

## TRAVEL

The scenery in and around the French and Swiss alps can be downright distracting—a potential hazard on a narrow, winding roadway.



# THE BEST OF Europe

**EDELWEISS BIKE TRAVEL OPENS THE DOOR TO A BREATHTAKING WEEK OF RIDING**

> By **Christopher P. Baker**

I wasn't expecting to be offered a 2017 R1200GS Adventure press bike by BMW Motorrad, and I'm still unsure who arranged it. But, there it was, outside the Hotel Henry, in Erding, north-east of Munich. A Triple Black special edition. My name stenciled across the windshield. A leatherbound notebook embossed with my name in the top case. And only 337 Km on the clock. Sweet!

I'd signed up for a nine-day (seven

riding) 'Best of Europe' tour with Edelweiss Bike Travel. The itinerary would loop through southern Germany and four other countries, taking in the Black Forest, Alsace in France, northern Switzerland, Liechtenstein, plus the Austrian Tyrol and Bavaria.

As our tour group was introduced to our bikes—a medley of Beemers, plus two Ducati Multistradas, a Triumph Tiger and four Harleys—I couldn't help smiling over what lay ahead. In fact, I

may have been purring as we set out north through rolling hopland, aiming for the scenic 'Romantic Road.'

### DAY 1: ERDING - ROTHENBURG

Technically, the easiest day. The relaxed pace gave us time to familiarize ourselves with our bikes, as we swept through undulating countryside in long graceful curves past checkerboard fields, their soils dark and rich, farmed with Teutonic precision. Giant wind turbines

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pinned the hilltops, their blades slowing scything a chilled charcoal October sky. Baroque churches with steeples topped by pomegranate-shaped domes pin-pointed our route.

We lunched at a beer garden in 14th-century Willibaldsburg castle, high above Eichstätt. Being Oktoberfest, German families were gustily quaffing steins of frothy Hefeweizen and Helles, but our tour leader, Axel, explained Edelweiss's policy: no bottles and throttles. Beyond Eichstätt we snaked down through forested hills to the 'Romantische Straße,' unfurling through an archetypal Germany of medieval fairytale towns: Dinkelsbühl, Feuchtwangen and finally, Rothenburg, capping the day's 270-kilometer ride.

"Holy cow!" I exclaimed, as we passed through the Galgentor Gate to enter Germany's largest and most celebrated Middle Age city—preserved in entirety within stone fortress walls. Half-timbered 12th-century buildings leaned drunkenly over meandering cobbled streets, resembling a Hollywood stage set.

I rode on the pegs. The stones were well-rounded and slippery. Another rider dropped her Harley-Davidson Heritage Softail pulling into the garage of the Hotel Reichsküchenmeister. Though dating back to the Crusades, our hotel had been thoroughly rehabbed as a honeypot of chic indulgence.

"You're free at any time to choose your own route," Axel had said at the initial briefing. We were each armed with a detailed map and daily briefings by Axel and our two other English-speaking guides, Björn and Mike. Yet, no one ventured off alone. Probably just as well; the route was a veritable Minotaur's Maze.

We rode cohesively as two groups that set off five minutes apart. We were 17 in all—a mix of Americans, four Canadians and one Australian—including three pillions. The groups were fluid.

## DAY 2: ROTHENBURG - HEIDELBERG

By the second day we had sorted ourselves into a lead pack of advanced riders, including myself, plus seven Millennial speed-junky pals from Colorado. Behind, the slower group, including our two

lady riders, comprised individuals preferring to move at their own pace. There was no requirement to keep up; the guides stopped and waited at every junction.

Westbound from Rothenburg, we augered into the valley of the River Jagst on the L1025, scrolling in sinuous arcs through a rippling multihued quilt of wheat, flax and meadow. Chill autumnal showers interspersed with moments of sunshine, so I kept the lean-angle-sensitive traction control in Dynamic and Rain modes.

This was my first time riding a late-model GSA. I was awed. Not simply by the dynamic traction control, which whipped my backside into line if needed, as we streaked through tight mountain bends like crazed deer. The 125 ponies generated blistering acceleration as we scattered fresh-fallen leaves on the straights. And the wizard Gear Shift Assist Pro let me power up through the gears on full throttle, and blip the gas for clutchless downshifts into curves. By comparison, my 2009 GSA seemed so ... old!

