

# **Loving it up the Ballon**

# Introduction

Purely for our own amusement and reflection this travelogue revolves around a bunch of mates who enjoy motorcycling and in 2006 decided to do some touring in mainland Europe. Back then there were 5 of us and in the ensuing years riders have come and gone – 10 in all to date. With the exception of 2017 there has been a tour every year since and during that time we've ridden through 12 different countries over hundreds of mountain passes and clocked up 30,000 miles.

# 2006 Chamonix-Mont-Blanc

For our inaugural motorcycle tour we decided to head for mainland Europe. The plan was simple, we would hop on a ferry and ride down to Chamonix-Mont-Blanc in the heart of the Western Alps and use Chalet Le Bois Rond as our base, from where we would ride some of the local Alpine roads and passes. Midway through the tour we'd ride out to Andermatt in Switzerland overnighting at Hotel Bergidyll before returning to Chamonix the following day.

We figured it would take us a couple of days to get down there and a couple more days to get back and booked a stopover at Hotel du Lac de Madine in Heudicourt-sous-les-Cotes for the ride down, and at Le Clos du Montvinage in Etreaupont for the ride back.

There was a twist though. It's 800 miles from Bewdley to Chamonix of which the vast majority is very boring tyre squaring motorway. Phil had ridden it before and knew what he was in for so elected to drive and trailer his bike down a couple of days earlier. The advantage being that he could take everyone's luggage down plus we'd have a car available to take us into the centre of Chamonix – the chalet's a couple of miles out of town.

After arriving at the chalet Phil would drop the luggage off and on Saturday morning head back north riding 350 miles of scenic roads to meet up with the rest of us who'd be making our way down from Calais. If all went to plan we'd all meet up at the hotel in Heudicourt-sous-les-Cotes sometime on Saturday evening for dinner and an overnigher. Simple.

So on this, our maiden tour, it would be Phil **BMW K1200S**, Chris **BMW K1200RS**, Gaz **Honda Blackbird**, Taj **Honda Fireblade** and Kyle **Suzuki SV1000S**. Our 9 day trip would see us visit 3 countries, ride 16 different mountain passes and roads, and cover more than 2,300 miles.

## **Part 1:**

### **The run down to Chalet Le Bois Rond in Chamonix**

#### **Phil's drive down to Chamonix**

This trip has been months in the making, our first overseas biking trip. A 9 day motorcycle trip over to France to ride Alpine passes. Phil organised it, planned all the rides out, and the rest of us – Chris, Gaz, Taj and Kyle are just along for the ride, so to speak. Being a little older and wiser Phil's plan included him driving to Chamonix in advance with his car loaded up with everyone's luggage and his bike on a trailer.

You can drive directly from Bewdley to Chamonix in a day but the motorway isn't much fun and it's far more relaxing to do it over a couple of days. Phil wasn't in a rush and had decided to go for the relaxing option leaving on the Thursday morning with an overnight stop at Chateau de Barive, a lovely hotel just outside Laon and pretty close to the midway point to Chamonix.

After a pleasant but ultimately long uneventful drive down to Chamonix Phil finally arrived at Chalet Le Bois Rond early on Friday afternoon. The chalet – that was to be our base for the next week, is owned by Kyle's brother-in-law Mark. He had intended joining us on this tour, on his Pan European, but a new job put paid to that and sadly he couldn't make the trip.

Phil set about unloading all the luggage and then stocking up the fridge with beer, wine and the other essentials of life. Next he got his bike off the trailer ready for the ride up to Heudicourt-sous-les-Cotes the following morning. At this point, having seen some of the roads he'd be riding on over the next week, he couldn't resist the temptation to go for a sneaky ride before everyone else arrived, so set out on a reconnaissance mission.

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#### **Phil's ride up to Heudicourt-sous-les-Cotes**

Saturday was the day that everyone was to meet up at the hotel we'd booked in Heudicourt-sous-les-Cotes, south of Verdun. Phil was up and about early this morning and after breakfast, and a quick check of his map – Phil likes maps – he set off on his ride north back up through France.

