

SUPERBIKE ACROSS EUROPE (2009)

PART 1

SATURDAY 26 OCTOBER

I left home at 09.45 for Mike and Ali's and apart from a busy M25 and M4 it was an uneventful journey apart from finding out my phone sim card had packed up. I think it was probably because it had been next to magnets in the tank bag.

A trip to the O2 shop in Farnborough had a pay as you go sim sorted so no real problem in the end, despite the fact it left my wallet was £30 lighter. Although I was able to replace my sim card there and then, I was told that it would take between 24 and 48 hours to be activated and that I had to be in the UK for this to happen which is why the 'pay as you go' sim was what I ended up with.

I sat out at Mike and Ali's in the sunshine and had a couple of beers before leaving some hours later for the 40 miles or so ride to Portsmouth which like the earlier ride down was pretty uneventful.

I checked in in good time for the overnight LD Lines ferry to Le Havre and struck up conversation with a couple of bikers who were away for a few days and were heading for Clermont Ferrand - returning on Wednesday.

One fella was on a new ZX10 and the other on a ZX9. I met them later in the bar. The guy with the ZX10 has his own business making custom parts for old bikes and was doing ok in that niche market. He told me that last year he made about 1,000 exhausts. It sounded like he has quite a collection of old bikes as well, and it was obvious from our conversation that he was also a pretty experienced biker when it came to travelling in Europe - bizarrely though his mate with the ZX9 told me he had only done just over 700 miles on his bike in the last 12 months.

They had got their return crossing for only £40 each but it meant them sleeping in their seats, the crossing was pretty quiet so they had plenty of room. My £75 or so crossing afforded me the luxury of a cabin, a decent bed and the opportunity of a shower and shave in the morning. I took the former and not the latter.

SUNDAY 27 OCTOBER

I was off the ferry for about 08:00 am and the weather looked promising for the journey south.

All in all it was a good journey down to Bergerac, although there was a chilly spell with mist and fog for an hour or so and it reminded me of a road trip a couple of years ago

when friends and I had taken the Route Nationale across the Somme in similar conditions.

As per the weather forecast the sun broke through for a glorious and steaming hot day. I did about 450 miles or so down to Bergerac and did about half on the AutoRoute's (the first half) and then the rest on pretty good roads - the last couple of hours were particularly good and were great surfaced roads that for the most part were pretty empty and the weather was just excellent.

My route down took me via Le Mans; Tours; Poitiers; Angouleme, and onto Bergerac. I was at my hotel for about 6.00 pm and was in the shower almost straight away.

Bike parking was excellent, under cover and secure. I went for a wander around Bergerac, took a few pictures and bought a sandwich before going back to the hotel for a couple of beers that I drank whilst sat out in the garden. I certainly couldn't be accused of living it up as I was in bed for about 9.30pm.

MONDAY 28 OCTOBER

I had slept really well and went for breakfast about 07.30. To be honest it wasn't great and cost me €7.5 for orange juice, coffee and bread!

I left a little after 9.00am and as it was only 225 miles down to Irun in Spain, (down on the coast and just a few miles before San Sebastien) I was in no rush so ended up taking a really good route that allowed me to find some decent roads and a few stops for coffee and cold drinks

Weather was just superb and I had a pretty exceptional ride down. My route took me via Marmande; Mont du Marsan; Dax and Biarritz before crossing the border into Spain and onto my stop for the night.

At one of my stops on the way down for a coffee I got talking to a Norwegian guy married to a Portuguese woman (who both lived in Madrid), they had been touring for the best part of two weeks, he asked me about my bike and my route and then called his wife from the car to meet 'the crazy English man'

I stopped for lunch at some place in the middle of nowhere and had a glass of orange and a camembert baguette for €4 and damn good value it was as well. It was quite a contrast to the miserable breakfast I had earlier at the Hotel Europ in Bergerac.

