

8  
Naked Bikes  
+7  
Readers  
=1  
Excellent  
European  
Adventure

# AN INSIDE JOB

WORDS: Aaron Frank  
PHOTOS: MC staff and tour participants



each bike and suffer through some mind-numbing photo/video shoots too. After all, every few dreams you have a nightmare...

Our adventure began in the once-divided city of Berlin, where we gathered from points around the globe and broke the ice with a tour of the historic BMW Motorrad factory at nearby Spandau, where two of the bikes we were testing—the S1000R and RnineT—are brought to life. We were a diverse group: a custom home builder from Canada, a commodity trader from Chicago, an auto-industry insider from Thailand-by-way-of-Detroit, a Dallas doctor, and more. Some had ridden tens of thousands of miles all over the world; for others it was their first time out of the country; one sheepishly admitted, after a particularly soggy stretch of autobahn, that he had never ridden in rain before! Most had some experience on naked bikes, and many owned naked bikes back home. All were passionate about motorcycles, and just like every Edelweiss tour we've done, the group bonded quickly. "Everyone had such a good time," Tom Bentley said, "laughing like we've been friends for 10 years right from the start. It would be a great experience even without the motorcycle riding."

Following the BMW factory visit, the first day's ride was an easy, 150-mile warm-up through the Spreewald Biosphere Reserve to Dresden in the former East Germany—for everyone except the author, that is. A scheduling snafu instead sent me 200 miles south to the suburbs of Munich in a rented VW Polo to retrieve our S1000R then 150 miles back to Dresden where I rejoined the group. (That 150 miles was covered in 90 minutes, including a stop for gas—what's not to love about Germany's autobahn?)

Day two dawned sunny and bright. After departing Dresden and climbing the rolling foothills of the beautiful Elbe Sandstone Mountains that rise nearly 1,000 feet above Germany's Elbe River, our guest testers got their first real chance to dive into the act of comparing the bikes—an eye-opening experience for many.

"You guys say it in the magazine all the time: 'All these bikes are great, it's so hard to pick a winner...' And I'm always like, 'Well, that's complete malarkey,'" Bentley said. "But it's true. You could take any of these bikes, and, once you got used to it, you'd love it. But that's what's so interesting about riding them back to back. There are differences, and it's a challenge to figure those out."

It's the ultimate bike-geek experience for these guys to compare notes with magazine editors, and it's priceless for us to learn what regular, cash-paying riders value in a motorcycle too.

"I've learned so much just talking with professionals that really know about the industry and these bikes," Hugo Caballero said. "These guys really know what they're talking about. Then you try the bike and you say, 'Okay, they're right.' When you switch bikes every two hours, you really get to know these bikes. You start being really critical, and it gets you on another level quick."

**W**e hear it all the time around here: "You guys have the best job in the world! The latest motorcycles! The greatest roads! Insider access to the factories! Mountains of swag, free food, five-star hotels, and someone else always picks up the fuel tab!"

Okay, so it's not a bad gig—most of the time. Once again this year, with a lot of help from Edelweiss Bike Travel ([edelweissbike.com](http://edelweissbike.com)), we gave seven lucky readers the opportunity to live their motojournalist dreams by joining us on a seven-day comparison test in Europe. Last year's reader tour featured adventure bikes in the Alps; this year we rounded up naked sportbikes and crafted a circuitous route through Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Italy that combined everything from unlimited-speed autobahn to awe-inspiring Alpine passes, with the added bonus of BMW, KTM, and Ducati factory tours. And everyone got a free T-shirt!

Our days were spent inhaling octane and wasting rubber; our nights were spent dining al fresco in Europe's finest cities, comparing notes about the bikes over countless cold lagers. Just so they didn't think our work was all wine and wheelies, we demanded our guests give complete test notes on





Above: This stunning view across Lake Misurina welcomed us to Italy and the Dolomites; Below: The group poses in the "Oldtimers Museum" in the basement of our hotel in Kaprun, Austria; Bottom right: The riverfront in Passau, Germany.