We lunched beside Kloster Schöntal,



a palatial Cistercian monastery and extravagant Baroque cathedral, haloed by crepuscular rays, as the cold autumn weather played hopscotch between sunshine and rain. We then rode on via Möckmühl and Mosbach to follow the horseshoe bends of the River Neckar.

Edelweiss had built in regular breaks to avoid fatigue, so we stopped for cappuccinos, and a sensational view of the Neckar Valley, at the hilltop castle-hotel above Hirschhorn.

We were now less than 30 minutes out from Heidelberg, our overnight stop at the end our shortest day (185 Km). Axel took a show of hands. A short ride along



The Vosges Mountains in France provides a stunning backdrop of vibrant colors for an enjoyable day of touring across Europe with Edelweiss Bike Travel.

the Neckar to our hotel? Or an optional ride into the forested Odenwald uplands? Unanimous, we coiled up through the deep woods where Siegfried was murdered while hunting, in Wagner's "Der Ring des Nibelungen." I kept a wary eye out for deer, and a more hopeful one for wild boar.

Finally came Heidelberg, the enchanting university city, unscathed by WWII. Björn had arrived ahead with the support van (driven each day in rotation by our leaders). Our bags were already in our rooms at the rambling, ivy-clad, 15th-century Hotel Hirschgasse.

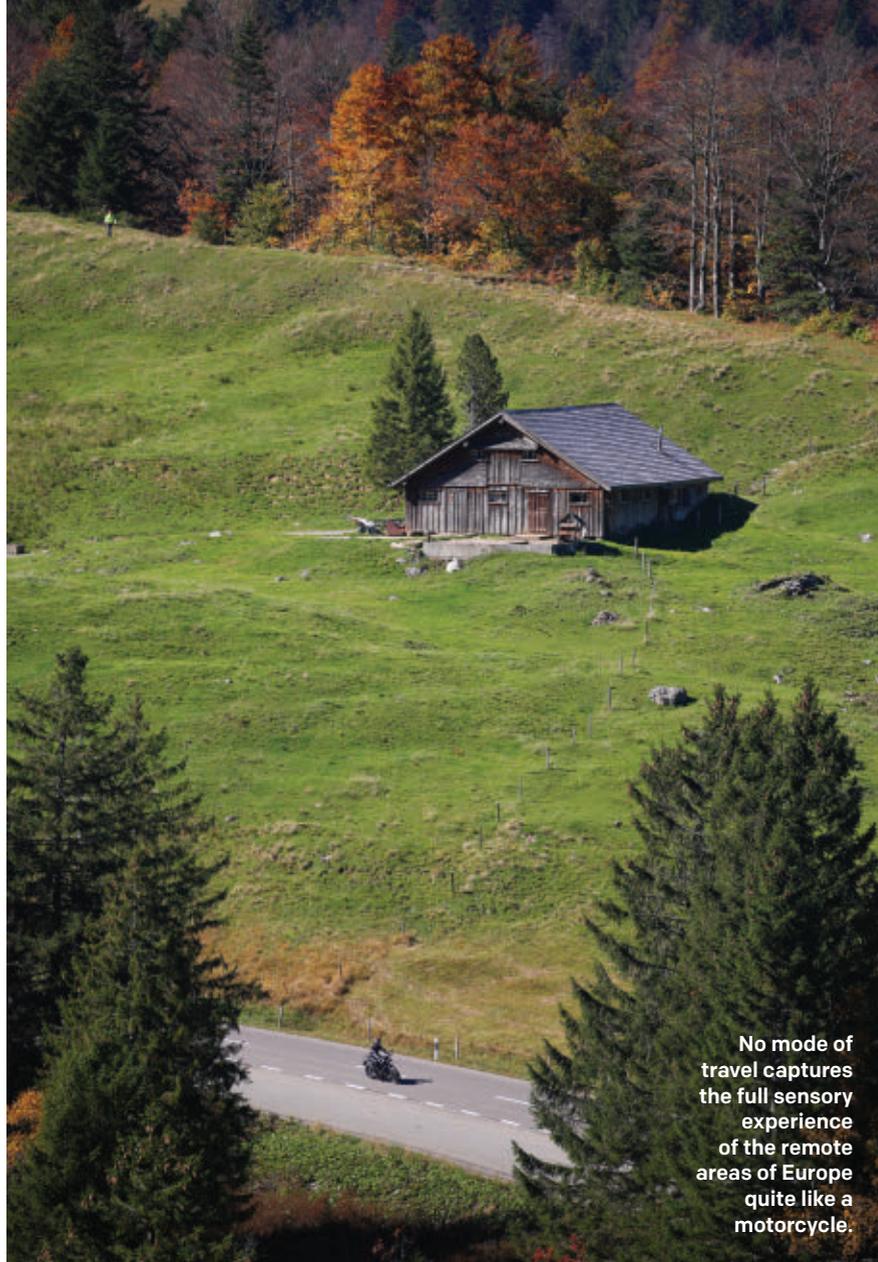
No other area in Germany has as many Michelin-rated restaurants as Baden-Württemberg. We strolled into red-roofed Altstadt (Old Town), a veritable gourmet ghetto, thronged with beer-swilling celebrants served by Dirndl-clad wenches. We settled in the cozy Hackteufel restaurant and dined on divine local delicacies: Pfälzer Leberknödelsuppe (liver dumplings in clear beef broth), sauerkraut with spicy sausage, and homemade plum cake with whipped cream.

