

SUPERBIKE ACROSS EUROPE



SATURDAY 26 OCTOBER: I left home in Manchester at 09.45 for Mike and Ali's down in Surrey 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 Sebastian) 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 Tuesday's 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 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 pedal 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 hungry 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 You Tube, 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?

WEDNESDAY 30 OCTOBER: After breakfast I headed off for Portugal and left the hotel a little after 09:00am.



The weather was overcast but warm. During the first hour it rained a little but not really enough to notice or make a difference to the riding.

I had looked for a few small places that would take me towards Portugal and set the sat nav to the first one.

I found a decent mix of roads although many of them were not out and out enjoyable roads - they were fast but given the vast and generally flat landscape most of the bends were just fast bends that lacked any real feeling but I was also able to find some excellent roads and picture perfect vistas.

The roads varied from superbly surfaced to poorly surfaced but I suppose as I was always looking to stay away from main roads then maybe it was inevitable, although in this part of Spain at times there wasn't really much choice.

I crossed the border and stopped to take the inevitable picture at the country sign for inclusion in the inevitable DVD. I travelled via the tiny villages of Granja de Moreruela; Tabars; Fonfria and then onto Miranda do Douro and very good it was as well. I eventually made my way back to the hotel for about 2pm and travelled back via the towns of Fermoselle; Pererruela and then Zamora, which is a largish and historically important city in Spain.

All in all a decent day although unlike in France there seemed to be a real absence of roadside cafes and bars, but there again the majority of my miles had been done in remarkably isolated places.

When I got back to the hotel I sat out and had a couple of cold beers (San Miguel) whilst I spent some time planning my route for tomorrow before lying on the bed and having a decent nap for an hour or so. Then I took a shower and went for a wander around Villapando again before returning to the hotel to lube' my chain before the next day's leg to Castello a mid way point on my way towards Andorra.

THURSDAY 29 OCTOBER: Dinner on Wednesday night at the hotel was good although expensive, but there again that was more to do with the place I stayed at I suppose it could hardly be described as a greasy bikers stop over.

I enjoyed breakfast and a couple of large coffees before packing my bags and loading my bike.

Experience has demonstrated many times that it's well worth taking a steady and methodical approach to packing and making sure that things are packed away in a certain order should anything be needed en route. At the risk of 'too much detail' it's helpful to have toileted oneself and to be 'suitably clean' in advance of the typical nine to ten hours 'in the saddle' if you know what I mean.

For this trip I had purchased a 'cargo net' which simply clips over my top Kriega pack and allows me to have my spare visor on the back of the bike rather than around my waist as on previous trips. This was to prove a real good investment for the £7 or so it cost me. I carry my small Fuji camera in my left pocket and my main Fuji camera in the tank bag.

The tank bag was another addition for this trip, although I have the art of travelling light pretty well sorted, I felt I needed a couple of things more accessible than in my back pack so had bought a fairly slim Hein Gerick tank bag that sits only 15cm high and afforded me an easy view of the sat nav, it's really pretty unobtrusive and this also proved to have been a really good practical buy.

As with previous days I was really looking forward to the ride and my plan was to make my first call to a place that Francisco had recommended - the village of Uruena.

After breakfast the geologist wished me well for the rest of my journey and I thanked her for helping with the translation. The owner Francisco and I had a couple of photos and then I settled my bill -

he shook my hand, gave me a hug and asked me to mail him the pictures when I got home - that really had been a decent stopover. The weather was set fair and when I checked the previous evening on my itouch it was showing top 70's for Castello which was half way to Andorra and my destination.

I was on my way just after 9am and I travelled up to the Rioja region via Uruena; Valladolid; Hortiguella, El Rojo and other places in between.

My first port of call had been to Uruena and it was a good call, another castle and walled city with tremendous views over the countryside. The road below looked more than inviting so after a few pictures I was on my way across the rolling well surfaced road in the general direction of Valladolid.



A superb mix of roads eventually saw my way blocked at a bridge closure across the Rio Duero. I carried on left hoping the sat nav would give me an alternative route across the mountains - it offered me a couple, but on roads that given my previous near calamitous experience on the E111 and the JCB incident filled me with enough dread to turn back and head east, leading me to rely on the compass more than anything else.

It was to be a lucky call as I saw a road that was so new you could smell the tarmac and the Armco barriers were still shiny and bright. It looked appealing but it was the smell of the road surface that made my decision and what a good call it turned out to be. It was as though someone had made this road for me - about 10 miles or so of perfect road it had everything, but all good things come to an end and basically it ran out in what was a collection of about a dozen houses and farm buildings.

