

House of the Habsburgs

EXPLORING
THE FORMER
EMPIRE ON THE
2009 RIDER
MUSEUM AND
CASTLE TOUR.

Story and Photography by Mark Tuttle

Mention Austria, and along with the *Sound of Music*, most American riders think of the extraordinary scenery, towering Alps and passes in the country's state of Tyrol. This region is in the long, narrow thumb that extends to the west of the otherwise fist-shaped country.

The thumb is where Innsbruck and Kitzbuhel are located, cities internationally famous for winter sports, and well-known alpine passes such as the Grossglockner Hochalpenstrasse, named after Austria's highest 12,461-foot peak. The area is very popular with motorcyclists, as are the Bavarian, Swiss and Italian Alps that surround the thumb.

For the 2009 *Rider* Museum and Castle Tour, we thumbed our noses at the thumb, choosing instead to explore the roads less traveled in and around Austria's large fist. The Austrian Alps extend another 250 miles northeast of the ol' Tyrol after all, and by using eastern Austria as a hub, we could ride in them as well as six core countries of the old Habsburg monarchy—Germany, Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Border stops between these old- and new-world countries are a thing of the past, and fresh cultural experiences as plentiful as good motorcycle roads. Nineteen Americans thought it a good enough plan to sign up, especially since our route would include three very cool auto-motorcycle museums for the petrolheads, and our choice of visiting half-a-dozen ancient, royal or haunted (or all three) famous castles.

Edelweiss Bike Travel was our host and organizer, and provided three of its best guides to lead two routes—long and short—on motorcycles each day, drive the chase van and generally look after us. Axel, Christian and Oliver are all EBT veterans, and having had the good fortune to be on tours with each of them before, I knew we were in capable and good-spirited hands.

As one of EBT's shorter, more affordable vacations with seven days on the bikes, accommodations on this tour ranged from comfortable and convenient (near or in the larger, expensive cities of Munich, Salzburg and Vienna), to funky and historic in the smaller towns. Unlike Spain at dinner and Italy at breakfast, in Germany and Austria they know how to eat at every



Susan Gragg checks out castle ruins on a lake island where we had enjoyed a picnic lunch a few minutes before.

meal, and in fact our only unmemorable repast was on the one night we spent outside them, in the Czech Republic. As the home of Bohemian hops the Czechs are famous for both beer and food, so this probably had more to do with our being the first guests at the modern new hotel there. The beer was still great, though, and the cheapest on the ride. Although Hungary and the Czech Republic haven't officially adopted the Euro, for the most part they've forgotten to tell the people who work there.

After arriving at EBT's base hotel in Erding, between Munich's airport and the city, we had a brief orientation and then "took over" our bikes in the garage below. EBT notes every scratch and ding before you add any,

and you can purchase extra insurance to lower or even eliminate the damage deductible. I had picked our usual mount from the primarily BMWs available, an R1200RT, for its good weather protection, comfortable seating for both of us, excellent handling and stump-pulling torque. Others rode BMW R and GS models, Japanese adventure tourers and naked sportbikes, even a couple Harley big twins. There were 19 bikes in all on the tour, including three two-up, two guide bikes and a backup bike in the van.

As befits any good *Rider* Tour, after the usual morning rider's meeting, most of us started the first day heading the wrong way. West into Munich, that is, for one of the highlights, the new BMW World and Museum complex.

After a visit to the former where all of the company's new products are on display (sorry about the drool and fingerprints on the M3), Axel was kind enough to arrange a private and quick tour of the museum for our group. The contemporary architecture of these buildings is almost as interesting as the contents and their nearly 95-year history, and the gift shops were pretty popular among our group, too.

Time to ride: Though there was too much traffic to exploit it, leaving Munich we had our first taste of the speed-limitless German *autobahn* on our way south before negotiating some gorgeous but also well-trafficked alpine scenery to Berchtesgaden and the Eagle's Nest, Hitler's former retreat in southernmost Germany. To reach the mountain-top chalet and unsurpassed views of the German and Austrian Alps, you ride a bus on a very narrow winding road up to the entrance of a long, dark tunnel, walk its 406-foot length to a large brass- and mirror-walled elevator and ride it 406 feet to the top. During World War II the Allies flattened the military community of Obersalzberg and Hitler's Berghof below, but the Eagle's Nest was supposedly spared by a blanket of snow that made it indistinguishable from the surrounding mountain.

Having justifiably overstayed at the BMW museum, we arrived at Eagle's Nest just after the last bus had left at 4 p.m., as did Christian's group that had skipped the museum in favor of more riding. So we pressed on together over the Rossfeld Panoramastrasse, a lovely serpentine alpine road, for our night in Salzburg. Mozart's birthplace flanks the Salzach River with historic baroque buildings dominated from above by the Hohensalzburg castle, one of the largest in Europe. Our hotel was right on the river, with a beautiful view of the city from the rooftop bar. Dinner was in a private room at a local Hofbrau, which we promptly turned into a raucous celebration of our first successful day on the road. Most evenings were pretty much one big party, in fact.

As with any such ride, the people on it play a big role in everyone's experience, and we were blessed with a fun, lively bunch of good-spirited and capable riders aged 45 to 73. I found it interesting what an icebreaker social media like Facebook has become on a tour like this, as despite coming from all over the United States, many of those on the ride already seemed to know one another when we first met! Several had been on an Edelweiss Tour before, too, and at least two riders had been on one of our *Rider M&C* Tours, so the mealtime atmosphere was always festive. To their credit, the entire group backtracked to



Eagle's Nest high above Berchtesgaden in southern Germany. The chalet was a birthday gift to Hitler, who only visited it about 10 times for meetings.



