

SUPERBIKE ACROSS EUROPE

PART 3

SATURDAY 31 OCTOBER

The weather was set for another stunning day so I decided to allow myself a fresh tee shirt for the ride across the Pyrenees via Andorra and onto Avignon in France.

Breakfast was at 09:00am so I was packed and ready to go directly after and expected to be on the road for around 9.30 or so. In practice it was all slightly later as the lady who ran the place had a different perspective on time than I had and was late in starting to prepare the breakfast.

Some of it was edible some of it wasn't.

The selection of meat that was put on my plate looked disgusting and rather like it had been culled from a variety of week old road kill and I wasn't happy that it was touching the cheese that I also had on my plate. The rest of the breakfast was bread already spread with something that sort of tasted OK but that you also wished it didn't taste of it. I also had some toast, some pineapple juice and a decent coffee.

To be honest it was something of a result that I didn't vomit - the road kill stuff was making me heave.

So a slightly later start than planned saw me taking the three miles of narrow and zig zagging road down from the hilltop stop over and heading into Andorra.

The border was only a few miles from where I stayed and was quite busy. I suppose that the tax haven status of Andorra is quite a pull for weekend visitors - I did a few miles and then turned and headed back into Spain for what was to become another epic days biking.

What can I say about the days riding other than my Carlsberg rating system was now shot and needed a complete re-think.

After leaving Andorra and re-entering Spain I took the blistering N260 from La Seu D'urgell through Martinet to Bourg Madame and into France. This road was just excellent: it was fast paced with a great surface and minimal traffic and the welcome and glorious early morning sunshine was lighting up the magnificent scenery.

The N260 though simply served as just the warm up for the main course for the road that took me through the Pyrenees after entering France.

It was just a stunner from wide swooping bends to twists and turns as the road climbed then dropped with the most stunning of views - this road had been the best to date and eventually it became the N116 and it went through a 'regional national park' which is part of the Catalan Pyrenees. It led through a wonderful gorge that made the Tarn Gorge in France look like a poor show and those that have done it (and some of us have done a few times) will know just what I mean you'll not be

surprised to know that I have taken loads of pictures and you'll know what I mean when you see them

And when the 80+ temperature was factored in, who could ask for more?

I diverted down to Argeles to take my bike to the beach. Pat and I had holidayed down here three years running so I was in pretty familiar territory recognising place names and passing the kart track that we had been to and that Marti, Richard and I had raced around - it brought back happy memories.

On the basis that you don't often get to take your bike to the Med' so often I thought why the f**k not, so I posed for pictures with my bike - the micro/extending tripod came in handy for this and then I sort of looped the Mediterranean coast riding all the way from Perpignan to Montpellier before turning inland to head for Avignon.

I got to my hotel about 18.40 very hot and sweaty.

Actually the term hotel isn't quite right, don't get me wrong the Hotel Crystal is a decent stop over but it's really a collection of rooms all accessed from outside pathways and one of those places where the photographer had a great day when the publicity pictures were taken and presumably had used a variety of lenses to produce the most favourable of shots.

But really my only gripe was that a 3km walk to the centre of Avignon wasn't quite the proximity to the town that I had understood. - so I didn't get to the pont or to wander around the town. Maybe another time then for that visit.

It did look a nice place (yet another walled city). Additionally I had thought there was a restaurant but there wasn't and I was pretty hungry. I ended up walking to the local Ibis hotel and paying the best part of 19 euros for what was really burger and chips with a beer and coffee!

I think France had become quite an expensive place and the low exchange rate against the euro didn't really help - but I was hungry and needed to eat properly.

I aimed to leave early on Sunday for my ride to Italy – I had no set plan for a route but knew that I would end up in Baveno for two nights and on Monday planed to go to Monza as it's was only about 65 miles from where I would be staying in Baverno.

Life is for living and I really felt that was just what I was doing, finding out that Man' United had dropped points to Sunderland was a decent bonus. I also found out that French white road paint in the heat can give a brown trouser moment – I had the most horrendous of rear wheel slides that I had ever had. In reality it was probably just an instant before the tyre gripped and I was upright again but I didn't want that to happen again.

I went to bed looking forward to Italy.

The hotel leaflet described the breakfast at the Hotel Crystal as abundant. Basically it wasn't and isn't worth further comment.

SUNDAY 01 OCTOBER

I had another immense days riding - I know all this is likely to get boring for the non bikers but basically all my previous thoughts about the Carlsberg ratings had to go because Sundays ride just 'raised the bar', 'set a new benchmark' etc etc.

I had an early breakfast and was on my way not long after 8.00am and within less than 30 minutes was on the good stuff heading out of Avignon and in the general direction of Marseille

I've travelled on roads that I thought had to be as good as it gets and I didn't think Spain was going to be topped but to be honest it was - stunning roads that had me twisting high into the mountains with me only breaking my journey to take pictures – and the views looking down onto the clouds were just wonderful.

I won't attempt to capture it all because basically but the Gorges de la Meouge are exceptional and the killer road is the N94 to Italy. If you're a biker you need to write in your promise book or what ever else you use to remember why you work that you must do this some day.

Words are not enough and every superlative you can think of would fit this one.

I carried on into the region of Verbania and towards Baverno when I got my first glance of Lake Maggiore I was stunned, for the entire world it looked like the sea!

The drop down on hairpin after hairpin was hard on the wrists and the traffic was chocker – I found out later that it's a Sunday thing and the town attracts lots of tourists.

The Italian police were having a field day directing traffic, but for bikes it was something of a free for all with people moving over, and filtering encouraged by the police.

There really were a lot of bikes there, loads of naked bikes and some very tasty superbikes. I did a stretch with an R1 for about 20 miles or so and it was great fun.