I don't know what the plan was whether at some future date it would be extended but in any case it was hardly a disappointment to travel back the same way and I was in no particular rush. I stopped to switch the bullet camera on and then moved off, about a half a dozen corners later there was a bloody big brown bull in the middle of the road. I pulled to a halt and it seemed that we stared at each other - he won and I manoeuvred my bike around as fast as I was able as for all the world I thought he was going to run at me!

I headed back and stopped not sure what to do - the situation was that I had to go back that way, there was no alternative but for me to get a grip so I turned round and headed back. By the time I got back to the brown bull he was thankfully stood towards the side of the road. I stopped a way off and to be perfectly honest I felt my bowels loosen as he did that sort of foot rubbing thing, dragging each of his front feet in turn along the ground.

At the same time as I decided this was not a good sign I dropped the clutch and thanked the lord and Mr Suzuki for the power rush of first gear that a GSX-R 1000 gives - I was passed him in a moment.

Maybe he would not have done anything and maybe it was my fear that was the issue but any which way I was relieved to be past him and I carried on the superb road. Round about that time a deluge of rain just came down it was pretty heavy but had stopped before I could get shelter and the sun was back out.

Eventually I picked up a sign for a place called Soria which I knew to be in the general direction of Castello the rest of the journey was uneventful other than the blackest of clouds and skies and the bizarre situation of rain for about 20 miles but that I was almost able to ride just in front of.

In my mirrors it was black but in front it was blue and I was only rained on when the road twisted back on itself. By the time I arrived at my stop the weather was glorious again but my hotel looked closed and deserted. The hotel was run by Best Western and was a converted convent outside the town of Corrella.

I parked at the front and despite it looking closed it was actually open and the youngish Spanish guy said I should put my bike around the back as no one would know it was there, I did that and came and checked in. To be honest it was a slightly strange place.

I asked how far the town was and the guy at reception told me it was 10 minutes way. I dropped my gear into my room showered, changed and set off on what turned out to be the best part of a 30 minute walk. I came to a garage and a bar - I had the obligatory San Miguel and spoke to Pat on the 'phone before making the long walk back. I was looking forward to something to eat and had noted a sign that said dinner was from 8pm to 10pm and was buffet style, which suited me.

When I Got back to the hotel I said hello to the chap at reception and as an aside I said I would be down for dinner at 8 ... He said "dinner there is no dinner sir"

Clearly I must have looked suitably mortified and he said "I can do something for you sir, perhaps a sandwich and maybe some fruit" given I was bloody hungry and didn't have a better offer I accepted and he said I should go to the restaurant at 8.30. I did and it was at this time I felt a bit uneasy - if you've seen The Shining then you'll get the idea ... big hotel pretty isolated, no other guests etc.

At 8.30pm precisely I went to the restaurant and there was a single empty white plate and no one else other than 63 empty chairs. Shortly after the chap arrived with a warm large ciabatta with cheese and ham on it along with the fruit – which actually turned out be two banana yoghurts!

I ate these in splendid isolation but actually wanted the normal mealtime noise of an hotel restaurant. But there was nothing. For company I had a host of religious icons including a huge mural behind me depicting Jesus taking the last supper. Well you know how it can get when you are on your own in this sort of situation - I was left hoping that it wasn't my last supper, actually and to be honest I was s****ing myself, thinking the worst - had I been poisoned, would I become the tortured play thing of the hotel keeper and all of this wasn't helped when I saw a woman walk down the corridor dressed in white carrying a black bin bag. It was made worse after my friend Mick had phoned me earlier and then sent me a picture of Jack Nicholson complete with sound effects from The Shining which I had foolishly mentioned to him during our earlier 'phone call, it really wasn't a welcome email.

I went to bed flicked through the TV channels and fell asleep listening to music on my itouch. It was a rubbish night's sleep.

FRIDAY 30 OCTOBER: I was glad when morning came and I found I was still intact of mind and body - I wasn't overly excited by the thought of the buffet breakfast and it turned out that I was right not to be.

It seemed that later on the previous evening two more guests had arrived and in addition to the single solitary setting for me there were two others place settings at some distance from mine, although no sight of the other guests.

The buffet breakfast consisted of a single small roll (there were three set out) a choc o'pain (there were three set out) along with cheese, ham, yoghurts and fruit as well as coffee and orange juice - it was ok actually and I ate, packed and was on the road shortly after 9am.

If the previous days biking had been excellent then quite simply the ride from Castello surpassed it all and led me to think whilst I was riding that I would have to reconsider my Carlsberg ratings.