The idea today was he'd try out the route that had been provisionally mapped out for the ride down to Chamonix on Sunday, when everyone would finally arrive at the chalet. Riding back up the valley towards Argentiere Phil headed to Martigny. From there he picked up the autoroute for a few miles before exiting at Aigle for a ride up Route 11 past Leysin and over the Col des Mosses towards Chateau d'Oex, and then on past Gruyeres – home of the cheese – Bulle and then the back road to Fribourg through Corbieres, La Roche and Villarsel to Fribourg.

The first part of this section up to Bulle was very good. The roads were technically demanding in places, with a number of tight downhill hairpins, but the scenery in this area was beautiful to look at. From Fribourg Phil headed up through Murten, Kerzers and Aarberg to Biel. The roads whilst pleasant enough were interrupted by too many villages to get any decent pace on. Grinding through Biel, thankfully aided by his trusty sat nav, he turned north onto the E27/A16 to Tavannes where he turned left onto the road through the Gorges de Pichoux – through Chatelat to Bassecourt. This road was delightful – stunning scenery combined with technically difficult roads.

From Bassecourt he bypassed Delemont and headed up the D432/D41 to Ferrette. A very good road full of long sweepers. From Ferrette he headed up through Altkirch to Cernay with the intention of switching onto the D431/D430 over the Col du Silberloch and Col du Herrenberg to Gerardmer. However the road from Ferrette onwards was slow because of a succession of small villages along the road, all with a 50 km/h limit. He worked out that his idea of riding the D430 and D431 was going to have to be shelved so thrashed his K1200 up the N83 dual carriageway to Colmar where he headed for the D417 to Gerardmer over the Col de la Schlucht.

Even with the holiday traffic this is a good road for a bike with a good surface and fairly predictable and well marked bends. The final bit into Gerardmer was shut for roadworks so Phil had to divert south a bit before reaching Gerardmer. He then continued on the D417 to Epinal – a truly good road for his bike with wide sweeping bends and where he could catch up some time. At Epinal he picked up the E23/N57 towards Nancy and from there headed for Toul and Heudicourt-sous-les-Cotes where we had all planned to meet up.

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### **Bewdley to Heudicourt-sous-les-Cotes**

While Phil was enjoying scenic roads through beautiful countryside, the rest of us – Chris, Gaz, Taj and Kyle – finally got our tour off to a start and headed for Heudicourt-sous-les-Cotes with almost 500 miles of motorway and autoroute in front of us – 220 miles to Dover, a ferry crossing to Calais, and then another 270 miles the other side. Starting from Kyle's house in the centre of **Bewdley** the first 150 miles of the tour were incident free, everyone making good time, until Taj unexpectedly left the M25 and joined the M23 heading for Brighton!?! At the last minute Gaz and Kyle followed like lemmings. Chris, who had no intention of getting off the M25, sailed straight past and on towards **Dover** .

After a 20 mile detour normal service was resumed and shortly before 11am, just outside the ferry terminal, everyone was reunited. No harm done and the ferry was made with time to spare but clearly a single sat nav shared between all of us might be an issue when riding through France. The ride through France was pretty uneventful and fuel consumption varied wildly according to speed ridden. The ride was broken down into manageable 90 minute chunks and stops were timed for when fuel was needed. However at one point Kyle did manage to drain the 17 litre fuel tank of his SV in 45 minutes thus proving riding faster will not necessarily get you there any quicker.

Matters weren't helped much when Gaz saw Kyle pointing at his fuel tank – the universal sign for out of fuel – and took that to mean he wanted to race. Gaz promptly sped off, the others following, leaving Kyle to limp to the next fuel station. The result being the group became separated for the second time that day. By the time everyone rolled into **Heudicourt-sous-les-Cotes** it was 6pm and we arrived to see Phil sitting in the bar, beer in hand. It had been a long and hot day in the saddle and everyone was pretty relieved to get to the hotel. Hotel du Lac de Madine comes recommended with a very good restaurant and reasonably inexpensive lodgings.

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### **Heudicourt-sous-les-Cotes to Chamonix**

The weather yesterday had been sweltering but today the forecast was for more of the same, and then some. Surprisingly we all felt quite sharp this morning despite all the beer and wine that was consumed last night and the time spent in the saddle yesterday. The plan today was simple, head to Chamonix by way of the route Phil had taken on his ride up from there yesterday.