After a short stop at the stunning Bastei overlook in Germany's Saxon Switzerland National Park, we passed under the rusted-steel awning of a former border checkpoint and crossed into the Czech Republic. Even without the different language on the road signs we recognized immediately that we'd left Germany when the formerly flawless pavement turned choppy and the tiny roadside villages resembled a shabbier, lived-in version of their slightly over-manicured German doppelgänger. Not so the beautiful capital city of Prague, our destination for that night, which fully deserves its UNESCO World Heritage Site designation.

Day three was a beeline toward the Sumava "mountains"—more a collection of steep, rolling hills carpeted with lush green meadows—that bisect the Bohemian and Bavarian forests in the area where Germany, Austria, and the Czech Republic meet. That night was spent in the German city of Passau,

a charming, almost-Venetian peninsula where the Inn, Ilz, and Danube rivers meet.

Leaving Passau early the next morning we followed the shoreline of the Inn River to the Austrian town of Mattighofen—the "M" in "KTM"—an otherwise unassuming village of 6,000 except for the massive manufacturing facility on the outskirts of town where the famous orange motorcycles are made. KTM's factory, a beehive of activity where seemingly hundreds of young workers assembled everything from 65cc minibikes to 1290 Super Dukes side by side, couldn't be more of a contrast to the unnaturally calm, largely robotized BMW facility we visited in Spandau a few days before. After a light lunch at the factory with our very entertaining tour guide Jochi Sauer—KTM product manager and former European Enduro champion, who was treated like a celebrity on the assembly line—we were off toward our most memorable overnight of the trip in Kaprun, Austria.



No one does fly-and-ride motorcycle touring better than Edelweiss, with more than 30 years experience leading tours in more than 190 countries. One thing Edelweiss excels at is leading you to unique places you'd never find on your own, like our destination for that night, Vötter's Sportkristall Hotel in the Austrian ski town of Kaprun, with its fabulously bizarre antique automobile (and motorcycle) museum in the basement that's populated almost exclusively with former East German oddball cars from brands like Opel, Janus, Trabant, Borgward, Messerschmitt, and more. Early the next morning the museum proprietor/hotel owner sent us off with an elaborate torch-lighting ceremony (don't ask), leaving us with an experience we won't soon forget.

But we didn't leave Kaprun without first taking full advantage of another of the biggest benefits of traveling with Edelweiss: the excellent ride guides. There's never a problem when traveling with an Edelweiss guide, even when there is a problem—like when the Monster 1200S got knocked over in the parking lot, snapping its shift lever off. No problem—five minutes, a 10mm wrench bent into an L-shape, and a few zip-ties later and our guides Frank Bergmann and Harald Pramhofer had us happily back on the road. More impressive was their uncanny ability to modify routes on the fly to avoid ever-present rain and their intuitive

## WHAT THE READERS SAY...

### BMW R912T

BMW's retro-modern R912T blurs the lines between throwback café racer and contemporary naked bike, combining the Oilhead boxer engine and up-to-date components with styling reminiscent of a '70s-era Slash-6. **Just like the vintage Beemer, the R912T was almost universally praised for its versatility.** "If this lineup were a baseball team, the R912T would be a valuable utility man," Mark Gion said, "able to do everything well and look good doing it." The R912T received high marks for its urban manners, mostly thanks to the genial personality of the torque boxer motor and easy low-speed handling provided by the compact wheelbase and low center of gravity. Our testers were less enthusiastic when the pace increased, however, faulting suspension that was too softly sprung and over-damped, resulting in unrefined chassis movements over rough pavement. "The suspension moves around a lot on twisty mountain roads," Dennis DiFeo said. "I only weigh 155 pounds; I can't imagine what it's doing under the big guys." But aggressive sport riding isn't what the R912T was made for (if that's your game, see the similarly priced S1000R). Clean, classy, and calibrated for everyday riding situations, this was the bike that felt most at home putting around downtown Salzburg or Prague.



