

Iron-butt ride around Europe in 80 days.



Freedom is a key word when describing motorcycle riding, especially when thumping along on really big road trips. After having done most parts of the Australian neighbourhoods several times, from Cape tribulation to the Great Ocean road and over the Great Alpine road, as well as 9000 k of New Zealand, even the Aussie outback roads started to loose some of that explorer feeling.

So we mapped 80 days onto Europe for a real scenic and attraction packed iron butt road trip. My butt can still feel the cobble stones in Prague (Czech Republic). There are so many more attractions per kilometre in Europe. This story doesn't even scratch the surface. The focus of the trip was not on attractions but on everything in between, i.e. the road trip itself. The scenery and serpentine roads of the Pyrenees, rolling battle fields at the Ardennes, the hills and mountain ranges of Sicily, roads along the long beaches of eastern Italy, the Scottish highlands, the northern Ireland coast, the Fiords of Norway with 24 kilometre tunnels through mountains and the remote arctic zone in Sweden, were just some of the highlight sections. This trip did not let us down, it had it all. We scuff at comments about the European weather, as we brought the fine weather with us. From the southmost tip of Europe (Sicily) to Kiruna (200 k north of the arctic circle) we only donned wet weather gear twice for a couple of hours. Our light Australian gear (e.g. for Tasmania) coped well with conditions, even in the arctic region, though I did shove down woollen mittens for the crotch up there. Sticky hot weather only came in Barcelona and through most of Italy.

It was exhilarating to experience the intensity of cities like Paris, Barcelona, Rome, Berlin, Amsterdam and London with great ease thanks to the Tom-Tom GPS and a trailer that allow lane filtering like the Romans do. The two years of preparation were not a chore but part of it all, like when enjoying the swirl of a first class cognac with your nose, anticipating and getting ready. Naturally we covered every major attraction we came past, the Eiffel Tower, Arc De Triumph, Versailles, D-Day beaches, Florence, Colosseum, Vatican, climb Vesuvius, walk Pompeii, an hour in a Gondola in Venice, the Olympiad preparations in London and so on. Instead of the attractions this story briefly is about two of the only real dramas we had on this 28150 k trip.



The Woo Doo man.



Much of the crowds, the barriers and the atmosphere were still there 36 hours after Mark Webber took the Formula 1 crown in Monte Carlo. We rode the world famous F1 hairpin bend on our Harley and imagined the excitement Mark must have felt. Feeling hot in our leather gear we soon took to cool drinks under a parasol by the beach, surrounded by the stroll of interesting people. The coast had an impressive parade of yachts, which made us wonder who had parked out there, during the recent races and recent party days. Our thoughts were interrupted by a tall dark stranger

in a Djellaba type African stained white clothing with a grey shade across his curly short hair and the looks of a Sudanese or Tunisian person, begging at the fringe of this exclusive area. I'd guess he was in his late fifties. My attempts trying to ignore his advance was cut when Ann confirmed his guess about where we were from. After a curt but friendly conversation, he held up a couple of matchbox sized turtle and elephant figurines in a Bakelite type material, typical of the mass produced items you find for a buck at the airport. Before we could reply, he pressed each in our hands. I thought well that's a friendly gesture. Quickly he added, "please, something for my children". Ok I fished up a 10 Euro note, which was probably a couple of times more than you'd pay at the airport. "One more", he demanded. "No that's enough", I said, upon which he gave me an "evil eye" type of look, if there is such a thing. He quickly disappeared and we didn't think much of it. Instead, we packed up and headed towards Italy on the elevated freeway high up, cutting through the coastal freeway ranges with an endless number of tunnels, each an average of a couple of kilometres long. With sunglasses, visor and windscreen, it's hard to adapt instantly to the darkness in some of these tunnels. It was made worse by cars doing well in excess of 130. I kept just under 130 kph, focusing on my lane. Then at 6.30 PM in one of these busy long tunnels, my rear tyre blew out in a puncture. Thank god I managed to keep it upright and exit the tunnel. Maybe the trailer helped steady the rear end. Coming to a stop in the tunnel could have been the end of us, with traffic at such speeds. The road-shoulder where I pulled up our more