After leaving there I headed for a place called Dax and then onto Biarritz, I stopped to take some pictures looking down on to the Bay of Biscay before continuing down a great series of curves as the road dropped down to the coast.

I ended up at my place for the night around 5pm and Ana the owner came out to meet me and carry my bags to my room!

I was in serious need of a shower – I was hot and uncomfortable and my leathers were sticking to me. After getting freshened up I went for a walk and found a place called the Cafe Irun, where I had a couple of beers in (black Munich beer apparently) before heading back to my B&B. On the way back I decided to really have a wild time and called into a garage for a sandwich, a bag of crisps and a beer. One of the things I noticed in Spain is the ready availability of porn DVDs at almost all of the petrol stations that I called at; this seemed an odd place to sell that sort of stuff.

The place I stayed at was quite nice and was located in a residential area of Irun. It had six rooms: four doubles and two singles. I think as well, that it has a contender for the world's smallest wardrobe and I had it. Still at least it gave me the opportunity to pile stuff up on the floor! But no complaints because for £36 the bike was secure, it was quiet and if the write ups were true then breakfast was supposed to be good and alongside of that, Ana couldn't have been nicer.

That was pretty much it for Sunday other than at the time of writing this entry I was hoping that City would beat West Ham and that Richard would keep me in touch with progress and goals.

I dropped off to sleep looking forward to Tuesdays ride. Irun is in the Basque region of Spain and is about 35 miles from Pamplona – Tuesday's route promised to be good.

In addition to the micro wardrobe it also seemed like the place had micro thin walls as I was able to hear every movement next door and woke about 06:00am to loud snoring from the Belgium bloke next door - that apart it had been a reasonable stop over.

TUESDAY 29 OCTOBER

The day started with what at best was an average breakfast, and that wasn't served until 09.00am. Aside from me there were two Belgium couples staying and who were travelling together. As there was only one breakfast table we sat together and their English was as complete as my Flemish ... and they talked a lot, or to be more precise one of the women talked for all of them.

Even without understanding what she was saying it was obvious they weren't interested but she carried on regardless - there was a bizarre moment when they engaged in some sort of Flemish competition to see who could give me the most portions of jam, marmalade and butter for my toast - how odd.

That apart the B&B had been decent enough, although the machine used for payment wouldn't accept my MasterCard. Thankfully I had enough cash as Pat had done the decent thing and got me a few hundred euros before I left.

After leaving I filled up with petrol and headed towards San Sebastian to pick up the N1 to head south to aim for Villapando in the region of Zamora.

The hotel information described the place as enchanting and an *ideal place for a retreat where you can relax and unwind* plus of course the obligatory thermal spa that includes aquatic *treatment, music and aroma therapy*, not only that I had the promise of my stay over being located in a town that had a castle and was in fact an ancient walled town so I was optimistic there should be something for me to wander round and look at.

I negotiated my way to the N1, an autoroute that had been recommended to me and initially I was at a loss to know why.

It pretty much seemed like any autoroute really. A few miles out and the traffic had really thinned and then bang this wasn't any old autoroute it just changed into sweeping bends, followed by tight hairpins as it wound it's way upwards – it was bloody excellent!

I followed the N1 for about 10 miles before pulling off to take pictures and then ended up not getting back onto the N1. I ended up heading for a place called Vittorio Gastes and more by chance than anything else just ended up having a great time on spectacular roads with great scenery and hot sunshine.

Really I went on more roads and places than I can recall but some of the highlights included a couple of the places that I stopped at for a cold drink where there was me and my bike and no one else in picture perfect villages.

One in particular was a place called Zaraton. But best of all I found the E111, now this road is just wonderful. It twists through the Rioja wine producing region and the road is an absolute joy, and to be honest my second day in Spain was turning into a pretty perfect day.

But after climbing up twists and turns that to all intents and purposes were like Swiss alpine passes I slowed when I saw a barrier across half the road, but as it was only half the road I assumed it was OK to continue. That was to turn out to be quite a mistake. Basically it was a road construction site a complete section of the road (both lanes) was being resurfaced for what was to turn out to be about six miles!