### BMW S1000R

BMW's overachieving S1000R was for many testers the most-anticipated bike of this bunch, and it didn't disappoint: "The S1000R isn't a jack of all trades," Tom Bentley said. "It's the master of all trades. It's insanely fast with superbike handling, but it's docile enough to ride at a relaxed pace too." This unbeatable combination of time-bending performance from the 152-hp, 999cc inline-four coupled with rider-coddling conveniences like electronic suspension, cruise control, heated grips, and an electronic "shift assistant" resonated with most testers. "This bike's limits can only be approached by expert riders, but it still allows average riders to enjoy its capabilities," Mark Gion said. **"It's non-condescending in its superiority. Anyone can enjoy this bike."** Some testers judged the S1000R too sporty for the category, however. "The BMW is the best bike I wouldn't buy," Dennis DiFeo said. "Power was abundant but never scary, and it did everything well without drama. But it was maybe a point sportier than I would like for open roads, a bit buzzy through the bars, and geared a tad short." None of these were deal breakers for Brooks Trotter, however: "I'm ordering a 2015 S1000R as soon as I get back to Texas," he announced at the end of the trip.



### DUCATI MONSTER 1200S

The Monster 1200S was another highly anticipated test ride—Ducati's Monster is the original naked streetfighter, and three of our testers had Monsters back home. The Testastretta motor received high marks all around for power, personality, and especially its great sound, though snatchy throttle response at low rpm, especially in the full-power Sport mode, tempered that praise. **Most agreed that it was one of the best-looking bikes of the bunch, too, resplendent in its blood-red paint set off with golden Öhlins suspension components and carbon-fiber accents.** Our testers were less enamored with the newly revised rider ergonomics. "A torture rack for your legs," Mark Gion said, "with footpegs that twist your ankles and engine heat that just cooks your right thigh. Uncle!" Dennis DiFeo agreed: "There's no excuse for that poorly designed passenger peg bracket." Testers were also disappointed with less-than-confident handling, though, to be fair, this was mostly due to the badly cupped front tire our testbike was delivered with. Brooks Trotter echoed the feeling of most testers: "I felt the least confident on the Monster during hard cornering, especially in tight, low-speed turns where I had to keep pushing on the bar, which was tiring. Even as a Ducati [Diavel] owner, it's near the bottom of my list."



### HONDA CB1000R

"The Honda was the biggest surprise for me," Tom Bentley said. "It wasn't even on my radar, but what a tremendous bike in the twisties." It's fair to say the CB1000R wasn't on any of our radars; when one guest tester asked if this bike was still sold in the US, even your dedicated *Motorcyclist* staffers had to think for a second before confirming that it is, for \$11,760. Whatever the CB1000R lacks in flash, it makes up for with user-friendliness. **"The CB1000R was the real sleeper of the bunch," Tom Chambers said. "The easiest for me to turn in, with great torque out of corners."** Rob Cooper, the newest rider of our group, also praised the "little Honda," calling it the easiest bike for him to ride fast. Powered by a detuned CBR1000RR inline-four, the CB delivers exactly the sort of accessible, broadly appealing performance Honda is notorious for, which is both its greatest attribute and its greatest downfall. "The Honda did everything well but nothing superbly," Brooks Trotter said, echoing a familiar refrain. "Smooth, refined, and easy to ride," Dennis DiFeo noted. "But it doesn't stand out for any reason. It's a really good bike, but it just doesn't give you that 'giggle in the helmet' feeling like a good naked bike should."





Top: Heavy clouds hung over our heads every day in the Alps, often dropping rain. Above: Superbike eye candy in Ducati's factory museum. Far right: Bastei overlook, Germany.



(the rider walked away). This delay and the requisite rerouting cut our time in the Dolomites short and extended our afternoon stretch on the autostrada (ugh) into Bologna, but it also inadvertently led to the best meal of the trip. We unexpectedly spent two hours on a veranda behind an off-map, locals-only, no-English-spoken restaurant overlooking the Boldo Valley, gorging ourselves on platter after platter of the most amazing grilled pork, lamb, farm sausages, and vegetables any of us had ever seen. "It looked like I dissected a dinosaur,

understanding of group dynamics, knowing when to add "just one more pass" when the group was especially having fun or to skip that last sightseeing opportunity when we really wanted to just get off the bikes. (Bergmann's background as a psychiatric nurse—his day job—is probably useful here.)

