

## 3RD ANNUAL AMA ALPS CHALLENGE TOURS I & II

**AFTER 2,400 KM, 27 ALPINE PASSES,  
38 CAPPUCCINOS, 11 PLATES OF PASTA, 39 BEERS,  
69 GALLONS OF GAS, 32 ATTENDEES, FIVE TOUR GUIDES,  
A BUM KNEE AND ONE BADLY HERNIATED  
SPINAL DISC, THE "ALPS CHALLENGE"  
MONIKER HOLDS UP**

**B**ack in the 1990s when Edelweiss founder Werner Wachter (1943-2021) and I ginned up the idea to hold annual Alps-region tours with *Motorcyclist* magazine readers, we felt the *Alps Challenge* name was a winner...as "challenging" is exactly what the tours would be.

High-Alpine passes, switchbacks all week long, narrow roads (some without guardrails), corners galore, great food and drink (you're gonna gain weight!), always some rain, and sometimes even a little snow. Basically, no pussyfooting around. All this would ensure great group camaraderie, energized post-ride bar and dinner bench racing (and plenty of lies), colorful memories and, best of all, Epic Riding Every Day — forever known as ERED.



# CHALLENGE

BY MITCH BOEHM  
PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR AND  
EDELWEISS BIKE TRAVEL

# ACCEPTED!

We did a handful of these tours at *Motorcyclist*, and when I joined the AMA one of the first calls I made was to current Edelweiss honcho Rainer Buck, seeing if he and owner Tobias Wachter (son of Werner) would be interested in renewing them. They were, and we did, with this year marking year No. 3 of the tours.

### EARLY CHALLENGES

My plan for this year, where we'd — I'd — co-host all three tours (we did No. 1 in '21, Nos. 1 and 2 in '22, and all three this year), was solid, if ambitious...and probably too ambitious: Fly to Munich for Tour 1, and then, when that group headed back to *Munchen* on the final day, ride south to Milan to meet Tour 2. And instead of heading back to Milan on Tour 2's final day, I'd angle west to Nice, France, to meet up with Tour group 3. But instead of heading back to Nice from the French Alps at the end of that seven-day trek, I'd pull a long one and get myself and my KTM 1290 Adventure loaner back to Munich for the trip home.

In all it would be 30 days, with 24 or so of those in the KTM's saddle. I knew that getting all of my magazine and web work done during the month (squeezed into mornings, evenings and between-tour days) would be a serious challenge, and that my swollen, meniscus-torn knee (suffered at the hands of a way-better-than-me Beta 300 a month prior) wouldn't help. But for some reason I figured it'd all be fine.

My know-it-all male ego aside, Tour No. 1 — Munich to Lienz, Austria, to Bolzano, Italy, to Livigno, Italy, to Sölden, Austria — started off on a positive note, with 20-plus interesting and excitable attendees, many of whom got to our Erding, Germany, base hotel a day or two

early...so by the time of our initial meet-'n'-greet the night before leaving for Austria, we were all reasonably acquainted.

### COLD RAIN AND SNOW

The following morning began as they always do on this tour, the group heading south via rolling country roads into



Inset photos, L to R: Edelweiss tour guide Henning, previewing Day One at Hotel Henry. My KTM 1290 Super Adventure... an AMA Superbike in ADV-bike clothing. Tour guide Dominik outlining the day's route at breakfast. And the seemingly ever-present pasta meal; delish, and challenging to resist.



**IN ALL IT WOULD BE 30 DAYS, WITH 24 OR SO OF THOSE IN THE KTM'S SADDLE. I KNEW THAT GETTING ALL OF MY MAGAZINE AND WEB WORK DONE DURING THE MONTH (SQUEEZED INTO MORNINGS, EVENINGS AND BETWEEN-TOUR DAYS) WOULD BE A SERIOUS CHALLENGE...**



Tour group No. 1 at the top of the *Passo di Gavia*, easily one of the most thrilling and memorable (some would say *scary*) passes on our tours. Lying between Bolzano and Livigno, it begins (from the South) in switchback-infested forest (some sections barely wide enough for a car) and morphs into faster and above-the-treeline pavement that often has no guardrail...so a mistake would likely be fatal. Not everyone enjoys Gavia for obvious reasons, but reaching the *Rifugio Bonetta* at the summit for a cappuccino and a photo is always cause for celebration regardless of what camp you're in.

southern Germany and the teeth of the Alps, though you don't see them immediately even though they're only 50 or so miles away. But when you do, and our awesome tour guides Wim D., Dominik N. and Henning S. made sure it was a thoroughly dramatic moment via our route (crest a particular hill where the tree line opens up and *wham!*... there they are!), it's one of those "Ahhhh" moments you won't quickly forget.