I also found out that part of the traffic chaos was caused by road closures due to what appeared to be the Formula 1 boating equivalent with some sort of racing event being staged on the lake. There were even F1 type boats in the hotel gardens that I passed.

Also I don't think that I saw any manned service stations in Italy during Sundays ride, they were all automated - pretty like in a lot of France.

Of course until recent years in France this could be a problem with UK cards not being accepted in the machines but this is no longer an issue. Of interest there were quite a few petrol stations in Spain where I had to produce ID i.e. my passport.

The only other thing worth saying about petrol when travelling on a bike with only a 17 litre tank and the range to match is that it pays to be prudent and maybe top up

more often than say in France or Germany - that's certainly the case in the parts of Spain down towards Villapando and then on into Portugal, but I didn't really expect it to be too much of a concern for the remainder of my journey.

I was really whacked when I got to my hotel but the owner came out to meet me and brought me beer, a bottle of Maserroti and he really couldn't have done more to welcome me.

My mobile 'phone was down to less than £0.80p of credit and thankfully Pat was able to top it up online

Later the hotelkeeper cooked pizza for me while I chatted to him, his wife and their lovely daughter Angelica (9 months old) nothing was too much trouble for them.

His wife described herself as half English (on her mother's side) and she had been born in the England and came to live in Italy when her Dad returned when she was aged seven. They told me they have lots of family who live in the Birmingham area and they return at least once a year, driving across with a stopover in Luxembourg.

On Monday my plan was to go to Monza and then probably have a lazy afternoon before crossing the Alps on Tuesday. I hadn't worked out a route at this stage but thought I might do the San Bernadino pass and probably the Gothard Pass – the latter of which I have ridden a few times

I planned to head straight across Switzerland to Germany and the Black Forest where I would stay at the only place I had been to before on this trip and which was in Simonswald

During the trip I was sort of charting my route on a map of Europe and by this stage it was starting to make me think have I really done this?

On the way to Baverno I had skirted Turin - about two miles from its centre and it had been interesting to say the least - talk about needing your wits about you. The days weather had been wonderful again - although I expected the temperature to drop across Switzerland and Germany but if it did, as I had been on the road over a week and seen rain for just a brief spell, I could hardly complain.

MONDAY 02 OCTOBER

I slept great last night and enjoyed a decent breakfast and plenty of coffee so was pretty much set for the day and my ride to Monza - and the weather was looking good. I set off for the Monza Autodrome and took as many of the back roads as I could but to be honest I wasn't really that bothered about the roads I just wanted to go to Monza, no particular reason just one of those things that I wanted to do.

It was only about 60 miles but took the best part of two hours and on the way and quite unexpectedly I passed this place that had tanks and planes and all sorts of stuff so I tapped the sat nav to save the location and thought I might call on the way back.

I was glad I went to Monza but in truth there is not a lot to see when you get there and you can't help but think they really don't make enough of its history. After paying my €5 I parked up and other than a cafe and gift shop there isn't a whole lot else. I had really wanted to stand close to the Parabolica curve but had no chance of doing so.

Feeling slightly cheated and as there was hardly anyone about I made my way through a closed off area and a gap in the fence and took my seat just on the exit of the pit straight - it was a splendid feeling.

I left the Autodrome and made my way back up Enzo Ferrari street (and took a picture of course) and then I tapped the sat nav to take me back to the place I had seen on the way down.

I'm so glad that I did. Not only did the place have tanks, planes, boats and all sorts of other stuff it also had probably a couple of hundred bikes!

So what a find and one that only cost me €5 to go in. It was astonishing and the place is called the Museo Gottard Park and has a website www.museogottardpark.it

Turns out the place was established by a guy called Alfio Gottardo who was fascinated by mechanics and technology and over the years established a fine collection of items from all over the world.

There were so many bikes that included classics like the Ariel Square Four, Aermacchi's, Benellis, Harleys, Bimoto's, BMWs, Ducatti's, Honda's Suzuki's Indians, Moto Guzzi's and more.

On the way back from there I stopped off to buy some shampoo but ended up buying conditioner, but apparently my hair would have loads more volume after using it ... so I suppose it was a happy and fortuitous accident.

On my return to the hotel I sat out and had beer and chatted to an American couple (Tom and Diane) from Florida who were travelling with their English friends who joined us shortly afterwards - he was nice enough but the woman who was originally from Bolton and now lives in Essex, frankly was less engaging.

Tom and Diane had asked me about my trip. I explained that it was a birthday present from my wife Pat and Tom said how good he thought that was, I agreed and described Pat as a 'Carling wife' I then of course had to explain that and the English woman made a point of saying she didn't know anything about Carling adverts and if things were on ITV they only ever taped them so that they never had to watch adverts, how weird and I thought that type of pathetic snobbery had died out years ago.

After a shower I walked down to the Lake Maggiore waterfront and took a few pictures before treating myself to an amaretto flavoured ice cream and it was lovely.

Whist wandering along I saw the American and English couple sat outside a bar. Tom called me over and asked me to pull up a chair so I did and spent an hour with

them, which was nice the only interruption to that was when I went 200 yards up the road to the supermarket (where I had got the conditioner) and purchased a carton of orange for the American lady (she wanted it for her vodka).

I cost only a single euro so I didn't want the money for it and said that on the basis that our politicians tell us we have a special relationship it was the least I could do so that gesture endeared me to them as some sort of English gent!

I left them and returned to the hotel for pizza, wine and an early night. Pat sent me a text to let me know that Aston Villa had taken the lead against City and then I was fast asleep long before the second half was played and when I did stir later on there were a couple of text messages from Pat and Richard (who had gone to the game) to let me know that the final score was 1-1, despite the phone being on the pillow I had been in too deep a sleep to hear the texts as I had drifted off thinking of my ride across the Alps the following day.