The road was dug up but did look passable. I certainly didn't fancy going back and finding another way over. It wasn't a case of there being a handy and short diversion it would have been a massive detour.

I set off down the section on the E111 that was dug up and got to the stage where the thought of trying to go back was much worse than the thought of going down, my reasoning being in part that on the loose surface - and when/if you have seen the pictures you know that I'm not talking about a bit of gravel, the prospect of losing traction and falling off seemed more likely going up than going down.

I was partly encouraged to continue by the sight of a red transit type van some distance in front; its movement seemed to imply that the surface was at least firm of sorts. It

turned out the van was collecting the construction workers at what I assume was the end of their shifts. So workers were collected from various diggers and construction machinery with the last worker being collected from a JCB some way down and a couple of bends away.

The arm of the JCB was left across the road and if you have seen the pictures then you will know what I mean. The last bit of the 'road' down to there was just horrible and by this time I was soaked in sweat, a combination of heat and anxiety - when I made it to the JCB I thought I might just get under it with my head ducked and at about 1mph.

I couldn't get off to push as there wasn't enough room on my left as there was a drop of three or four feet ... I couldn't get under either, I tried and then had to desperately 'back peddle' with my feet to push my bike back. This was hard work, but eventually I managed it. I took my gloves and helmet off put them on the JCB's bucket and pushed my bike round the end of the JCB's arm. By this time I was absolutely soaked with sweat - after getting round that I had to ride about another six miles across a temporary road surface that seemed like heaven to what I had just come across. I stopped as soon as I could as I had to cool down so I stripped to the waist to get some fresh air to my body.

I suppose the rest of the day was uneventful compared to that, but suffice it to say I travelled on great roads and stopped at some remarkably quiet places for drinks or to take pictures. I arrived at my hotel about 6pm after what probably to date had been the best days biking that I had ever had.

When I arrived at my hotel in Villapando Zamorra I checked in and enjoyed a cold San Miguel beer sat in the courtyard and reflected on the tremendous day that I had enjoyed - just superb, a real Carlsberg day.

It was a really nice place and my bike was secure outside my room. I got showered and changed and went for a walk round. I ended up getting something to eat at a coach terminus on the outskirts of the town more because it's where I arrived at and was hungrier than anything else - although it wasn't a great place to eat.

I returned to my hotel and ended up spending an hour with Francisco the guy who ran the place. He wanted to show me bull fighting videos on YouTube, along with old pictures that I think may well have been of him in his younger days.

It was difficult as neither of us could understand a word of what each other was saying. He then plied me with leaflet after leaflet about Castilla y Leon and Zamorra (the area that I was in) and to try and explain more he 'phoned the only other hotel guest - a young geologist from Madrid who lived at the hotel Monday to Friday and was working in the area for about three months.

I think she realised that I wasn't overly interested but we sort of humoured him and in any case he was just being really nice. The tendency in Spain is to eat late from about 9pm so they were both surprised that I didn't want to eat in the hotel. I told them I had

eaten on the way down which seemed better than me telling them I had eaten at the dodgy coach terminus on the outskirts of town.

Breakfast was also late at 9am which wasn't really ideal for me Francisco was surprised that I wanted to eat earlier, but it wasn't really a big deal as the geologist took breakfast at 7.45 before leaving for work so I said I would eat at the same time.

One thing I should mention is that the nature of the landscape, some of the roads and the near total desolation, make this part of Spain an ideal place to 'speed test' a bike. Of course as there is nothing big or clever in doing that and as some may misinterpret such an activity as foolish, irresponsible and all of that, then clearly you wouldn't expect me to have recorded a speed (true GPS accuracy) of 165mph. The bike of course had more to give – but I didn't.

Anyway it would be equally childish for someone to take a picture of the GPS recorded speed wouldn't it?