Bergmann and Pramhofer could really ride, too, as we found out the next day when we finally entered the Alps. Our first Alpine pass was the famous Grossglockner, and not even cold, wet conditions could dampen our enthusiasm for Austria's tallest mountain—besides, there was warm strudel and marmots to pet in the coffee shop just below the Edelweisspitze summit, where we stopped to warm up. Later that afternoon we hit another highlight, Passo Giau, across the Italian border in the more-dramatic Dolomites. Although Giau isn't as tall at just 7,335 feet, the weather had dried

considerably and we were able to make a proper, footpeg-dragging attack. We truly made the most of this riding day, also tackling Faltarega and Pordoi passes before finally arriving at our ski chalet hotel in the Italian village of Canazei just after dark.

As expected, the high-Alpine riding was remarkable. "I've probably done more turns in the last seven days than in all my previous riding experience," Brooks Trotter said. "And I've been riding since 1969!"

"It's a good thing we were wearing helmets," Mark Gion added, "or our heads would have exploded all over Europe!"

Day six was literally and figuratively a day of highs and lows. The day started with a spirited climb up Passo Duran, a narrow, mostly deserted paved goat path that was for many of us our favorite pass but was soon derailed by a three-hour delay when one bike took an unplanned detour off the mountainside



KAWASAKI Z1000



By far the most outrageously styled (over-styled?) bike of this bunch, Kawasaki's Z1000 had testers talking before we even fired the bikes up, and the chatter didn't cease after the riding was over either. **Nearly everyone enjoyed the powerful and playful motor, intoxicated by the combination of short gearing and howling intake noise that made passing maneuvers even more thrilling than you would usually expect from a 128-hp, 1,000cc inline-four.** The handling, however, left our testers feeling less than enthusiastic. "The Kawasaki is one of the cheapest bikes here [\$11,999 with ABS], and it feels like it," Brooks Trotter said. "The suspension was rough, and on a bumpy road it really beat me to death." Other riders noted what can only be described as severe engine vibration transmitted through the tank and footrests above 6,000 rpm and close-coupled ergonomics that especially cramped our testers who stood over 6-foot-2. It's too easy to hate on the so-called "Sugomi" styling that's intended to invoke a crouching predator ready to pounce; instead we'll leave that task to Hugo Caballero, one of the few who appreciated the Z1000's unique look: "I like the manga animation style. That's the kind of bike I would love if I was a few years younger."



KTM 1290 SUPER DUKE R



Reminiscent of our all-staff naked bike shootout earlier this year, the same two bikes topped everyone's test sheets here in Europe: BMW's S1000R and this bike, the KTM 1290 Super Duke R. Riders accustomed to dirt bikes or adventure-tourers especially liked the shorter, more upright ergonomics of the KTM, and if you prefer the big-time power pulses of a big-bore V-twin, nothing beats the Super Duke's potent 1,301cc, 75-degree powerplant. "I loved the Super Duke," Dennis DiFeo said. **"This was far and away the most comfortable bike for me, with everything in the right place. And I love the power of a twin—just dial in what you want."** Testers also praised the sure-footed handling, especially on degraded roads like those we encountered in the Czech Republic. "The rougher the road, the better the Super Duke felt," Mark Gion said. "The dirt bike DNA comes out in the riding position and longer-travel suspension. And that motor just romps—it loves to play." Some testers noted some finicky throttle behavior under 3,000 rpm, exacerbated in some of the tight Alpine hairpins by gearing that was maybe a few teeth too tall, but for the most part, the KTM was universally lauded as a confident and capable ride at any speed.



MOTO GUZZI V7 SPECIAL



We originally invited a Moto Guzzi Griso along for this ride, and with its 110-hp, 1,150cc V-twin engine that bike would have been a great fit for this group. When the rental agency was unable to provide a Griso and delivered a 750cc V7 Special instead, we had to do some quick recalibrating. With roughly one-third the Griso's horsepower, the retro-standard Special was way out of its element, but we still enjoyed it as a calm, cruiser-ish counterpoint. "The Guzzi was a bike I looked forward to riding—once," Dennis DiFeo quipped. **"For those of you who miss the 1970s, this is the bike to buy. It puts you right back there."** DiFeo could have been referring to the air-cooled V-twin's wheezy acceleration, reminiscent of an OPEC Embargo-era Z-28 Camaro, or wooden-feeling disc brakes that are barely improved over an old Eldorado's drums—or perhaps the fact that we weren't even 2 miles into our ride before the Italian Stallion shed its first part, a snap-on spark-plug cover that elegantly ejected itself into Berlin's morning rush-hour traffic. On the other hand, Moto Guzzi nailed the *That '70s Show* styling. Our testers universally loved the look of this bike, even if the low bench seat made even the most fashionable pilot look like he was sitting on a commode.



