

JANUARY 2009
Volume 15 No. 1

Motorcycles, Travel & Adventure

BACKROADS



***Powerin'
thru the
Peach Tree State***

All New BMW F650GS • Color in the Catskills • Harley-Davidson CVOs

ROAD TRIP

A Tour into European History

Words and images: Tom Hall

I had been thinking about adding new countries to the 15 countries I have visited and a chance came up where I could do so. Edelweiss Bike Travel had an opening on their Austria-Hungary Tour and I jumped at a chance to do some more exploring.

I have ridden in Austria many times on other tours and somehow missed spending time in Vienna, so I decided to go early. Plus there were some interesting areas to see in other countries (Hungary and Slovenia) that I had not visited before.

I received a packet from Edelweiss weeks before departure with all the necessary items for the tour. It contained three large maps of the countries I would visit, a list of all the attendees, a wonderful well-written booklet on the tour and the daily routes (long and short versions), stickers and easy to attach nametags for luggage.

The tour started in Vienna, which is the capital of Austria, and is also one of the nine states of Austria. It's Austria's primary city with a population of about 1.7 million (2.3 million within the metropolitan area), and by far the largest city in Austria as well as its cultural, economic and political center. It's the 10th largest city by population in the European Union. Vienna is host to many major international organizations such as the United Nations and OPEC. Vienna lies in the very east of Austria and is close to the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary.

The tour bus took us into the city where we viewed many historic renaissance buildings by famous architects, with statues everywhere and much more.

Vienna's famous Schlosspark Schonbrunn - Hapsburg's favorite palace with a museum full of fresco art (nearly destroyed in WW II) and a beautiful garden with water fountains and sculptures in the back. They estimate 6,000 visitors a day!

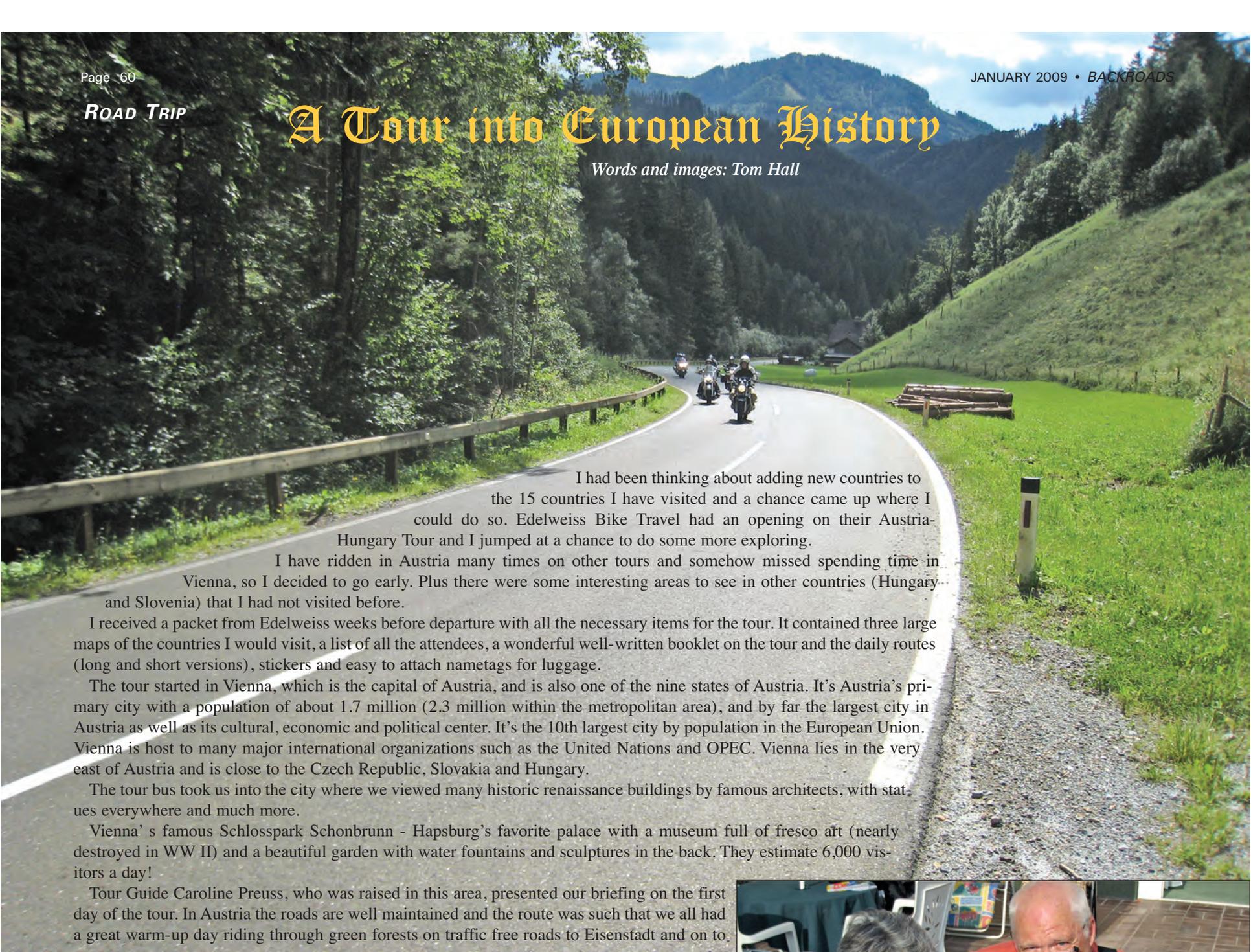
Tour Guide Caroline Preuss, who was raised in this area, presented our briefing on the first day of the tour. In Austria the roads are well maintained and the route was such that we all had a great warm-up day riding through green forests on traffic free roads to Eisenstadt and on to

