

EUROPEAN VACATION

A TWO-UP, TWO-WHEELED ALPINE ADVENTURE ON THE ROAD TO FAKKER SEE

Story and Photography by Matt King



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ntil the invitation came from Edelweiss Bike Travel to join its European Bike Week tour, the thought of jetting across the Atlantic for a motorcycle tour

had never seriously entered my mind. I've always admired dazzling photos of riding in the Alps, with their picture-perfect lakes and villages, and twisty roads that defy engineering logic. Yet while I appreciated the beauty, with so many great places to ride in the U.S., the challenge of trying to get a bike over there and sorting out all the other arrangements had kept it low on my bucket list.

But as a partner in the Harley-Davidson® Authorized Tours program, Edelweiss, which has been hosting motorcycle tours around the world for more than 35 years, makes it their business to sort out all those details. All I needed to do was book a flight, pack my gear, and show up ready for eight awesome days of riding through Austria, Germany, Italy, and Slovenia, with a two-day break at European Bike Week – the largest motorcycle rally outside of the United States. Edelweiss handled everything else, including arranging a motorcycle, booking the hotels, and mapping the route. The tour package even included most of the meals along the way. It sure took the stress out of planning a riding vacation.

Getting to Austria was easy. My wife, Erin, and I flew from Chicago to Berlin, then to Salzburg – birthplace of Mozart – before hopping trains to the village of Seefeld in Tirol, a small ski resort about 30 minutes from Innsbruck, where we met our fellow tour participants: Sonia and Ricardo, a couple of doctors from São Paulo, Brazil, riding two-up; and H.O.G.® members Gene Rueckert, a building contractor from Cincinnati, and Dan Ross, a retired firefighter from

Detroit. Dan and “Gen-O” met playing adult-league baseball and have been riding together for more than 10 years, including on many H.O.G. touring rallies. Their joint mission on their first trip to Europe was to rack up as many ABCs of Touring points as possible. Our small group was the perfect size for a fun and friendly week of riding.

The first order of business after check-in was getting set up with my bike. Edelweiss has access to a huge fleet of late-model Harley® motorcycles, and I requested a bike I knew would be familiar to ride and comfortable for me and my passenger: a 2015 Ultra Limited.

It's here I should mention that even though I've worked at H-D for 10 years, before this trip Erin and I had never ridden together on a motorcycle for longer than 30 minutes. So despite considering myself a competent rider,

with experience on some of the most technical roads in America, I was a bit nervous about tackling so many unfamiliar Alpine passes with a passenger on board.

Most of my concerns were allayed during the opening briefing, where our multilingual tour guides Ted Goslinga, a retired Dutch Navy commando, and Rob Stoll, an American from Denver with Swiss-German parents, gave us the lowdown on what to expect during the ride ahead. They went over European road signs,

speed limits, general traffic navigation, group riding, and, most important, some tips on how to ride a motorcycle in the Alps (see Between the Lines in issue 032 for more). As they explained the basics of corner entry and exit, late apexes, and negotiating tricky mountain switchbacks, the sound of scraping floorboards and my wife screaming in my ear flashed through my mind. But I'm happy to say, all those sounds remained in my imagination for the duration of the tour.

From Seefeld, we hit the road back to Salzburg, where we toured the historic

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Old Town that lies at the foot of a spectacular castle perched magnificently above the city. We dined at the St. Peter Stiftskeller – an amazing restaurant carved into the rock face of the cliffs below the castle, which bills itself as the oldest in Europe – to the tunes of a Mozart-themed dinner opera. Jokes about the time a bunch of uncouth bikers crashed an opera amused us for the rest of the tour, but in hindsight it was one of the highlights of the trip.

On day two we packed up and headed to Germany, with a stop at Hitler's infamous Eagle's Nest in Berchtesgaden, which offered a stunning panoramic view from its perch 6,000 feet above sea level. Fortunately the weather was clear enough to appreciate the scenery below, but I think we were all a bit creeped-out by the building's sordid past. The whole time I was up there I was thinking about the scenes in HBO's “Band of Brothers” when Easy Company “liberated” Hitler's wine cellar, and it was interesting to learn that the building and much of the surrounding area remained under U.S. military control until 1995, when it was returned to the local Bavarian government. Today the Eagle's Nest houses a restaurant and is a popular tourist destination as one of the few intact Nazi-era buildings remaining in Germany.

From Germany we rode back into Austria through terrain that reminded me of the Smoky Mountains, to Gmunden, a resort town on the shores of Lake Traun. We enjoyed a great dinner and a few beers at our hotel, and woke up the next morning to find that the weekly farmer's market in the



The town square in Hallstatt, Austria.