### DAY 3: HEIDELBERG – RIBEAUVILLÉ

A brief rocket-burst south on the Autobahn for Baden-Baden. I was happy cruising at 150 kph as Axel (Triumph Tiger 1050) faded over the horizon, with Perry (1078cc Ducati Multistrada) sniffing at his rear end. Then David, with his wife snug in the pillion, blazed by on a 160hp BMW K1600 GTL—a ballistic speed test. "I clocked 240 K before Jeri tapped me on the shoulder and shouted 'Enough!'" he recalled gleefully that evening.

But the real fun began south of Baden-Baden as we spiraled into the mountains via the 'Schwarzwaldhochstraße' (Black Forest Highway). Celebrated as one of Europe's most panoramic routes, the B500 delivered the first real mountain riding, which would highlight much of the ensuing four days.

It was exhilarating as we leaned through the curves at the max. We rode through Naturpark Schwarzwald (Black Forest Nature Park) in on-and-off drizzle, the Rhone Valley far below lost to view as we ascended into freezing fog.



No mode of travel captures the full sensory experience of the remote areas of Europe quite like a motorcycle.

A hot indoor lunch beside the Mummelsee—a gunmetal-gray lake, haunted by mermaids, at 1,036 meters elevation—was most welcome! I was already well-layered, but more clothing was needed. I added a fleece vest under my BMW AirShell jacket, and a fleece-lined, water-resistant, high-vis jacket over it. Oh, and heavy fleece tights under my AirShell pants. Then we corkscrewed down, fast and furious, through sweeping bends and steep hairpins to hit the Rhine like logs shooting out of a flume.

I'm a conservative rider. Fairground rides scare me to death. Our Daytona pace—unforgiving of errors—both thrilled and surprised me. "If we knew our children were riding like this, we'd take away their keys," said 61-year-young Perry, laughing, as we dined that evening

in Ribeauvillé, on mushroom soup and lamb stew, washed down with a hearty Alsatian Sylvaner.

### DAY 4: RIBEAUVILLÉ

Finally, a rest day. The ladies opted to shop and relax with spa treatments in postcard-perfect Ribeauvillé, a time-warp of iconic medieval cuteness, where we stayed for two nights. The lads voted for an optional adrenaline-fueled loop through the Vosges Mountains. Axel & Co. had now got the measure of the lead pack. Björn, on a BMW R nineT, tore through the mountains like Marc Márquez. Perry stuck to him like glue, while I tried to not lose sight of his Ducati's behind. We pretended not to notice the signs warning motorcyclists: "Trop d'accidents. Ralentir."

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(Many accidents! Slow down!)

We arrived at the emotionally wrenching Collet du Linge (987m) and the Musée Mémorial du Linge WWI battle site, where our mountain high literally and metaphorically topped out. We dismounted to explore the rock-lined bunkers and trenches—garlanded with rusty barbed wire barricades—still in situ atop a rocky mountaintop ridge.

Here in the summer of 1915, more than 17,000 French and German soldiers perished in intense hand-to-hand fighting involving flame-throwers in trenches mere meters apart. A sobering downer to a dopamine day.