First order of the day was fuel. Being Sunday though nowhere was open, and all the unmanned pumps that we came across only accepted French bank cards. Fuel was a recurring problem for the SV throughout the trip and its fuel light had been on for almost 20 miles. The Fireblade was also getting desperate for fuel before a solution finally presented itself. We managed to catch a French motorist filling up at an unmanned pump and we offered him cash in exchange for him filling up our bikes too on his card. Result.

Fully fuelled we left Heudicourt-sous-les-Cotes and headed south through **Toul** and **Epinal**. We stayed on the E23/N57 until past **Remiremont** where we picked up the N66 to **Saint-Maurice-sur-Moselle**. From there we turned onto the D465 which took us over the Col du Ballon d'Alsace. The road had the potential to be good but heavy overbanding on many of the corners meant that we had to take it very carefully around the hairpins. We all had the front or rear wheel slide on the ascent, sometimes both of them.

The story was the same when we descended the other side where even greater care had to be taken. This side of the pass ran down through heavy woods and the dappled light playing on the surface made it difficult to pick out imperfections in the surface – of which there were many. From the bottom of the Ballon we headed towards **Belfort** and it was only a short run from there until we reached the French-Swiss border. It didn't seem like we'd been in Switzerland 5 minutes before we were alerted to the presence of a police speed trap as we approached **Delemont**

Just out of Delemont we cut off through the Gorges de Pichoux just as Phil had done. Through the gorge we were reminded of the advantage of local knowledge when we saw a rider on an old K1100 Flying Brick by the side of the road. He followed us and quickly swept past all of us at a speed which seemed barely credible. We then rode on to **Biel** and decided that we needed to pick the pace up if we were to get to Chamonix at a decent time, so we headed for **Bern** and the A12 past **Fribourg** and **Montreux** to

**Martigny** where we headed up to the top of the Col de la Forclaz for a well deserved beer.

From the top of the Forclaz it's only a short hop to the Swiss-French border. The border post is usually unmanned but take your passport regardless because you're bound to get caught out the one time it is manned. From the border the road twists its way down through **Vallorcine** and over the Col des Montets and into **Argentiere**. From there it was pretty much a straight run down the valley into **Chamonix** and we finally rolled up at the chalet at 5pm, hot and very clammy, and it had indeed been a very hot day.

## Part 2:

### Three countries, two mountains and a tunnel

#### Col du Grand St. Bernard

There was no particular plan today and we'd always intended on taking it easy after all the riding we'd done over the weekend. After a late breakfast we gave the bikes a bit of a wash down and checked oil levels and for those that had chains, they were also checked and oiled. By late afternoon though cabin fever had begun to set in. We'd all had enough of sitting around and decided to venture out for a short ride.

The great thing about Chamonix is that it's conveniently located in the western part of the Alps and borders Switzerland and Italy providing easy access to some stunning Alpine roads and passes.

The plan was to ride up the valley from Chamonix to Martigny, up to the top of the Grand St. Bernard, and then ride down to Aosta on the Italian side, returning to Chamonix through the Mont Blanc tunnel.

We left Chamonix and headed up the valley and over the Col des Montets towards **Vallorcine** and the French-Swiss border. From there we crossed into Switzerland and headed up and over the Col de la Forclaz and then on into **Martigny**.

From Martigny the road up the Swiss side of the Col du Grand St. Bernard is very good and fast until you reach the pass road itself where it is very tight in places. The first gear hairpins on Phil's K1200 proved tricky because of the long wheelbase and it took a bit of practice to get used to them.

At the top we stopped for a coffee and took in the spectacular views and as we crossed the border into Italy we tried marmot spotting – without success. We then rode down the Italian side heading to **Aosta** and from there we used the Mont Blanc tunnel to get back to **Chamonix**.

It was only a short blast but in the space of a couple of hours we'd managed to ride a loop that took us to 3 countries, over 2 mountain passes – 3 if you count the Montets – and through 1 tunnel. Not bad going for an afternoon's work.



## Part 3:

### A ride out to the highest pass in the Alps

#### Col de l'Iseran & Col du Petit St. Bernard

The plan today was for a longer ride than our short blast up the Grand St. Bernard yesterday. Phil had planned a route that would explore some magnificent Alpine roads and gain a lot of altitude, and before days end would have us riding to the top of the highest pass in the Alps. There were a lot of miles to cover today if we wanted to get there so the consensus was that we needed to be on the road and rolling by 9am.