Unfortunately, rain and cold temperatures dampened things once we got into Austria and the Alps proper, with snow at higher elevations (in August, even), so we couldn't sample one of the best elements of Tour No. 1 — the famed Grossglockner, one of the region's highest peaks (at nearly 12,500 feet), and its High Alpine Road, which winds spectacularly through the pass.

Later in the day came the heaviest rain we'd see, and while our two groups of 10 bikes each got through it all without issue, I had a couple of self-inflicted challenging moments on the KTM thanks to me riding too fast for the sloppy conditions,



hydroplaning and losing front wheel traction at about 60 mph. My feet flew off the pegs at one point, and the sight was something ex-roadracer Joe B. — who was following me — and I laughed about that evening over a beer during our first overnighter in Lienz.

Things cleared up the following day on our way to Italy's amazing Dolomites and the beautiful Alpine crossroads city of Bolzano, and that would pretty much be the end of crappy weather.

#### THE ROAD TO LIVIGNO

After a rest day in Bolzano (folks can sightsee, shop or rest, but most did a day trip on the bikes, while I caught up

## MY FEET FLEW OFF THE PEGS AT ONE POINT, AND THE SIGHT WAS SOMETHING EX-ROADRACER JOE B. — WHO WAS FOLLOWING ME — AND I LAUGHED ABOUT THAT EVENING.

on work) we were off to my favorite location of this tour — the summer/winter sports town of Livigno, Italy, which sits in a picturesque valley with ski lifts, hiking and biking trails everywhere you look...and that yummy pizza place I wrote about two years ago on our first trip there. ("Pineapple on your pizza, Domenico?")

But before we settled into the sumptuous Hotel Lac Salin with its insane views and superb bar and restaurant, we had what was for me the best riding day of the entire tour. It all began on the Mendelpass, which leads out of Bolzano and offers truly wood-rasp pavement and corners that feel more like racetrack than mountain pass. There's a lot of that in the Alps, but the Mendelpass ranks as one of the best — and several of us took, *ahem*, full advantage on the way up.



#### CRAZY JOE

Up top there's a little 2.5-mile-long road that splits off and leads to the Hotel Penegal and its spectacular deck overlooking the entire Bolzano valley. It's narrow, tree-lined, seriously bumpy and packed with tricky, decreasing-radius corners, but that didn't stop roadracer Joe and



I from heading off on our own ahead of the group and literally going bonkers on our way to the top — me on my KTM and he on his big BMW RT tourer. We just needed to get it out of our systems, I think, after all the rain and tiptoeing around the previous day.

Now, I have witnessed some crazy &!# in my nearly 40 years of magazine work and testing, and ridden with some really talented riders who could do unreal things on two wheels, but I have to say I have never seen a big touring bike ridden that hard and that fast over such a tight, twisty, bumpy and pine-needle-sprinkled mountain road. It was more motocross than street ride, and from 30 feet back I had a ringside seat to Joe's RT sliding and wallowing

and hooking up from perfectly orchestrated (but sudden) power and max braking applications all the way to the summit. We laughed and laughed at the top, and while that road definitely challenged us, I'm pretty sure we won.

#### CRAZIER GAVIA

An even bigger challenge — for some, anyway — came later that day when we summited *Passo de Gavia*, which in my mind is the most challenging pass of any of the tours. It starts in a lush valley, runs up into thick forest where the roads narrow to barely the width of a car, and then above the tree line it's all dramatic cliffs and, in many spots, no guardrails. It's sketchy, scary, challenging and thrilling at once, and just like last year and the year before,

some of the group did not like Gavia at all, and a couple were even a little freaked out by it.

One of the ladies remarked at some point that the walking trails near their home were wider than some of Gavia's route. It's a fair point.

After a second rest day in Livigno (I worked, while the group did an epic day trip on the bikes), Day 6 found us headed back toward Munich to Sölden, Austria, where we'd summit the infamous *Passo de Stelvio*, a favorite of Euros and foreigners alike for its dramatic views, serpentine switchbacks and sheer Alpine majesty.

#### THE PAIN GAME

Last year I'd headed south to Milan and Tour No. 2 from Livigno, which is a two-hour shorter haul than the Sölden-to-Milan trek, but I was having such a good time that I figured I'd stick around for an extra day and enjoy the camaraderie. Which I did, right up until the following morning when, while hefting my big Klim gear bag onto the KTM's pillion and tail rack in anticipation of my all-day



ride to Milan, I wrenched my lower back in a bad way...and immediately knew I was in trouble.

Those of you unlucky enough to have disc herniations know exactly what I mean (mine's at L4/L5), but when you tweak your back it's always severely debilitating. Once those muscles spasm and lose the ability to support that area, the pressure from that protruding disc material on those bundles of nerves running from the spine to various lower-body areas causes intense pain, and there have been times over the last 20-



L to R: Cell phones and GPS aside, it's pretty hard to get too lost in the Alps. Dominik and Greg C. digging in during a meal in Bolzano. Morning or afternoon espressos in the Alps? Priceless.

some years when I could barely get myself to the kitchen or bathroom.