TRIUMPH SPEED TRIPLE



Just try to tell Tom Bentley the Speed Triple's bug-eyed headlights present one of the most iconic faces in modern motorcycling. "Who cares? What an ugly bike!" Talk to him after the first ride, however, and it's a different story: "I wouldn't have even thought of this bike; it's so awful looking," Bentley said. "It has outdated technology, or, in the case of the electronics, no technology... But it's so neutral, so rider-friendly, and so easy to go fast on. If BMW hadn't invented the S1000R, I would buy this." The Speed Triple has long been one of our favorite streetfighters, proving once a good bike, always a good bike. Many testers singled out the 1,050cc inline-triple engine: **"Triples rule!" Mark Gion said. "This is not a compromise between a twin and a four-cylinder engine but the best of both, with smooth, linear power delivery in a predictable but still exciting way."** Testers also gave the Speed Triple high marks for handling, even though our example was the base model, not the Öhlins-suspended R-version. "I wasn't expecting much from the Speed Triple, one of the oldest designs in the bunch," Tom Chambers said, "but it was one of the most fun bikes to ride. It's flickable, light and easy to turn in, and always predictable."

We covered almost 1,100 miles over seven days of riding, changing bikes every few hours. Off-bike activities centered on exploring Europe's finest cities.



“If you haven’t before, it’s hard to overstate just how thrilling it is to ride a motorcycle in a country like Italy, where speed limits are advisory at best.”



toward Passo della Futa in the Appennine Mountains just beyond Bologna, the very same roads where test riders develop Ducati’s legendary sportbikes. This was the last ride of the tour, and we made the most of it, “riding like escaped convicts,” Bentley said. If you haven’t before, it’s hard to overstate just how thrilling it is to ride a motorcycle in a country like Italy, where cars move aside when you approach, where double-yellow passes are no big deal, and where speed limits, at least when you’re not passing through a town, are advisory at best. It’s something every rider should experience at least once, and doing it with Edelweiss makes it a breeze. Gion has ridden Europe independently too but prefers riding like this: “[They] take care of the details. You know where you’re going to stay; you know you’ll get fed. You can turn your brain off and focus on the ride instead.”

Once again, our reader tour was a huge success. “For me, this was the best riding trip ever,” Caballero said. “Awesome’ is such a cliché word. Is ‘orgasmic’ too much? It was more than I expected, really. If you call me, I will be here every year without thinking twice.” We had so much fun, in fact, that Bentley and Gion were already laying the groundwork for a stateside “No Schnitzel” reunion tour next summer in the US—sign us up for that!

there were so many bones on my plate,” Bentley said. “What a meal!” On an Edelweiss adventure, nothing ever goes “wrong.”

Our final destination, Bologna, was the only city where we spent two nights—and we needed the extra time to take in all the sights. Bologna is nicknamed “The Red City” ostensibly for its abundance of terracotta buildings and its traditionally left-wing politics, but we motorcyclists know it’s because the city is home to Ducati, located in the Borgo Panigale neighborhood. We started our day with a tour of the Ducati factory, watching Panigale superbikes and

Diavel mega-cruisers being built largely still by hand in the same building where the company made radios in the 1920s and motorized bicycles beginning in 1945. After the assembly line we spent some time in Ducati’s amazing on-site museum that holds more than 50 championship-winning racebikes ridden by heroes like Hailwood, Smart, Fogarty, Bayliss, Hayden, and Stoner. Everyone but Valentino Rossi, curiously...

Looking at great motorcycles is one thing, but riding them is something else—which is why we rushed out of the museum before lunch and suited up for one last ride, aiming