We were on the road by 9 but not rolling because most of us needed fuel. There are plenty of places to fill up in and around Chamonix but we weren't sure what the situation would be like up in the mountains. As we were going to be heading west from Chamonix we dropped a mile or so down the valley into **Les Houches** and filled up there. Everyone filled up regardless of whether they needed fuel or not with the SV and the Fireblade brimmed.

After fuelling in Les Houches we continued west and headed for **Megeve** on the N212 before turning at **Notre-Dame-de-Bellecombe** up the D218B. The D218B took us over the Col des Saisies – 1,657m high and a part of this year's Tour de France route. From the top of the Saisies we headed down to **Beaufort** where we picked up the D925. The D218B was good but we had no idea how those cyclists manage to get up the passes.

From Beaufort we kept on the D925 up to the top of the 1,605m Col de Meraillet and then over the 1,968m Cormet de Roselend. The scenery here was stunning but unfortunately we only stopped briefly at the top of the Meraillet and Roselend so no scenic pictures. There was more hairpin practice coming down into **Bourg-Saint-Maurice** and then again on the D902 through **Val-d'Iserre**.

We then climbed the 2,770m to the top of the highest pass in the Alps, the Col de l'Iseran. The D902 is justly rated as a 5-star biking road although we did have to stop for roadworks in a couple of the tunnels. However it is well surfaced and not too tight – so it was second gear for the hairpins and third gear for the straights. Despite the altitude all the bikes were running perfectly and the views from the top Iseran were spectacular.

From there we retraced our steps back down towards Bourg-Saint-Maurice before turning right off the D925 at **Sainte-Foy-Tarentaise** to cut across to the N90, meeting the pass to **La Rosiere** close to the top, and turning right for the Col du Petit St. Bernard. The climb up to the pass heading north is gentle and fairly featureless and tops out at 2,188m.

The pass going down towards **Courmayeur** is much more challenging with hairpin after hairpin after hairpin. Most of us found the trick was to stay in second gear for all but the tightest hairpins and use both the front and rear brakes before the bend, releasing the front before the bend but keeping the rear on and balancing it against the

throttle, before releasing it as the bike straightened up. From Courmayeur it was another trip through the Mont Blanc tunnel back to **Chamonix** and then home to the chalet.

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Coming down the approach to the tunnel on the French side you pass the memorial commemorating the efforts of those who died in the great fire in 1999. The fire started only 750 metres into the tunnel on the Italian side when a lorry carrying flour and margarine stopped and caught fire. 39 people died in this fire but one of the heroes was an Italian security guard named Pierlucio Tinazzi.

Pierlucio Tinazzi was also a biker and he rode in and out of the tunnel as the fire raged rescuing a number of those trapped. Eventually he was forced to seek refuge in one of the shelters but unfortunately it was one which had not been upgraded and sadly he died.

## Part 4:

### Two days in the Swiss Alps and a night in Andermatt

#### Chamonix to Andermatt

The next couple of days were going to be spent in Switzerland and we'd pre-booked a hotel in Andermatt for tonight. Our ride out there was going to be a fairly straightforward affair. Beginning with our by now usual route out of Chamonix we'd drop over the Forclaz and head north-east towards the Furka and ultimately Andermatt.

We left Chamonix due east over the Col des Montets and Col de la Forclaz, through **Martigny** and on to **Brig**. Leaving Brig the road got more interesting and eventually we passed **Ulrichen** – the start point for the Nufenen Pass. Very soon we reached **Oberwald** and this is where the Furka Pass starts in earnest. The road up from the western side takes you past **Gletsch** and at this point if turn left the road will take you up the Grimsel Pass. We weren't riding it today though so we carried on towards the summit.

Just before we reached the top we stopped off at the Rhone Glacier viewing point and from here you can just about see where the Grimsel and Furka meet in the valley floor below. After a quick coffee we got back on the bikes and continued on up to the summit. The pass going down into **Andermatt** on the eastern side is much tighter and without the benefit of any armco or any similar protection on the open side of the pass. A momentary lapse of concentration at this point and you are facing a long drop.