So there I was, standing in the parking lot with the rest of the tour folks as they loaded their bikes and got ready to ride back toward Munich, feeling the pain build and knowing I was in for an ugly and very challenging day. I thought about maybe sticking around for a day or two, but since these spasms typically last several days at a minimum, I knew I would be just putting off the inevitable.

So I said goodbye to my new friends, somehow wriggled into my gear, and rode the nearly 400 kilometers to Milan, gritting my teeth pretty much the whole way. And despite two full days of downtime at the hotel before Tour No. 2 began (where I was able to get more work done), my physical situation wasn't any better the morning our group of 10 met for breakfast and reviewed the map for the day's destination of Pontresina, Switzerland. I would simply have to eat ibuprofen and gut it out...just one more challenge in, so far, 10 days of them.

### CREEPING BIG-BROTHERISM

From Milan, Tour No. 2 would head northwest



**AN EVEN BIGGER CHALLENGE CAME LATER THAT DAY WHEN WE SUMMITTED PASSO DE GAVIA...IT'S SKETCHY, SCARY, CHALLENGING AND THRILLING AT ONCE, AND JUST LIKE LAST YEAR AND THE YEAR BEFORE, SOME OF THE GROUP DID NOT LIKE [IT] AT ALL, AND A COUPLE WERE EVEN A LITTLE FREAKED OUT BY IT.**

into Switzerland, and eventually nip at the beautiful and majestic French Alps before heading back toward Milan. The Swiss are famous for staying neutral in conflict, but it's their billions of speed cameras and, even worse, their criminal fines for those that dare to go faster (how *horrible!*) than their ridiculously low posted limits that put a damper on riding there, especially in the mountains.

The roads and geography there invite the occasional out-of-town high-speed mountain rip, but keeping things under those silly limits to keep from being busted and having to pay a four-figure fine (it happens) or having your bike confiscated (it happens) is a challenge.



challenging, and has a nice refugio and lake at the summit where we stopped for lunch. Among the 40 or so bikes parked there that Sunday (traffic was pretty thick), a guy pulled up on a radically raked Harley chopper, and even had his girlfriend on the back. Riding an adventure bike or sportbike up that road was challenging enough, so...yeah, two-up on that thing on that road? Mucho respect.

Later on we summited *Passo Aprica*, which is part of the Giro de Italia bicycle race route, and then Switzerland's Bernina pass, which connects the uppity ski town of St. Moritz with the Val Poschiavo valley and was an important trade route over the Alps during the middle ages. Big

**CHOP-CHOP**

Despite that and the pain radiating from my back, the ride to Pontresina was epic, and started with a summit of Italy's *Passo del Vivione*, a high-alpine road built during WWI to supply troops. It's very narrow and severely



brotherism aside, Swiss roads have a reputation for being near-perfect just about everywhere, and there's good reason for that reputation.

**CALORIC OVERLOAD**

And that's pretty much how it goes on these tours...amazing pass after amazing pass, near-perfect asphalt everywhere, and lovely little picture-perfect towns in each valley, with cappuccino and strudel stops spaced strategically between great continental breakfasts, yummy regional lunches, and of course wonderful dinners at night. The dinnertime beer and wine isn't bad, either. Some folks can eat and drink like this and not gain an ounce (I hate them with a passion), but if you've got metabolism like mine this is dangerous culinary territory, and yet one more challenge to overcome...though I didn't even come close on this one.

**ANDERMATT, HERE WE COME**

From Pontresina we headed mostly Westerly to a double overnighter in beautiful Andermatt, Switzerland, and to get there we summited a dizzying list of simply breathtaking passes, including the Julier Pass, the Splugenspass, *Passo San Bernardino* and the legendary St. Gotthard, with roots to the 13th century. My lower back was on fire all day, and getting on and off the bike was really difficult, but the grandeur and sheer immensity of the geography kept me from letting it ruin what was an amazing day.



I took the following day off and worked while the rest of the group did a day trip with tour guides Wim D. (who helped guide Tour No. 1) and Michael G., a veteran guide who rides like the wind (another ex-racer), plays guitar and sings (he played one evening in Andermatt), and is about as solid as you can get guide-wise. We had one of the best dinners of the month that final evening at

**THAT'S PRETTY MUCH HOW IT GOES ON THESE TOURS...AMAZING PASS AFTER AMAZING PASS, NEAR-PERFECT ASPHALT EVERYWHERE, AND LOVELY LITTLE PICTURE-PERFECT TOWNS IN EACH VALLEY.**

Above, L to R: Tony and Tammy doing the fondue thing. Our lunch stop atop *Passo del Vivione*. Tour group No. 2 at dinner in Andermatt, about to sample the yummy Bobotie.



the Gasthaus Tell, which served up a wonderful curry-laced South African stew called Bobotie. Wim, who's spent a lot of time in S.A., had chosen the restaurant for that very reason, and hit it out of the park with the gastro choice.