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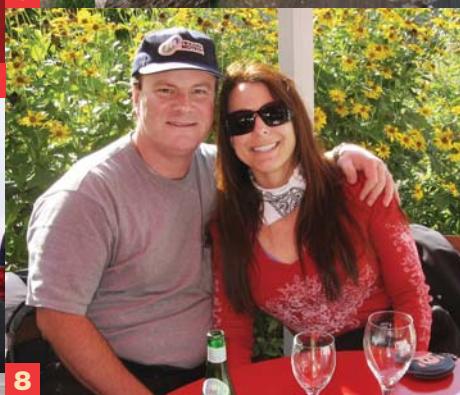
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1. Hohensalzburg castle dominates the skyline of Mozart's birthplace, Salzburg, Austria.
2. Dorky tourist in Cesky Krumlov, Czech Republic.
3. BMW Museum, Munich, by Ernst Henne's 1937 land-speed record holder.
4. Giant BMW World, where the new bikes are relegated to a small corner. I was scolded for fondling a new M3 coupe.
5. Christian leads the group just inside the Slovenian border.



PHOTO BY STEVE FIELDS

1. Old Town pedestrian zone, Vienna, on the rest day.
2. South 40 of Vienna's Schönbrunn Palace. Hate to be the gardener.
3. Riding through castle ruins in Austria somewhere; I can't read my notes.
4. Self-guided tour of Schönbrunn. Hey you, no photography allowed!
5. Gmund private Porsche museum.
6. Fall festival at City Hall, Vienna.
7. Genie Tuttle, guides Axel and Christian crossing a lake on a ferry on the way back to Austria from the Czech Republic.
8. The Tuttles outside the Porsche museum. Come ride with us!
9. Eggenburg, Austria, motorcycle museum is tucked away in a residential area but houses more than 320 historic vehicles, mostly Austrian Steyr-Puch motorcycles.
10. Hochosterwitz castle near Klagenfurt, Austria, dates before 806.

Eagle's Nest the next morning to take in the view. We had to hustle, though, as each day of the tour was a full one. Today's options were visiting a private Porsche museum in the town of Gmund where the sports car company was founded, and the famous hilltop Hochosterwitz castle, which dates back well before 806. The Nockalm Road lies in between, climbing and winding for 22 miles over the green Nockberg range in Europe's only national park. Off the *autobahn* the roads on this tour varied from classic alpine twisters to rolling, winding forest and farmland highways, to arrow-straight and bumpy two-lane in the former East Bloc countries, where the priority is not yet on the road condition. As always, you could ride with a guide or make your own way, which is fairly easy to do in Europe once you get the hang of navigating from town-to-town rather than turn-by-turn.

Given the destination-oriented roads in Slovenia and Hungary, our day trips into these countries and two in the Czech Republic were more cultural exploration than seeking the limits of our motorcycles' tires. Even with the Berlin Wall a 20-year-old memory, there's still a stark difference between the look, feel and economic condition of the towns and villages in robust

Above right: Riegersburg Fortress near Graz, Austria, sits 482 meters high atop a dormant volcano. It dates back to sometime before 1122. Below: Beautiful and enormous Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna, seat of the Habsburg monarchy until its demise in 1918. Right: The Workman family, Bill, Rhonda and Wally, are not in Texas anymore, Toto....



Germany and Austria, and those in struggling Slovenia, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Our route took us into all three, as well as into Slovakia and its capital of Bratislava from Vienna on the rest day if desired. It was an opportunity to see how the other half still lives, not to mention the countries' historic old towns, pedestrian zones and architecture in relatively unrestored condition. Crossing the border from Austria, visiting the villages and towns and talking to the locals at gas stops and lunch, then crossing back into Austria to spend the night made for exciting cultural immersion into the Old World with the convenience of the modern one.

The next several days brought more rolling countryside and soft hills, perfect riding weather and good company, castles and alpine corners, punctuated by the Austrian Motorcycle Museum in Eggenburg with its more than 300 vehicles—primarily Steyr-Puch, which started making bikes in 1903, the same year as Harley-Davidson. Gothic towns with their enormous cathedrals and palaces like mighty Vienna, our rest day, as

Guide Axel takes a well-earned nap in the sun on the Iron Butt Hotel during lunch somewhere in the Czech Republic.



Now this was an awesome bunch, 22 in all with guide Oliver, who at this moment was probably unloading our bags at the next hotel. Thanks everyone; see you next time!

well as Ceske Budejovice (Budweis in German) and Cesky Krumlov in the Czech Republic, kept us on our toes and caffeine levels topped-off after riding the nearly trafficless surrounding forested hills and farmland. Overall the 1,000-mile September ride was a very satisfying combination of corners, beautiful and rough roads, culture, food and company, particularly if you've already experienced some of the alpine passes in and around the thumb to the west on a previous tour. After seven days we went home feeling like we had experienced the whole of Europe rather than just a few mountain ranges.

Edelweiss Bike Travel will once again be our hosts for the 2010 Rider Museum and Castle Tour, which will be joined by Clement Salvadori. The tour goes to Germany, Switzerland and France and runs July 29-August 7. For more information see www.ridermagazine.com or www.edelweissbike.com 