#### DAY 5: RIBEAUVILLÉ – SCHAFFHAUSEN

The next morning, we recrossed the Rhine and climbed again through the Black Forest, slick with fresh-fallen leaves, on mountain switchbacks that delivered us atop the wind-swept Kandel pass (1,242 meters). The ski-resort restaurant, with its vast views over the Rhine Valley, was closed, so we scrolled down through steep ravines at a rollicking rate for cappuccinos and Black Forest cake in Hexenlochmühle at an old mill-restaurant festooned with Cuckoo Clocks.

Further down the road, Axel had prepared for us a delicious picnic lunch—the only one of the tour—in a meadow surrounded by spruce, beech and pines. I was impressed by Edelweiss's purpose-designed support van, featuring onboard refrigeration and retractable shelving; a veritable gourmet food truck. Toblerone Swiss chocolate had thoughtfully been laid out as dessert.

The front-pack tore downhill out of the Black Forest Mountains, the Swiss border now in our sights. At these speeds, you couldn't afford to miss an apex, or fishtail. I hasten to add, these were very skilled riders. Nonetheless, the rider in front of me went down going into a turn.

I felt massive relief as he picked himself up, shaken but unharmed. His BMW R1200RS was scratched up, but the Boxer engine intact (Edelweiss wisely fits crash bars to its bikes). He rode on. We crossed into Switzerland, and paused at Rheinfall—spanning 150 meters, the largest



Santis peak presides over another beautiful day of riding near Schwägälp, Switzerland.

waterfall in Europe—before checking into our comfy hotel in Schaffhausen.

#### DAY 6: SCHAFFHAUSEN – WARTH

Finally, sunshine and an intense Paul Klee-blue sky! I switched to the slower group, which provided greater opportunities to absorb and photograph Switzerland's sublime beauty, safely.

Reaching Lake Constance, we turned south, the distant Alps luring us on as we rode a delicatessen of country roads through quintessential Swiss landscapes, colorful as Crayola. Lime-green meadows framed by larches now turning gold. Swiss chalets adorned with florid window shutters and flower boxes overflowing with pink and purple geraniums. I felt like I was riding through a calendar cover, with the clanging of cowbells to boot.

Beyond Urnäsch we spiraled up into the Alpstein massif for a leisurely lunch at Schwägälp beneath Säntis peak (2,501 meters), the highest mountain in eastern Switzerland. Then it was downhill again, east through the mega-wealthy, pipsqueak principality of Liechtenstein (blink and you'll miss it) and into Austria.

From here, the grandeur built like a Mozart Concerto as we clawed into the Tyrolean Alps on the Faschinastraße. We snaked through long avalanche tunnels and zigzagged sharply uphill past ski resorts awaiting the arrival of snow.

We were soon above the tree line at Furkajoch, a mountain pass (1,761 meters) with stupendous views over the wild, Bock-brown Alps. Talk about a roller-coaster! Now down once more, diz-

zyngly, to the lovely ski resort of Damuls.

Then, up, up, up on the Bregenzerwaldestraße (B200) to the Tyrolean hamlet of Schröcken, poised beneath sheer, snowcapped mountains and a dramatically cantilevered curving highway—a final slingshot to the Hochtannbergpass, separating the watersheds of the Rhine and Danube rivers. We arrived, exhilarated, at the Wanderhotel Jägeralpe as graphite-gray clouds gathered.

#### DAY 7: WARTH – ERDING

We awoke to find our ski resort blanketed by the season's first snowfall. The GSA's temperature gauge displayed 4 C, as we cautiously descended the slippery switchback to Warth and the Lechtal Valley. I was glad for my winter gear; the Harley riders in their jeans and chaps must have been freezing, and overjoyed when we stopped at Schloss Linderhof, to warm up with coffee and lunch.

Edelweiss had included a guided tour of the pocket-sized, jewel-encrusted baroque palace—the smallest of three palaces built by 'Mad' King Ludwig II of Bavaria. Then we sped on through Bavaria, weaving a convoluted route between storms to arrive back in Erding, wet but safe, at the end of a spectacular tour.

I felt deeply satisfied and my confidence level was boosted immensely by this full week of sometimes intense and challenging mountain riding. **MCN**

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