

ENGAGING THE SENSES

EDELWEISS BIKE TRAVEL

STORY & PHOTOS BY GREG DREVENSTEDT

The well-known road up to the Queen of the Alps, 9,045-foot Stelvio Pass in Italy, the second highest paved pass in the range. Note the traffic jam where an RV and several cars are trying to negotiate the same switchback.

The Bucket List is a funny, heartstring-pulling movie about two terminally ill men who complete a wish list of experiences before they kick the bucket. They skydive, race classic cars, go on a safari and ride a motorcycle atop the Great Wall of China. Since the movie came out in 2007, “bucket list” has entered our lexicon, and many of us now have lists of our own. “Ride a motorcycle in the Alps” should be on that list.

TOURING CENTER ALPS

Upon completing Edelweiss Bike Travel’s 6-day Alps Extreme Tour (*Rider*, October 2010), I wanted desperately to go back, to again ride over some of the legendary passes and to have my breath taken away by ones I had missed. The supply of smoothly paved, ridiculously curvy, majestically scenic roads in the Alps is inexhaustible. You could live your entire life in the heart of that ancient mountain range, stretching 750 glorious miles over eight countries, and never ride every great road.

It took two years of wrangling but I finally made it back, this time with my girlfriend Carrie as a passenger. After spending a few days sightseeing and acclimatizing to the time zone in Switzerland, we took a scenic train ride to Seefeld, Austria, a picturesque ski resort town tucked into the mountains above Innsbruck that serves as base camp for Edelweiss’ Touring Center Alps. Edelweiss offers Touring Centers in the Dolomites and Norway as well, and all differ from traditional tours in several ways. First, whereas most guided tours follow a circuitous route with overnight stays in different hotels almost every night, a Touring Center occupies the same hotel for the entire tour. That means you only have to unpack your stuff once, but it also means that you eat breakfast and dinner in the same hotel for a week. Second, on a traditional tour, because the group moves from hotel to hotel along the route, you have no choice but to ride. Touring Center routes start and end at the same hotel each day, allowing participants to skip a day and relax or do some sightseeing, or small groups to take entirely different routes of their choosing. Lastly, because Touring Center itineraries are Sunday to Saturday with five riding days and no chase van, they’re more affordable and manageable than longer tours.

On a Sunday afternoon in mid-August, we checked into Hotel Central, the aptly named, charming, four-star hotel that was our home for a week. Owned by a former Edelweiss customer who keeps a BMW R 1150 GS and a World War II-surplus Willys jeep out back, it has comfortable, stylish rooms, spa facilities, a restaurant and bar, and even a wine cellar, where proprietor Hans Ölhafen hosted a complimentary tasting for our group. At the Welcome Briefing, we met our knowledgeable, friendly,