The hotel we chose, Hotel Bergidyll, was very popular with bikers. With secure parking, reasonably priced, and with good food it wasn't difficult to see why. Once we'd checked in most of us were happy to get out of the saddle and relax for the rest of the day – except Phil and Gaz.

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#### Oberalp, Lukmanier and St. Gotthard loop

While Chris, Taj and Kyle retired to the bar Phil and Gaz were the only ones with enough energy to get out and ride the Oberalp, Lukmanier and Gotthard pass roads. If you're planning a trip that takes you near Andermatt it's certainly worth making the effort to ride the 97 mile loop that includes all of these passes.

The Oberalp Pass is excellent for bikes with fantastic wide grippy hairpins and great sweepers once you get out on top. From here you run down to **Disentis** where the Lukmanier Pass is well signposted. This pass could be one of the best but unfortunately the road surface is terrible. It's been laid in concrete in what appears to be 25ft long blocks so every second you hit one of the joins between the two. Phil reported that neither him or Gaz could find a comfortable pace. Not even with the K1200's ESA where ultimately the Sport setting was the best.

At this point they dropped down into **Biasca** and then hopped on the A2 to get up to **Airolo** where the St. Gotthard Pass – or San Gottardo on that side of the pass – starts. The exit off the autoroute is well signposted but you need to remember that there are two pass roads. The one signposted is the newer pass – a fantastic bit of road engineering with hairpins built on stilts out from the mountain. But there is also the old original pass – the Via Tremola – which is still open for those with mountain goat blood in them. From here it was a straightforward run back into **Andermatt**.

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### **Andermatt to Chamonix**

The following day saw us heading back to Chamonix but before we left Andermatt the plan was for Phil and Gaz to introduce Chris, Taj and Kyle to the delights of the Oberalp, Lukmanier and Gotthard pass roads. We were all up and about nice and early, however, from the moment we got up the weather looked decidedly unpredictable. Nevertheless we checked out of the hotel, loaded up the bikes, and headed out.

Unfortunately the weather turned very quickly and the top of the Gotthard Pass was shrouded in mist. It looked like it was set in for the day too so we had a coffee and revised our plan. Rather than carrying we decided to turn around and ride back the way we'd come and head for **Wassen** which lies just north of Andermatt. From here we could ride over the Susten Pass to **Innertkirchen** instead. This was a great road, especially going up from Wassen. The pass down was much more difficult and quite technical but still fun and on the way down we stopped by the Steingletscher Glacier for a break.

From Innertkirchen we had planned on riding back through Gstaad – playground of the rich and famous – to Bex, but near **Interlaken** it decided to throw it down with rain so we retreated via the autoroute to the base of the Col de la Forclaz. From there we rode up to the bar at the top and made our now regular end of ride stop before heading down the valley over the Col des Montets and back into **Chamonix** and the chalet.

## Part 5:

### 800 miles with a stopover in Etreaupont

#### The Montenvers Railway & Mer de Glace

The stormy weather that we'd encountered in Switzerland yesterday arrived in Chamonix early this morning and it was wet until lunchtime. No a problem though because there wasn't a ride planned for today anyway. We were all too aware of the long haul up the autoroute that lay ahead of us. Instead we spent the morning checking the bikes, packing up our gear, cleaning the chalet – generally just relaxing.

The weather did clear a little by the afternoon and the roads had started to dry although it remained overcast. We toyed with idea of going out for a short blast but we came to our senses and instead headed into Chamonix for a bit of a look around. We took a train ride up to the Mer de Glace on the Montenvers Railway before we all cracked and retired to a bar for a few afternoon beers.

Amongst the topics we discussed was what we were going to do for dinner. After a week without a curry everyone was getting withdrawal symptoms and Kyle knew of an Indian restaurant in town. The decision was made although some of us might come to regret it before the ride home was over.

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#### Chamonix to Bewdley

With our stay in the Alps at an end, the time had come to return home with the reality check that it's an 800 mile ride from Chamonix back to Bewdley. Too much to ride in a day but manageable over couple of days. We wanted to knock off as many miles as possible on the first day so we were only left with a short dash to the ferry terminal on Sunday morning.

The ride to **Etreaupont** was about 430 miles and we figured it would take around 7 hours. Fortunately when we woke the weather had improved and we were all packed and ready to roll shortly after 9am. Not bad considering we'd had a bit of a boozy day yesterday.