Neusiedler See, past Europe's largest shallow, warm steppe lake. We rode through Rust and spotted storks resting upon nests on rooftops. We spotted an older gentleman wearing a full-face helmet with his white mustache and beard riding his scooter from the opposite direction. Eventually arriving in Győr, where there are many bikes and scooters everywhere ridden by men, women and kids of all ages and sizes. Each town we passed through had nice trees and homes close to the road, many with red rooftops.

The next morning it was off to Budapest cruising the tree-lined roads, its fields and forests and crossing the Danube River, which is no longer blue, for the first of four times on this tour. We had one crossing on a ferry and had to wait for about an hour because we missed it and it crosses every hour.

Entering Budapest, the capital of Hungary is quite a sight. Widely regarded as one of the most beautiful cities in Europe, with its World Heritage Sites including the banks of the Danube, the Buda Castle Quarter, Andrassy Avenue, and the Millennium Underground railway, the first on the European continent. Budapest attracts over 20 million visitors a year. There is much history here to visit and see on our rest day.

The roads were not like Austria, mostly long and straight tree lined with a turn now and then. They were not as well maintained as in Austria. Some riders took side routes to explore back roads that led up into surrounding hills. We really couldn't get lost as all roads were on the map and we could easily find our way back to the main route and locate our hotel. We stayed in art'otel facing the Parliament building just across the Danube, which gave us a fantastic view from our hotel windows.





Some took the rest day to see the historic city and all its glory. Others took one of the best motorcycle roads that can be found on Route 24 between Matrafured and Eger covering most of Matra, Hungary's highest mountains for a day of riding. Also there are the Bukk hills east of Budapest with small and narrow roads that crisscross through the Bukk Park of remote hills and valleys, little creeks and beautiful forests.

On our next day, one route traveled north through vineyards, Tihany peninsula and Lake Heviz and the other went through pastures, vineyards and along Lake Balaton. The choice was up to each rider, long or short route. There seemed to be a church in every small town right at a turn in the road, and we were able to see 4 church towers at one time as we rode into one town. We arrive at our hotel in Misefa after another ride through history.

On this day we rode through three different countries whose borders are now open to all traffic night and day without stopping, seeing more history before we arrive in Maribor.

Maribor is a romantic old town to explore or possibly take a ride into the surrounding mountains, as our group spends another rest day here to do as we please.

Maribor's popular tourist sites include a 12th century cathedral in the Gothic style and the town hall constructed in the Renaissance fashion. The castle dates from the 15th century. The city hosts the University of Maribor, established in 1961. It is also home to the oldest grapevine in the world called Stara trta, which is more than 400 years old.

The next day's ride is what we have been waiting for. We're headed for Deutschlandsberg and stayed in a castle. Although it is only 50 km from Maribor as the birds fly, we will take longer routes either through the vineyards of the southern Styrian wine region or drag the pegs on some great motorcycle roads and have lunch at a high mountain in the Alps. There are always too many choices.

Arriving at Deutschlandsberg, which is a little town famous for its Schilcher wine, we find a castle sitting on a hill surrounded by vineyards. Imagine Hollywood building a castle such as this. It's dated back to the 16th century and sitting on sheer rock. This is our hotel!

Another day of choices! Ride another thousand turns and curves through Styrian Mountains or go to Graz and visit more history. We are heading to Semmering. Some chose to experience the turns and curves to Barnbach to see the church designed by the famous Viennese artist Friedensreich Hundertwasser. It is very colorful and he didn't like straight lines in his buildings. Practically next door was the 300-year tradition of glass blowing in a factory that we could tour to see some of the most elaborate glass souvenirs.

It's the last day of riding and our minds are overloaded with history and riding. There are two choices again, long or short route. The long route went through "Hell Valley" considered the biker's dream with countless curves through a magnificent gorge and little traffic. Or we could find our own route home through various historic areas of central Europe's largest mine or Europe's largest underground lake.

We did have some fun side trips, like the trip to Highway 69, which is a well-known stop for all bikers to come talk about bikes and play around a bit.

There were some great roads with sweepers and tight turns to keep us awake while riding through the forests and along the country roads.

The overall feeling of this tour is if you like history and easy roads to ride this is a good way to go. If you are a good rider and want more challenges you might like to consider a different tour. The group was great and was made up of 8 couples (2 women rode their own bike), 2 father and son combinations, 3 guys and 3 guides.

Have a safe ride out there. To find out about this or any of the offerings from Edelweiss Bike Travel, log onto www.edelweissbike.com.

