come to grips with how our bikes handled off-road. I'd never ridden a Multistrada before, but I was impressed with the Enduro riding mode and the way the bike handled despite its size and power.

As we climbed further into the hills, we encountered the destructive force of nature. Entire hillsides had collapsed under the weight of floodwater, bringing down trees and sweeping along boulders in its wake. For the most part, repairs had already begun, although many sections that had slipped remained taped off. And as the sun dropped lower in the sky, we came across a completely closed road.

Not wanting to retrace our route, a broken conversation ensued with a local. German, Italian, Spanish and English all joined the fray, but the winner was our flailing hands. We were gestured to ride through a vineyard, which took us to the road and on to our hotel for the night in Bertinoro. From our hotel, we could see the dark stillness of the Adriatic Sea stretching out across the horizon.

The next day saw us riding even more spectacular gravel roads and some pretty damn incredible tarmac hairpins as we climbed further into the Apennines. Although we had our hotels waiting for us each night, lunch stops were found along the way, which quickly became part of the adventure.

After working up a hunger riding increasingly difficult trails, we were faced with the prospect of finding a restaurant that was open on Sunday in a sparsely populated area of the country. After passing multiple shuttered windows, we came across a restaurant in a remote village. Our arses had barely touched the seats before an onslaught of hors d'oeuvres were placed on our plates, and we couldn't eat them fast enough before they were refilled.

Made from foraged ingredients like wild flowers, herbs, and mushrooms, each was a delight. After dozens of these flavourful little treats, we thought we were done. But that was simply the opening salvo. After a minute to recover, we were bombarded by soup, struck by a 1-2 hook of pasta, besieged by pork, and blitzed by lamb. Our stomachs were straining to contain all the food, but it was simply too delicious to pass up.

We just about managed to get the final slice of cake down, paid the bill, and staggered to our bikes, stunned by the voracious scene that had occurred. We'd spent hours in the restaurant, and somehow, we had to fight the urge for a siesta to climb aboard our bikes and hit the trails again.

Soon the road worked its magic and we were feeling lively as we ducked into tight corners and followed gravel deep into the forested mountains. By the time we reached our hotel at Città di Castello, night had nearly fallen and we were treated to an exquisite sunset painting the mountains red from the hotel's balcony.

## TECHNICAL TRAILS

The riding grew more difficult on the third day. Loose stones and tight hairpins necessitated slower speeds and greater concentration but, as a reward for our efforts, the scenery was some of the best we'd see the entire week. With some peaks topping out over



Despite being a mostly off-road adventure, the sections of paved road were sensational



1,000m, we had expansive views of the skeletal ridges and misty forests below. At the top of one peak, Tom guided us along a narrow ridge trail that was barely a tyre width. This put my choice of such a big bike sharply into focus. Thankfully, the Ducati and I didn't meet a mangled demise down the side of the mountain, but it was definitely a squeaky bum moment.

The best thing about tackling more challenging trails was that the group's sense of camaraderie grew massively. If one of us took a tumble, we'd all be there to help them up and laugh it off, and getting through a particularly difficult section would give us a huge sense of achievement.

When we arrived at our stop for the night on the shores of Lago Trasimeno, Andreas was there with the traditional boot beer, a chiller with an assortment of lager that occupied an essential place in the support van, ready to be cracked open when the right moment came. Watching the sun set over the lake, laughing about the day with people who had already become good friends, drinking cold beer, and eating crisps, the moment was most certainly right.

## CLASSIC TUSCANY

So far, we'd ridden through the regions of Emilia-Romagna, Marche, and Umbria, with half a day spent in Tuscany. Our fourth day would see us travel deep into Tuscany, with all the classic sights you associate with this world-famous region. Think white gravel roads lined by tall

cypress trees disappearing over rolling hills, as well as rustic wineries and olive groves dotting the landscape.

The off-road sections were gentler, and we could sit back and enjoy riding through the oil painting scenery of the Val D'Orcia. We stopped in Pienza for a coffee, a town that was rebuilt under Pope Pius II as an 'ideal' Renaissance town, making it one of the first planned towns in the world. We also rode through the famous vineyards of Montepulciano.