If I had been on Carlsberg roads so far I would have to downgrade them to Carlsberg B and C because today I was on the A roads or maybe A * or perhaps Carlsberg Extra - it was the most staggering of biking days.



After leaving the convent I topped up with fuel and headed for a place called Ejea de Los Caballeros then Erla and then on towards Ardisa.

I headed out on the NA125 and then the A125. The former the NA125 through Navarra was a joy, the Aragon region was a hot and parched landscape and great fun to bike through on its twisting roads although at times the surface wasn't 100% ideal.

The sat nav froze whilst I was heading for Huesca so I carried on frankly thinking what the f*** am I going to do now - I thought that maybe I could call Pat and get her to search the web or maybe phone Garmin for a solution.

I topped up with petrol and sat in the hot sun to figure out if I could reset it which in the end turned out to be really easy, and by good chance when I had purchased it I had I put the short users guide in the case and it was simply a case of pressing two buttons and hey presto job done.

I carried on and the weather was hot, the scenery at times dramatic and traffic virtually non-existent and the roads were set to get even better. The N230 was fantastic the views at times were mesmerising and my pace was slowed only by time out to take pictures or just to stop and look.

On the way to my destination I did so many good roads that I would recommend to any biker. These included the N230 and the N260. But the road that left me exhausted was the L511 from Isona to Coll de Nergo, it's just 38km of non-stop action constantly rolling the bike from left to right as the road cut through the valley, My friend Rich had done the N260 that runs parallel to this (about 15 miles away) and I knew that he would know these roads are just simply off any normal scale. I did a good bit of the N260 and it truly is a magnificent road.

I ambled along for the last 20 or so miles at a steady 60/70 mph just taking in the views and the warm sun

I arrived at my overnight stop at around 5.45pm in the tiny hill top village of Estamariu. I checked in but my room was small with only a tiny window and to be honest had something of a prison cell feel

about it. I asked for a room with a view and for a €10 supplement moved to the top floor with a veranda and stunning views to the Pyrenees.

I sat out in tee shirt and underwear, hot, sweaty and with a cold San Miguel before taking a shower and going for a short wander around.

Back at my stopover I had another couple of beers and open cheese and tomato sandwiches before bed and falling into a deep and sound sleep by 10pm.

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 took a lot of pictures. 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.

Whilst 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.

TUESDAY 03 OCTOBER: Tuesday was another really decent day and started with a decent breakfast.

I left Baveno about 08.45 or so and headed for Locarno, it was nice easy riding on well surfaced flowing roads alongside Lake Maggiore in wonderful morning sunshine. I had the lake to my right and the Alps looming large in front of me – what more could I ask for? I turned to head for Biasta and the St Gothard pass, I had decided the San Bernadino pass was too far to the east for me to do without giving myself too great a distance for a comfortable days riding.

Maybe I would do the San Bernadino another time, on the basis that it really is a big world and there are so many places to see I think it may well be some time before I ride to Switzerland again – this trip made it three times in the 16 months. I aimed for Airollo and took a welcome coffee at the viewing platform. I still had Swiss Francs from my visit a few months earlier and I had enough to pay the required three Francs for the coffee.

There really are wonderful views to be had from here and I had been there twice before, most recently in June of that year with friends Rich and Mick, it was colder then and there was snow

about - this time it was ideal and despite packing my showerproof/windchill jacket I had no reason to take it from its convenient location in my back pack. After coffee I headed for Altdorf and stopped to switch the bullet camera/ video camera on. I then rode through Flulen and past the place that Mick, Rich and I had stayed at back in June. I stopped to take a few pictures of Lake Lucerne and its aqua waters before turning in the general direction of Zurich and then onto the border crossing into Germany at Baden.

I wasn't quite sure where I was but knew I was still in Switzerland and I travelled alongside a lake for about 15 glorious miles of superb black tarmac on rolling easy bends. I just coasted along at a leisurely pace probably a steady 70/80 mph barely adjusting the throttle and hardly touching the brakes, it was relaxed and easy riding - not a care in the world and just the quiet steady drone of the engine for company. Shortly after entering Germany I had some rain, not enough to need to stop or adjust the pace and it probably only lasted for 10 minutes but the air was cooler and the skies darker - although roadside signs indicated it was still a decent 18 degrees.

The Black Forest towards Simonswald was as pretty as a picture and clearly it had rained earlier. The roads were wet and flowed alongside glorious lakes and although some invited more speed I tempered my pace after two bottom clenching rear wheel slips - nothing too awful but enough to provide fair warning.