than half a tone vehicle combination, wasn't much more than 80 centimetres wide, but our relief was overwhelming that we managed to stay upright. An attempt with puncture spray proved futile, as the wheel rim had a 20 centimetre crack, rendering the whole wheel useless. A recovery company took the bike to an overnight garage and us to a seaside hotel, without using a single word, as we didn't speak Italian and they knew no English. In bed that night, with the sound of the waves of the Mediterranean, I thought of the African man. Next morning on the Jetty, I pressed the turtle figurine in Ann's hand and said, "Now let's throw these black Talismans as far away as we can out in the Mediterranean". The next day after an hour to Savona to Harley Service, we had a new Dunlop tyre, a near new Fatboy mag-wheel, wheel parts transferred in 2 hours, we were on our way to Sicily at a total repair cost of much less than AU\$900.

Snow-Bogged in the Alps.

Stilvio is an alp pass in northern Italy and a bit of a must-do on an European road trip. Whilst steep, very high and serpentine rising, we found it not as challenging as Trollstigen would be in Norway. We expected a green, scenic and sundrenched ride, which it was to start with. Snow was then only a decoration at a distance. Half way up it turned foggy with snow right up to the very steep winding road and then it started raining. We met cars with a foot of snow on their roofs, wondering where they had parked overnight. Sleet started to build up on the road as falling rain turned to snow. Ann tried to walk/run in front to find a way through the sleet but was quickly exhausted as we were 2750 meters above sea level. I estimated we only had 500 meter left to the summit and kept ploughing on at walking speed until I went sideways. Even trying to come to a halt produced skidding. The tyres were caked with snow, there was no traction to go forward and I could barely arrest a backward slide. The intense snowing took some of our daylight away. Ann caught up with me and together we managed to get the bike and trailer somewhat away from the middle of the road. We felt our confidence dropping as we and the bike were quickly covered by the falling snow. Our feet were taking a cold turn, there was no chance the weather would improve soon and we couldn't move the bike. If we didn't stay with the bike, it might get smashed by a snow plough. A car approached from over the pass. They helped us phone for recovery assistance, but there were either no answers or the tow trucks were simply too busy already. So they wrote down the phone numbers for us and left. Yaiks this was not good. Maybe one of us could walk



to the summit, and check some buildings. The car came back up, in spite of road conditions, with great news. Just two serpentine bends down the road was it almost free from snow and sleet. The four of us managed to turn bike and trailer around. On the way down, I feathered the front brake and used the clutch as rear brake as my legs were busy keeping it upright. After about 500 meter of slow descent we had traction again and returned very slowly to a café in Bormeo, where we munched two hot chocolates

each and lots of pastry stuff. As I later headed for a lower pass, I found the clutch was slipping alarmingly much which was not a surprise. Weeks of very steep serpentine roads through 180 degree turns with immediate 1 metre rise with a net 570 kg vehicle combination. So no more passes for this bike. Instead we tried for recovery (tow) options to a Harley Centre? Suggestion by locals to go to Milan seemed wrong and futile, until I discovered it was all down hill thanks to a series of tunnels. So we clutch slipped all the way to within 60 k of Milan. With too much traffic to continue safely, we stayed at a very scenic hotel on the shores of Lake Como and had a tow next morning. The boys at Harley Davidson "Numero Uno" Milano did a full clutch overhaul-replacement and we were back on the road within a couple of hours, this significant repair also much less than \$900. Apart from new front and rear tyres, there were no more issues with the bike, but we had a very reliable and enjoyable trip over 20 European countries. We now feel a strange sort of gratitude to the inanimate object, the bike, for taking us through intense traffic, remote wilderness and distances safely and dependently. I guess we should direct that towards the design and development that produced the bike. We had planned for all the road experiences. What we hadn't planned for or expected, was all the nice people we met, relatives, friends and strangers for mateships that will last forever, together with some very life enriching road trip memories. With special thanks to my expert planner and navigator for an excellent adventure. (much more pics at)

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Royal and Kichan