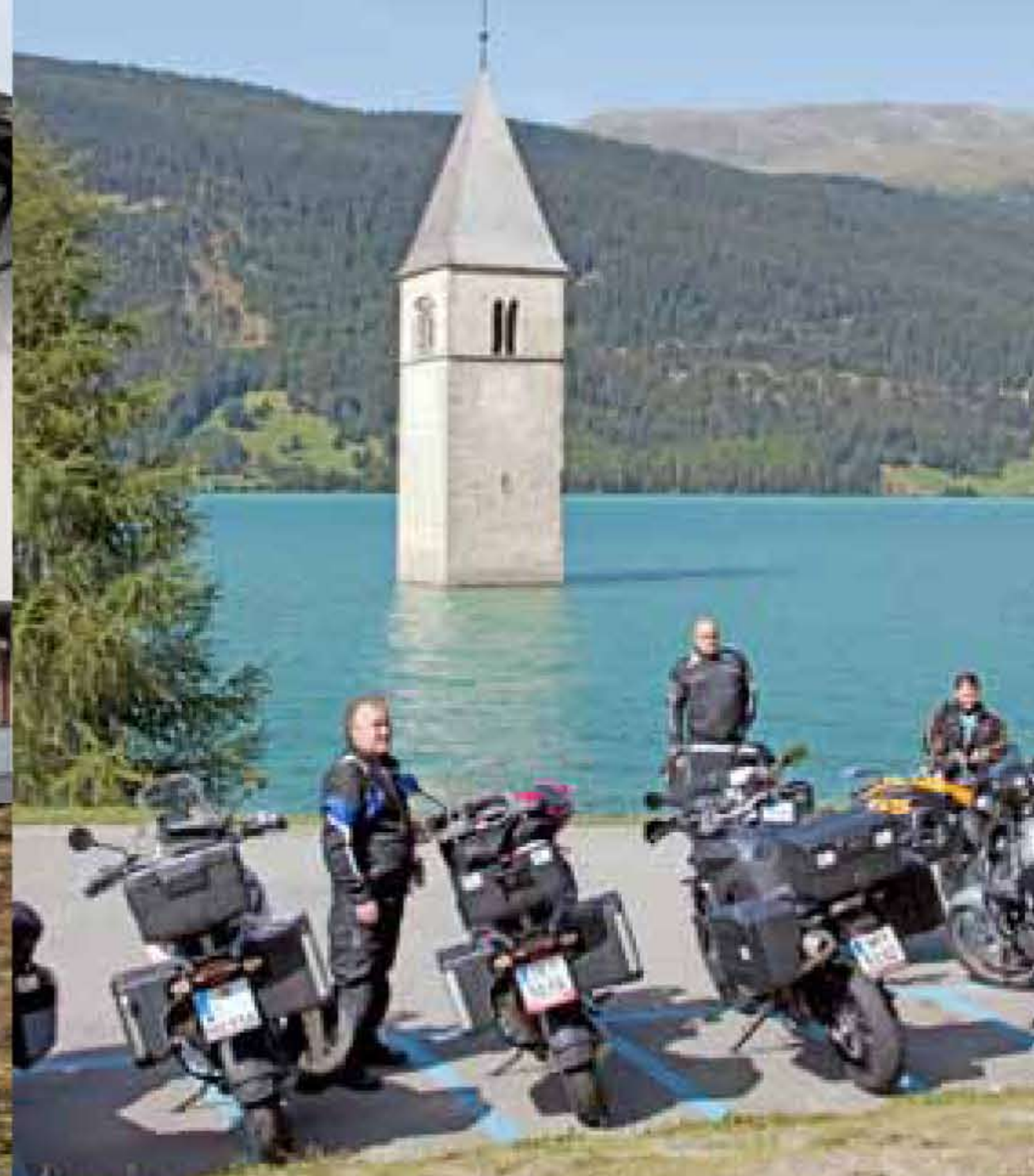


One of the final curves on the climb up to the incomparable Timmeljoch (8,117 feet), one of many mind-bending passes in the Italian Alps.



Linderhof Palace in southern Germany, one of three palaces built by the eccentric King Ludwig II and supposedly his favorite.

Right: Hotel Central was our base of operations for the week, in the heart of Seefeld, Austria. Far Right: A dam built in 1950 created Lake Reschen, submerging everything in the village of Graun im Vinschgau except the top of its 14th century bell tower. Lower Right: Between Italy's Jaufenpass and Timmeljoch we enjoyed authentic thin-crust pizza for lunch. Below: Rounding smooth curve after smooth curve on the ride up to 6,870-foot Jaufenpass.



ENGAGING THE SENSES

English-speaking Austrian tour guides, Hans and Tom, as well as 20 other participants from the U.S., Canada, Australia and Brazil. Prior to the tour, Edelweiss mailed us a map of the Alps and a detailed tour book with information about the countries we'd be riding in, daily itineraries, rules and regulations, and what to pack. Most of the group had been on one or more Edelweiss tours before, but head tour guide Hans covered everything in detail, with a strong emphasis on safety. Edelweiss has been running guided tours around the world, with particular expertise in the Alps, since 1980, so they have the process dialed in. Because the tour has an intermediate difficulty rating, several riders opted for a pre-tour training ride with the guides to get a feel for alpine roads.