Perhaps this was from the rain falling on roads that had been untypically dry for long periods but when I hit the tighter and twistier bits on damp and glossy tarmac I've got to be honest and say for the second time on the trip (the first was the negotiating the JCB situation on the closed road) I flicked the drive mode switch to the 'girls' setting of B although I had opted for setting A for the JCB incident.

The last ten miles or so to the hotel were interesting on what I would probably say were B roads and that were isolated deep in the forest. Anyway I arrived safe and sound and had a wonderful room (room 2 on the first floor). When I arrived Ludwig who I think owns and runs the place, shook my hand and said "Anthony it's good to see you again, last time was the spring no? and with your friends"

The room really was excellent and with a very decent bathroom and a simply excellent shower. After refreshing myself I went down to the bar for a welcome beer - I had three of those and also the best meal of the trip. The starter was a salad type affair and the main course was deep fried camembert - sort of thick fish cakes but filled with camembert with toast and some sort of berry side relish it was lovely.

When the restaurant emptied Ludwig, the chef and the waitress came and joined me at the solid wood table and ate their evening meal there with me. I finished the evening off with a large glass of red wine and listened to one of my favourite songs by Go West - The King of Wishful Thinking, I made a mental note to myself to include this in the DVD it was a nice end to another excellent day.

My trip for the following day was onto Luxembourg, and probably about 230 or so miles to my final overnight stop of this trip.

THURSDAY 04 OCTOBER I enjoyed breakfast in what really had been a decent stop over and an excellent standard of accommodation all for €38 and that included breakfast - possibly the place with the best shower as well.

The weather looked excellent with a clear blue sky and a temperature been forecast to reach about 54 degrees I didn't really have much of a plan, I had seen from looking at the map that there were a couple of natural park areas broadly on my route so I thought I might head that way.

I supposed that I would go to Luxembourg via France as I doubted that I would stay in Germany all the way there. My 'supplies' had lasted well and I had the pleasure of clean socks and underwear - I think the waste bin in my bathroom would have been best if it was incinerated as a health precaution.

All my maps were now packed away at the bottom of my bag apart from my Luxembourg map as that was the last one that I would use now. My single tin of deodorant had lasted well but I would need to buy some more during the day. My first task on leaving was to find petrol I had finished off on reserve the previous day but had at least 20 miles left so knew it wouldn't be a problem.

On checking out I ran into a slight problem, there seemed to be a problem with my credit card - I didn't have a clue what the lady was saying but thankfully an older gent told me I could only pay with cash - my bill was 55 euros (dinner beer and wine had cost me 17). I checked my cash and had 54.70 she accepted this and then I was on my way.

Whilst I was loading my bike the old gent who had translated for me came and looked at my bike and asked me where I was heading, when I told him, he seemed to think it was a long way to travel in a day. When I told where I had been he was staggered he wished me well and told me it was a good day to be on a bike as the forecast was for 78 degrees ... surely he was wrong the forecast had been for only mid 50's but to be fair the cloudless blue sky had perfect day written all over it.

And it certainly did turn out to be a hot one. At times I saw roadside signs that indicated it had topped 80 degrees – I had been very fortunate on this trip. I had wonderful riding through the Black Forrest on superb roads and passed through village after village each one picture perfect. I had found petrol after only a dozen or so miles and then I let the sat nav take me on a wonderful route some of which was on unmade roads deep in the forest, not for the first time on this trip the roads I travelled on were interesting to say the least. The weather was scorching hot and I was pretty sweaty I was glad of my tinted visor as the light was intense although some care was needed at times when the light changed through the wooded sections. I had a great time sometimes steady and sometimes fast, at times the roads just opened up with clear vision and sweeping curves on rolling roads.

A slight bonus was when I saw a sign for a ferry crossing across the Rhine ... I followed the signs and realised that this was why this route was only 230 miles or so, the alternative was about another 100 miles or so ... except I had a slight problem I had no cash as I used it all when checking out at the hotel in Simonswald.

I checked the sat nav for the nearest cash till and the first dozen or so were all across the Rhine in France so I scrolled through for a German looking address and the nearest that came up was a 30 mile round trip. Seemed like I didn't have much option so I set off but found a bank after five miles

so got some cash and headed off back to the ferry crossing ... as it happened it turned out that the ferry across the Rhine was free!

From there I took in lovely countryside and roads and as ever the most scenic of villages all neat, clean and bright in the hot sun. I rode through the wine growing Alsace region and for a time followed the 'vin route' before crossing into the Lorraine region and on towards Luxembourg. I crossed back into Germany about 10 or 12 miles before Saarbrücken, the capital state of Saarland and then half an hour or so later crossed into Luxembourg and headed for my hotel for the night in the pretty but tiny village of Esch Sur Sure.

