

Learning to ride the Alps with Edelweiss

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JON LANGSTON

Riding the Alps is the dream of many a rider, but the challenge of motorcycling Europe's famous mountain range can sometimes prove to be overwhelming. Even those who consider themselves skilled can find the demanding roads, foreign street signs and frantic traffic difficult to negotiate, and end up working so hard to master the ride they don't enjoy the vacation.

To help its participants achieve the richest touring experience possible, in 2014 Edelweiss Bike Travel launched the Alps Riding Academy. Part tour and part riding school, this weeklong offering provides the opportunity to motorcycle in one of the world's most glorious locales, and the skills to do it with confidence. Led by Chief Instructor Christian Preining, a friendly, multilingual guide with a schoolteacher's patience and 21 years of Edelweiss experience, participants are given the knowledge to read the ever-changing tarmac, understand local traffic and interpret and predict the actions of other motorists. Instead of sweating and swearing under their helmets, students learn to relax in the saddle and appreciate the experience of riding in one of the most majestic places on Earth.

The Academy differs from most Edelweiss junkets in that participants take day trips from a central host hotel, rather than being escorted on a whirlwind tour from one fabulous location to the next. For now, the academy's headquarters are in Northern Italy, in the quaint village of Klobenstein. Nestled in the hills above Bolzano, the capital city of the province of South Tyrol, Klobenstein is as close to Innsbruck, Austria, as any major Italian city. German is the predominant language, but most South Tyroleans speak Italian, too. Hotel Bemelmans Post oozes Old World charm, boasts a fine restaurant and friendly staff, and makes an excellent base camp.

Another difference is that the riding academy is limited to six students and an instructor. On many group tours the fastest, most experienced motorcyclists typically tuck in behind the leader and leave the novice and foreign riders—those who would benefit the most from watching and emulating the local expert up front—stuck at the back of a large pack and often struggling to keep up. By restricting class size and requiring riders to switch positions often, everyone at the academy learns by example.

At the introductory dinner, I met Stephan Kessler, a towering gray-haired German with a hearty laugh who showed up aboard his own BMW touring bike, and James Muriithi, a quiet Kenyan native from Arlington, Virginia. Stephan lives within a day's ride of Klobenstein and has traversed these mountains many times; he enrolled in the academy for no other reason than he wanted to become a better motorcyclist.



Main: Challenging roads and magnificent vistas make the Alps one of the world's most desirable riding locales. **Top:** The small group size differentiates the Alps Riding Academy from standard Edelweiss tours. **Above:** The cross at the top of this rock formation exemplifies why staying on your side of the road is crucial.

MASTER CLASS



(Clockwise from top left) Even in late spring, it's common to find snow at the crest of South Tyrolean mountain passes. More cowbell! From 7,253 feet, the ride down is easily as exhilarating as the ascent. Into the abyss—yes, that's a two-way road.

MASTER CLASS

James had only a couple of years' riding experience, mainly commuting aboard a used Honda Shadow. He viewed the academy as not only an awesome vacation and valuable learning opportunity, but also as a chance for a weeklong test ride of a Ducati Monster from Edelweiss' rental fleet.

The first morning we gathered for a lecture and PowerPoint presentation. Christian began with the basics, such as local laws, road signs, rotaries and group riding etiquette. He then spent the rest of the morning covering the particular intricacies of motorcycling the Alps: the types of roads and road surfaces; the nuances of passing and lane-splitting; push turns vs. lean turns and when to use each, and much more. He talked about the importance of completing your turn on your own side of the road, and the difference between a typical line (using the whole lane) and an Edelweiss line (starting wide, finishing tight) in a hairpin. The lesson also covered the value of keeping two fingers on both levers, braking during a curve and working the clutch instead of downshifting.

After lunch, we rode to a parking lot near an airfield where Christian set up orange cones and led us through a series of exercises. The rain was light but constant, and all afternoon our instructor stood on the tarmac in his modular helmet and rain gear, coaching, gesturing and shouting encouragement and advice in our direction. He walked us through slow speed turns, slalom, braking and swerving, and more exercises I hadn't *really* practiced in years. By the end of the day, the Multistrada and I were good friends—while James was wondering if he shouldn't have chosen a bike less fierce than the Monster to ride for the entire week.

It's constantly tempting to soak in the view—but you'd be well advised to keep your eyes on the road.



(Clockwise from top left) Not all of the best views are jaw-dropping vistas. Motorcycles aren't the only two-wheeled traffic cruising the Alps. There's plenty of riding in small towns and villages between alpine passes.





Main: Lago di Garda is the largest lake in Italy. A ride around it will take most of a day. Below: Personal instruction is just one of the benefits of the Alps Riding Academy.

Above: The view from my room at Hotel Bemelmans Post of the Rosengarten massif in the Dolomites. Who could ask for more? **Right:** Our small group rotated position often so each student could closely observe the lead instructor.



MASTER CLASS

Over the next five days we traversed no fewer than 10 phenomenal mountain passes, charging up narrow mountain roads to snowcapped peaks and down into lush valleys on the other side. Some roads we re-rode several times, with Christian leading the way and watching us in his mirrors to ensure we were hitting our lines, using our levers and staying active in the saddle. His suggestions at the end of each run helped us all ride smarter, safer...and a little faster every time. By design, the roads grew progressively more challenging as the week went on, allowing us to learn the techniques, drill them repeatedly and then put them into practice. It was fun watching young James' poise grow each with each pass.

If the learning was rewarding, then the sightseeing was magnificent. All week we crisscrossed Northern Italy, riding through dense forests and verdant pastures, around lakes, through tunnels, past idyllic villages, innumerable vineyards and medieval cliff-side castles. We rode onto a ferry to cross Lago di Garda and took an 8-foot-wide, centuries-old road straight into the side of a cliff, exiting into the sunny highlands on the other side. We rode through torrential rain, thick fog, melting snow, sandy roads and blinding sun. We drank espresso to warm up, ice water to cool down, and ate the best pizza I've ever had in my life—twice. And every night we'd sit around the dinner table talking, laughing and learning as Christian took the time to explain to each of us what we did right, what we did wrong and what he expected to see from us going forward. Because when a guy who used to race against Roger DeCoster gives you motorcycling advice, you take it.

By Friday night I was exhausted. My shoulders hurt, my hands and forearms ached from all the lever work, and my legs and hips were sore from moving around in the saddle. Sure, a long week on the bike is tough on the body, but I was mentally tired, too. I've taken many long trips on motorcycles, but none as rewarding as this.

Stephan concurred. He felt he was an accomplished motorcyclist before the Alps Riding Academy; now, he can't wait to re-ride many of his favorite alpine roads. "The Edelweiss training more than fulfilled my expectations," he said. "I now really master my bike, increasing my speed a little, but mainly my safety margin. I don't need to correct my line anymore."

"I'm glad our instructor was as good as advertised," James said. "His patience and encouragement made the learning environment less intimidating. The amazing scenery, food and company were a great bonus."

The best motorcycle tours take us along exciting roads to breathtaking locales, but often the only time we ever learn anything is when (and if) we make a mistake. The Alps Riding Academy offers more than stunning vistas and challenging motorcycling; it offers the opportunity to be a better rider. And that's an experience you'll remember every time you gear up.

Several Alps Riding Academy tours are planned for 2015. For more information, visit edelweissbike.com. 40