Despite the fact we weren't in an area of Italy known for its pizza, we thought it wasn't quite right that we'd been in the country for four days and not had a single slice. So, for lunch we ordered enough pizza to feed Naples for a week. Absolutely stuffed, we left the restaurant only to be immediately confronted with a steep rocky descent, with deep diagonal ruts carved out by rainwater and large stones acting as trip hazards.

Challenging enough on any day, but with bellies bursting, we were sweating on the way down. The gang helped each other out, picked up each other's bikes, and soon we were back on easier roads and grinning with the pleasure of riding adventure bikes in such good company. We finished the day at the hilltop city of Orvieto, eating gelato and sampling local liqueurs with medieval bells ringing in the warm evening air.

It was just as well that we cut ourselves off from the bar when we did, because the next day saw us tackle the toughest riding of the entire

## THE BIKE

Ducati's Multistrada V4 S is a truly impressive motorcycle. With 170bhp to play with, there's no limit to the amount of fun you can have on twisty Italian mountain passes. And although we spent minimal time on motorways, the adaptive cruise control sure was appreciated as we entered Rome via a toll road.

In fact, the rider comfort is second-to-none, with heated everything for the cooler mornings in the mountains, expansive fairings, and an excellent seat to park your bum.

Of course, we were on trails most of the time on this trip. And although its handling off-road and Enduro riding mode are both excellent, it's still a big, top-heavy bike, and there were times I wanted something lither. But when you're in Italy, passion wins over practicality any day.





The camaraderie of the road proved one of the highlights of the trip, and it was handy to have friends to help pick up the bikes



trip. Long off-road sections surfaced with loose stones was the order of the day, and progress was slow. The big Multi got the better of me a couple of times in this section with the front tyre digging deep into pits of large stones, but that was all part of the fun.

And although I was casting some jealous looks at the lighter Tiger 900 and KTM 890 Adventures, when we hit the tarmac again, the Multi made it all worthwhile with its raucous engine never failing to spread a smile wide across my face.

The penultimate night of our tour found us in Cascia, a gorgeous town in a deep valley. But while the meal and surroundings were sublime, there was a bittersweet feeling at dinner as we all knew our final day of riding was nearly upon us. Little did we know, Edelweiss had saved the best for last.

Despite entering a more populated area of Italy, we were also riding in the highest section of the Apennines we'd been to yet. With the Corno Grande, the second highest mountain in Italy outside of the Alps towering over us at 2,912m, there was certainly no shortage of breath-taking scenery to soak up. And although we had a lot of ground to cover to reach Rome, the quality of riding more than matched the views.

But as we descended the mountains, the haze of Rome appeared on the horizon, and we encountered the first real signs of the modern world that we'd seen since we left Bologna. Wrestling our bikes through the heavy traffic, we made it to our luxurious digs in the city, and after a well-earned shower, we met in the bar to digest the last six days of riding.

Before this journey began, I worried I'd feel more like a tourist on holiday than adventure biker exploring the world. But between the thrilling trail riding, untouched forests, ancient mountain tracks, sublime food, and enormous sense of camaraderie that had developed between riders, it was every bit the adventure that I'd hoped for.

I'd lived la dolce vita, a saying in Italy that means 'the sweet life' and time spent indulging in pleasurable activities. And boy, we'd done that as we rode glorious roads and trails, conquered challenging terrain, learned a lot about each other, and best of all, we'd had a great time riding as a group of strangers who quickly became friends.

That's the brilliant thing about adventure, it can be found absolutely anywhere. And as it turns out, maybe it's best shared with others after all. **ABR**

## WANT TO RIDE IN ITALY?

I travelled with Edelweiss Bike Travel on the company's ACT Centre of Italy Unpaved tour. Everything is taken care of so you can simply enjoy the riding and the scenery (and food). You don't need to be an enduro expert for the tour, but if you've never ridden off-road before, it'd be wise to visit a skills school and learn the basics before you go.

Not only did we have two tour guides, but Edelweiss organised the route, all the accommodation, breakfast and evening meals, a new model bike, map, and guidebook, which were all included in the price of the tour.

Prices start at £3,885 if you ride a mid-size bike like the Suzuki V-Strom 650 XT. My tour cost £4,225 with my choice of the big Multistrada V4 S. Flights between the UK and Bologna and Rome are plentiful and can set you back as little as £30.

To begin your Edelweiss Bike Travel adventure, simply head over to: [www.edelweissbike.com](http://www.edelweissbike.com).