H.O.G. members Gene and Dan were on a quest for ABCs of Touring contest points.



Top: A giant motorcycle sculpture signals that you have arrived in Faaker See. **Bottom:** Built in 1077, the Hohenzalzburg towers over Salzburg.



plaza next to the hotel had parked in our bikes and chase van. Watching our guide Rob negotiate with a flower seller to move his van so he could move ours was a highlight of the morning, at least until we got to Hallstatt, a touristy town on a lake near a massive salt mine that was packed with Japanese and Chinese tourists. We stripped off our rain gear long enough to wander the streets and grab some coffee and apple strudel (which became a daily ritual), and were amused when some tourists asked to take pictures with us. Harley riders really do stand out anywhere in the world.

We finished day three with a stop at the Red Bull Ring in Spielberg, home of the Austrian round of the Formula 1 world championship, before checking

into the coolest hotel of the trip, the nearby Schloss Gabelhofen, a genuine castle built in the 1400s and now owned by Red Bull's Dietrich Mateschitz. Yeah, we slept in a castle.

Waking up the next morning in a castle was cool, but I was pumped about ending the fourth day at Faaker See, a.k.a. the Sturgis of Europe. This was the whole reason I chose this tour in the first place. I figured if I was going to spend a week in Europe, the least I could do was get a firsthand look at how Harley-Davidson culture has established a foothold abroad.

Well let me tell you, it has grabbed more than a foothold. I knew we were big in Japan, but we're big in Germany and France and Italy, too. Faaker See

has a really cool vibe, and much like Sturgis, getting there and being there is as much about the riding as the event venue itself. The excitement built as we got closer to the event, with bikes from all over Europe (mostly of the Harley variety but other brands, too) amassing like a giant armada headed for a tiny lake in southern Austria. The scene that has sprung up around the lakeside resort of Faaker See looks a lot like any big U.S. rally, with scores of vendors hawking T-shirts, leather, and all sorts of motorcycle parts and riding gear, not to mention the bars, bands, burnouts, and all the other "unmentionable" stuff you see at rallies everywhere. There were loads of cool bikes all over the place, but what really struck me as most

different was how many fewer baggers I saw compared to home. But after riding through the mountains and villages of Europe, it's not surprising that smaller and lighter Dyna® and Softail® models outnumber Electra Glide® bikes by a wide margin.

Our two-day stopover at European Bike Week included day rides around the area, with routes through two awesome national parks in Austria and Slovenia. With 52 curves in 22 miles, the Nockalmstrasse northwest of Faaker See was worth the 10 Euro price of admission for the photos alone, and the road through Slovenia's Triglav National Park threw something completely unexpected at me: cobblestoned switchbacks on the ascent to the

summit. Trying to hold a line over the rough, uneven surface on the way up made me glad I wasn't descending them in the rain.

After two full days at European Bike Week, we packed up and headed out for the final weekend of the tour, but if I thought the highlights were over, I was in for a surprise when we hit the Dolomites of Italy – starting with the ride to Cortina d'Ampezzo, site of the 1956 Winter Olympics. Ripped from the pages of a European guidebook, Cortina is ringed with rocky spires that host spectacular light shows as rays of sunset and sunrise bounce off their peaks. The roads were spectacular, especially as we rose above the tree line and could fully appreciate the magnificent engineering feats required to cut a ribbon of highway over, around, and through solid rock. And nothing beats having Italian food in Italy.

The eighth and final day of our ride was planned to be the longest, with a route across two mountain passes through the Dolomites, but an unexpected road closure caused by a bicycle race forced a change in our plans. Fortunately the pass we detoured over and the sinuous road back down the other side into Innsbruck was another highlight of the trip, with a perfect mix of technical corners and panoramic vistas. You can ride a Harley

anywhere, but some roads are more perfect than others, and we definitely found one that day.

Back in Seefeld, we shared a final dinner together before our group went its separate ways, and I had some time to reflect on the ride. Even with some weather challenges and a few unexpected turns in the road, Edelweiss had planned and executed a nearly perfect tour. If I had to sum it up in a few words it would be great roads, great hotels, great meals, and great company all enjoyed on a great bike. There are many ways to visit Europe, but now that I've been there on a Harley, I think I know the best way.

Edelweiss Bike Travel covered some tour and accommodation expenses for this article. All opinions are those of the author and HOG® magazine.



H-D® AUTHORIZED TOURS

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