Phil was trailering his bike up the autoroute with all the luggage and while the bikes were quicker on the road, they lost time with fuel stops and at the peages. As a result we all arrived at Le Clos du Montvinage in Etreaupont all together. Phil had found the hotel and it was lovely. Quiet and relaxing with very friendly owners, and a superb restaurant.

The following morning all that remained was a short 130 mile dash to **Calais** – mainly autoroute – a ferry crossing to **Dover**, and then a final 220 miles or so of motorway to cover before we'd be back home in **Bewdley**. The journey home was uneventful although the high winds we experienced were enough to keep us alert right up until the very end.

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On a final note, thanks from everyone to Phil for his route planning, hotel bookings and all round navigation throughout the tour – we promise we'll all have our own sat navs next year. And a big thank you to Mark for letting us use his chalet – we hope you can make it next year.

## 2007 The Midi-Pyrenees

After the triumph of our tour to Chamonix last year we set about planning a follow-up. For our second outing we decided to move venues from the Alps to the Pyrenees. And on the back of last years success the rider numbers were up from 5 to 8. The increased numbers made it tricky to agree start and end dates as some had time restraints and others didn't. The answer presented itself in the form of two start dates.

The *Millau* group would start on the Sunday while the *Santander* group would start the following Wednesday. We'd all meet up somewhere in the Pyrenees on the Thursday and return home the following Tuesday.

Kyle, Cat and Pete opted to ride down catching the Sunday night Portsmouth-Caen ferry and make their way down to Millau the following day. Their first night would be spent at Hotel du Commerce in the centre of Millau. From there they'd ride to Sorede, near the coastal town of Collioure, and spend a couple of nights at Hotel Saint Jacques including a day in Collioure to celebrate Cat's 40th birthday. On the Thursday they'd ride to Urdos, located on the route du Col du Somport, and meet up with the others.

Meanwhile, on Wednesday everyone else – Phil, Chris, Gaz, Taj and Mark – would catch the midday Plymouth-Santander ferry, arriving in Spain the following morning. From Santander they'd ride to Urdos where hopefully everyone would meet up at Hotel des Voyageurs.

From Urdos we'd all ride to Saint-Lary where we'd booked to stay at Auberge de l'Isard for a couple of nights. From there we'd head to Esterencuby where we'd stay at Hotel des Sources de la Nive – as it turned out, not the friendliest hotel we've ever stayed at – for our final night. The following day we'd ride to Santander to catch the ferry back home arriving in Plymouth on Tuesday morning. Well that was the plan anyway.

So for our follow-up tour it would be Phil **BMW K1200S**, Chris **BMW K1200RS**, Gaz **Honda Blackbird**, Taj **Honda Fireblade**, Kyle **Suzuki SV1000S**, Cat **Honda VFR800**, Pete **Honda Blackbird** and Mark **Honda Pan European**. Our 7-10 day trip would see us ride 17 different mountain passes and roads, and cover 1,600 miles and 2,600 miles.

## Part 1:

### The long, wrong way down to Millau

#### Bewdley to Millau

Late yesterday afternoon we – that’s Cat, Pete and Kyle – set off from **Bewdley** and travelled the 150 miles – most of them wet – down to **Portsmouth** to catch the 10.45pm overnight ferry to Caen. At 6am this morning soft music was piped through to our cabin and all of us were gently woken from our slumber. The tune was called *It Can’t Be That Time Already* and for those of us who hadn’t got much sleep, we certainly were glad it was that time. Lets just say that there will need to be some cabin changes on the return ferry.

After a good breakfast we returned to the cabin to put on damp leathers and collect our luggage. Unlike the wet weather we’d left behind in Portsmouth it was currently dry in **Caen**. Unfortunately the forecast was bleak. Despite this, just like he’d done yesterday, the perpetually over optimistic Kyle refused to put his waterproofs on. We returned to the bikes, loaded up our luggage, and waited patiently for the ferry to dock. Everything was going like clockwork.

Having all fuelled up yesterday evening in Portsmouth before boarding the ferry, as soon as it docked this morning we were on the road and rolling. Not long after setting off though the confusion started. Last year the only person who knew where they were going was Phil because nobody else had a sat nav. This year Kyle came prepared and, armed with his brand new TomTom Rider, he led the way with our route to Millau programmed in.