The final leg of this day's journey was heaven sent; the N12 was the perfect finale to take me to my last stop. Bend after sweeping bend left, right, left - biking heaven for about 12 to 15 miles. I tapped my sat nav mid curve to save this one as I thought I would do it again after breakfast before heading through Luxembourg to Belgium and then to France.

I didn't have a whole lot of options for dinner - sort of the hotel or nothing. I told the lady who runs the hotel that I would take a walk and eat later so I had a beer (two) then wandered around, took a few pictures and then made my way back to the hotel, I couldn't really understand the menu but ended up with too much meat on my plate (some of which looked to me like uncooked bacon) I ate the ham and onions, left the eggs, gherkins and other bits of s**t that littered my plate, ate all my frites and bread and then had a coffee served with an excellent selection of chocolate and biscuits - I'd paid too much for this but hunger had won out.

In the restaurant the only other diners were a dear old Scottish couple who I enjoyed a conversation with, they were travelling to Zeebrugge in Belgium for their ferry home and had just spent two weeks in the Swiss alps they were probably mid to late 70's and although their pace across Europe was gentler than mine, they left me impressed by their extensive travel and the whole thing about living their life to the full.

As others before them they asked me about my journey and wished me well for a 'safe home' on the last leg of my journey. As it was the last leg and last night of my journey I began to tidy up this journal and as I read it back could hardly believe the journey I had done - it's been amazing, so many new places and new experiences and I am indebted to Pat for ever for making this journey possible.

In reality it's only been 13 days and 4,000 or so miles, but in between times my route had taken me though France, Spain, and Portugal before returning to Spain to go to Andorra and then Spain again and then the Mediterranean coast of France onto Italy and then Switzerland before Germany, France again and then Germany again before Luxembourg, Belgium and finally France again.

This means that my list of countries biked in by that time read as follows: the home counties of England, Scotland and Wales along with France, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Austria, Holland, Switzerland, Lichtenstein, Andorra, Spain and Portugal.

As superb as this trip had been the prospect of a familiar bed the following night was a good one, as was the prospect of seeing Pat.

Of course before then I had the following day's trip to Calais via Belgium and then the inevitable dullness of the journey from Dover to Manchester but all good things come to an end and this had

been a good thing. Well I suppose it had to happen at some stage as I was about to turn into bed a huge storm with thunder, lighting, rain and wind - the works, I hoped it would clear by morning.

I was up at 07:00am and the first thing I did was check the weather and it didn't look good. There were dark rain filled clouds and shiny damp roads from the rain during the night. I decided that if the weather turned I would simply take a pretty direct route to Calais even the most amateur weather forecaster would not have bet on the day staying dry.

Whilst I was packing my gear it absolutely hammered down which pretty much made my mind up that I would head directly to Calais and take an earlier ferry home - my booking was for the 19:00 ferry and by 08:00am I just couldn't imagine I'd be hanging around for that one.

By the time I had had breakfast, checked out and started to load my bike the rain had stopped and the skies looked clearer but it still didn't look great. I set off and decided it would probably be best just to take the quickest and most direct route up through Belgium and on towards Lille in northern France - after about 30 minutes I was riding in very fine drizzle not enough to need my wet gear on but enough for me to slow my pace a little. The weather was cooler but the sky was blue and the roads were drying but it was chilly enough for me to stop and put my wind-chill jacket on.

And in terms of rain that was it for the rest of the journey I was on dry roads and in the sunshine, road side signs indicated the temperature was increasing and it ended up at a reasonable 18 degrees. I arrived at the ferry port in lovely warm sunshine and checked in for the 16.20 ferry instead of the 19.00 that I was originally scheduled on with me due in to Dover around 17:00.

The journey home from Dover was as awful as ever, 300 dull motorway miles with the M25 the trial it always is, and by half way home I was cold to the bone. I was home for about 22:20 to a warm shower, coffee and a couple of glasses of red wine.

The bike was fantastic and never missed a beat and a GSX-R 1000 is a wonderful bike to tour Europe on although perhaps not an obvious one. The Michelin 2CT tyres had been remarkable the standard Bridgestone's would not have fared so well. I'd put the Garmin sat nav up there as a trip essential along with a few decent maps.



The bikes a real mess but only 4,000 miles worth of dirt – no damage at all other than a small mark on the tail.

Would I recommend solo biking around Europe – yes of course it was just great and as I have written earlier I am deeply indebted to Pat for this trip

Tony