### FRENCH CONNECTION

The group would head to the French Alps and the ski town of Chamonix and the Mont Blanc region the following morning for three more days of great riding, epic sightseeing (Mont Blanc being the Alps' highest peak at nearly 16,000 feet) and world-class cuisine, but for me it was time to head back to Munich and, eventually, back home. My back was getting worse being on the bike so much, and my outlook and attitude were deteriorating, as well.

I'd become a party pooper and just couldn't hack it anymore, so I packed up my stuff, had breakfast with the group and said goodbye to new friends Wim and Michael, 30-tour Charlie, John, Tony and Tammy, Dave and Billie, Tekeshi and Hisako, and Kaz and Noriko, and headed out of Andermatt toward Austria and, eventually, Munich and the airport.



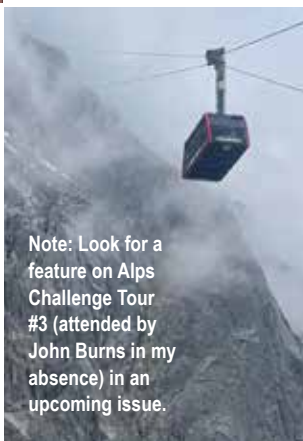
### SOLO TRAVELER

I've always enjoyed striking out on my own in the Alps, and it's happened a lot over the years, my schedule rarely matching that of the other tour participants. I'm either joining the group a day late, traveling alone to a new base hotel between tours, or leaving a day or two early, and so it was this year. Leaving by your lonesome on a motorcycle in a place you don't know very well (or at all) in another country is what I call an attractive challenge, and I've found there's plenty of satisfaction to be had when you get where you're headed...even if your back is effed up in a big way.



I snapped this as I left Andermatt on my way to Munich on Day 17 of 30. Bittersweet, for sure. Left: Tour guide Michael, toasting the group after serenading them with some James Taylor tunes. Below: Tram rides near Mont Blanc. Right, below: Arriving at Hotel Henry after that painful (but beautiful) ride from Andermatt.

I left cozy little Andermatt and headed east on the immediately twisty Oberalpstrasse road, turning north into Lichtenstein briefly before resuming my eastward trek toward Edelweiss headquarters in Mieming, Austria, where I'd have a quick meeting and coffee with Edelweiss'



Note: Look for a feature on Alps Challenge Tour #3 (attended by John Burns in my absence) in an upcoming issue.

Tobias, Rainer and Sarah, who brilliantly handles a ton of the details that go into the company's 100-plus tours each year. From there it was a few more hours north to our Munich-suburb base hotel — Hotel Henry — where I'd have a day to recover and work before catching a flight back to the U.S.

### FINAL CHALLENGE

The 10-hour trip was pretty uneventful despite

I'VE ALWAYS ENJOYED STRIKING OUT ON MY OWN IN THE ALPS, AND IT'S HAPPENED A LOT OVER THE YEARS, MY SCHEDULE RARELY MATCHING THAT OF THE OTHER TOUR PARTICIPANTS.

being in pain sitting in the KTM's comfortable saddle, but the weather was perfect — cool and sunny — and I had plenty of time to reflect on the past 16 days and consider one big additional challenge that comes with Alpine touring.

It's so obvious it almost doesn't need to be mentioned, but maintaining *focus* is a key to not dying an ugly death while riding in the Alps, or in just about any other on-road circumstance, really. I was reminded of it in a big way while ripping along a fast and curvy mountain road an hour or two out of Andermatt; while taking in the incredible morning light on the mountains and daydreaming about how nice the entire scene was — back pain notwithstanding — I found myself drifting wide in a left-hander and nearly running into an ugly stretch of rusty guardrail with a several-hundred-foot

drop just a foot or so over the edge. Higher speeds don't help when this happens, as you're covering a lot of ground in a hurry. It could have been very ugly, and I remember

thinking after the butterflies subsided how close we motorcyclists come to disaster, and how often it happens.

And I wondered...Is the possibility of disaster part of the allure with all this? Is danger why many of us are so attracted to motorcycles? Riding motorcycles has its risks, for sure, and some feed on that. But I suspect it's deeper than risk and danger alone. I think it's more about challenge, and the satisfaction of beating the challenges present in

motorcycling...and of *overcoming*, whether you're riding to the 7-11 or from Andermatt to Munich.

Achievement. Overcoming challenges. Werner and I had it right, I think. **AMA**