TomTom calculated that it was 498 miles to Millau and we would arrive at 4pm. It told us to take the A88 for 30 miles and join the A28 signposted Le Mans. And from there carry on for another 15 miles and join the A11 signposted Paris. From there it was A28, A10, D976, N76, A71 and then a couple of long stretches on the A75 and D911. However it didn’t seem to make any sense to us to ride towards Paris before heading south. So the consensus was TomTom had got it wrong and it was duly overruled. Instead we decided to take the A84 signposted **Rennes** – and would face the consequences of this during the course of the day.

In the midst of this confusion it had started to lash it down with rain to the point where Cat and Pete had to force Kyle to put his waterproofs on. The theory went that it wouldn’t stop raining until Kyle suited up. We kid you not, no sooner were the waterproofs on than the rain stopped and the sun made its first appearance of the day. Come midday we were riding in glorious sunshine and our leathers and luggage were virtually dry. All was good in the world. We were making good time, employing a splash and dash technique at fuel stations, stopping every 100 miles for fuel with 10 minute breaks. Our predicted 4pm arrival looked on the cards.

Coincidentally no long after the rain clouds had cleared, so did our heads, when it finally dawned on us that we really should have listened to what TomTom had said. By the time we finally arrived in **Millau** we had ended up covering 678 miles in a



little under 12 hours and the consequence of not following the advised route had been an additional 180 miles and 3 hours of riding. We finally rolled into Millau shortly before 7.30pm and checked into Hotel du Commerce in the centre town. The hotel was fine, clean and comfortable, but without any secure parking. We were too tired to care to be honest and just left the bikes parked up on the street outside the front of the hotel.

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### **Millau to Sorede**

Considering the nearly 700 miles we'd covered yesterday everyone felt surprisingly good this morning. After a lie in and a late breakfast, what was left of the morning was spent stretching legs and wandering around Millau. It turns out that besides the famous bridge Millau is also well known for glove making, the production of Roquefort cheese, and is also the main centre in France for paragliding. And it's twinned with Bridlington.

Today's destination was Sorede near the coastal town of Perpignan and while there wasn't a specific route planned we did all want to take a closer look at Millau's biggest attraction – the bridge. Designed by Norman Foster the *Viaduc de Millau* spans the gorge valley of the Tarn and is the tallest bridge in the world, with the highest mast measuring 343m above the valley floor. The viaduct is part of the A75-A71 autoroute from Paris to Beziers and was opened to traffic on 17th December 2004.

It costs €5.60 – €7.40 to cross the bridge during the peak months of July and August but we had no intention of riding over it. We'd had our fill of motorways and duel carriageways so a plan was hatched to ride underneath the viaduct and take the road that runs down the Tarn Valley instead. Whether by good judgment or just plain luck the decision to take this road was absolutely the right one. From Millau all the way to **Albi** it was a 60 mile stretch of pretty much perfectly surfaced and traffic free D roads that swooped up and down the valley. It really was a terrific run and ranks high on the list of best biking roads in France.

From Albi though we returned to the motorway and picked up the A61/E80 and then A9/E15 pretty much all the way into **Sorede**. The side winds that gusted across the A9/E15 were quite unpleasant but apart from that the rest of the ride was incident free. Except for Pete's mad half hour when he started riding towards Carcassonne instead of Perpignan and he had to be chased down and pointed in the right direction. In fairness we had briefly mentioned visiting Carcassonne earlier in the day and Pete had got it into his head that we were in fact going there.

It was nearly 8pm when we finally arrived at Hotel Saint Jacques. We were more than happy to get out of our leathers, get showered and changed, and have something to eat. The hotel was nice enough, clean and comfortable again, with pleasant staff. The restaurant was closed by the time we arrived though. Fortunately there were a couple of places to eat in the centre of town, only a few minutes walk from the hotel.

## Part 2:

### A plan comes together in Urdos

#### Collioure

Today was the day that Phil, Chris, Gaz, Taj and Mark kicked off their tour and saw them riding down to Plymouth to catch the overnight ferry to Santander. It was also Cat's birthday – the big one. Aside from a short 14 mile round trip to the supermarket so Pete could pick up some essentials we didn't intend riding anywhere. Pete wanted a bit of hand-in-the-sand time this trip so knowing the seaside town of Collioure was a mere 15 minute taxi ride away we couldn't think of a better place to spend the day celebrating Cat's 40th.