The five daily routes ranged from 125 to 225 miles, with an 8:30 a.m. departure and arrival back at the hotel by 5:00 p.m., allowing plenty of time to shower and unwind before dinner. To keep the group manageable, the 14 bikes were split between the two guides. We stopped every hour or so for coffee or to take photos at scenic locations, and lunch breaks were relaxed and inexpensive. On several days, a small group struck out on their own with a route programmed on a GPS by Hans. Edelweiss believes the experience should be whatever you want: ride with the group every day, ride on your own every day (two-bike minimum for safety), spend every day sightseeing or lounging at the hotel, or any combination thereof.

The first day's route was on roads that weren't especially

challenging, allowing everyone to get a feel for the group and the bikes they had rented—mostly BMW GS and RT models, plus two Ducatis (Multistrada and Monster 696) and a Suzuki V-Strom 650. A wide variety of BMW, Ducati, Honda, Kawasaki and Triumph motorcycles are available to rent, even bikes you can't buy in the U.S. like the Honda Crosstourer, and the tour price varies by up to \$1,100 depending on the motorcycle that's chosen. First-day highlights included picturesque farm roads through the Leutasch Valley, the twisties of Kesselberg, fresco paintings on houses in Oberammergau and a tour of Linderhof Palace.



Tuesday was a big day, in more ways than one. The 225-mile route was the longest of the tour, crossing into Italy and Switzerland. Tackling Stelvio Pass (9,045 feet), the second highest paved pass in the Alps, required a challenging ride up 60 steep, tricky switchbacks through chaotic traffic—a free-for-all of cars, RVs, bicycles and motorcycles in both directions. At the top we were rewarded with stunning views of the road below and rugged mountains topped with glaciers. But I got an extra reward. After snapping a few photos from the overlook, I turned and got down on one knee, taking Carrie by surprise. Opening a ring box, I asked her to marry me. She said yes!

Stelvio Pass was certainly a highlight of the week, but the rest of the tour continued to enthrall us. Our central location in western Austria provided easy access to Switzerland to the west, Germany to the north and Italy to the south, each country having its own special wonders and mix of sights, sounds, smells, sensations and tastes. Riding up and over each pass—Jaufenpass (6,870 feet), Penserjoch (7,254 feet), Timmeljoch (8,117 feet) and Umbrail Pass (8,205 feet), among others—brought delights such as glaciers, lakes, even rainbows, and the roads, bridges and tunnels are masterpieces of civil engineering. We visited medieval towns, ate authentic local food and soaked up alpine culture. At the beginning and end of each day, everyone convened around a



Carrie began the tour as my girlfriend and ended it as my fiancée, having said yes to my marriage proposal atop Stelvio Pass.

long table to break bread, building new friendships based on our shared experiences.

All too quickly, our week came to an end. We wanted to ride more and spend more time with our new friends. We enjoyed having our room cleaned each day, the friendly service of Hotel Central's owners and staff (they're quick with a refreshing beer at the end of each day!), and the variety of delicious food at each morning's breakfast buffet and each evening's fixed menu,

which included several options, plus appetizers, salad bar and dessert. We enjoyed the company and expertise of our Austrian tour guides, who know the Alps well and understand the region's peculiar weather patterns, where a range of temperatures and rain are common. They juggled routes based on the forecast, allowing us to avoid rain in one area while bagging epic passes in another.

The Touring Center Alps is offered four times in 2013, once in late May and three times in July and August, with prices starting at \$2,580. The July and August dates are high season, requiring a \$300 per person surcharge. Going in May saves money and cuts down on late-summer traffic and heat. Regardless of when you go, it will be unforgettable.

For more information, visit edelweissbike.com or call Edelweiss Bike Travel at (011) 43-5264-5690. 

Seefeld, Austria, a charming ski resort town tucked as snug as a bug in a rug within the Alps, was our central location for tour. Hotel Central is located near the town center, offering easy access to the train station, shops and restaurants.