Collioure is a beautiful little town, famed for its art and culture, and our day started off innocently enough with us wandering aimlessly around the town. We knew how the day was going to end but were trying to delay the inevitable until at least lunchtime. It was easy for us to kill some time because in addition to all the shops that filled the town, today was Wednesday which meant market day. At midday though we finally cracked and an early lunch soon became a boozy afternoon. And the rest, as they say, is history.

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#### Sorede to Urdos

We were all suffering with varying degrees of hangovers this morning. Pete in particular was suffering with the hangover from hell and for him it was going to be a long painful day. With around a 300 mile ride in front of us we were going to take the most direct route from Urdos and this meant most of the day would be spent on motorways.

Jumping straight on A9/E15 motorway, and then the A61 at **Narbonne**, we spent the first 140 miles heading towards **Toulouse**, the tedium only broken by a stop for fuel. We then spent a further 120 miles on the A64/E80 motorway heading towards **Pau**. Monotonous would be an understatement and fuel stops became something to look forward to.

At Pau though we were able to pick up the N134/E7 for our final run up to Urdos – a really nice 50 mile ride. The E7 is a spectacular biking road and the run from Pau, through **Oloron-Sainte-Marie**, and up to **Urdos** was our reward after munching motorway miles all day.

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#### Santander to Urdos

Phil, Chris, Gaz, Taj and Mark on the other hand had a much better prospect in front of them. Their crossing from Plymouth to Santander had been good value. They'd had

a few beers, eaten in a great restaurant, and had a good nights sleep. So, feeling well rested they were raring to go.

After disembarking the ferry they jumped onto the E70 for the first 10 miles, heading towards **Valdecilla**, and then turned onto the CA161/CA261 and over the **Puerto de Alisas**. From there they rode through **Arredondo** to **Ramales de la Victoria** picking up the N269/Bi-630 to **Balmaseda**.

The scenery on the Bi-630 was very pretty and the road surface good, but on the hilly bits traffic tended to build up behind slower cars – not really a problem on a bike though. From Balmaseda they headed for **Arceniega** on the N624 – although listed as an N road the surface was very poor. From Arceniega they continued on the N624 through **Amurrio** and joined the AP-68 at **Urquillo**. This road was an improvement on the N624 and was excellent, with fast sweepers and a good surface.

They then took the motorway, and then dual carriageways N622/N1 and A2134/N104 to bypass **Gasteiz Vitoria** and get on the A132. From here it was on to **Campezo** and **Acedo** across to **Estella**. This was a terrific road with very little traffic. From Estella they took the N111/Na-601/N121/Na-234 to join the N240 a couple of miles north of **Monreal**, heading south-east. The first 24 miles of the N240 are nondescript but at **Yesa** the road runs around the Embalse de Yesa – a reservoir – and then to **Jaca** 38 miles away, a great bit of road. From Jaca they turned north and up the N330/E7 to **Canfranc**.

Avoiding the tunnel they passed through Canfranc Estacion and then up and over the Col du Somport rejoining the main road, which on the French side becomes the N134, a few miles from **Urdos**. The road up from Jaca is good but the pass road going up on the Spanish side is spectacular with wide, well surfaced, constant radius corners.

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By late afternoon we were all reunited at Hotel des Voyageurs with the *Millau* group arriving first and the *Santander* group arriving an hour or so later. Urdos is the proverbial one horse town with nothing to do and nowhere to go outside of the hotel. The hotel however was fine. It is reasonably priced, with reasonable food, and the staff are friendly and helpful.

## Part 3:

### Urdos to Saint-Lary and a ride out to Andorra

#### Urdos to Saint-Lary

We had quite a big ride planned today with our proposed route taking us over 6 passes. After our second pass of the day, the Pourtalet, we would be leaving France and spending pretty much the rest of the day in Spain. Once on the Spanish side we were going to head for Castejon de Sos where we had a couple of passes earmarked, and crossing back into France just before Saint-Beat, we had another couple of passes to ride that would take us into Saint-Lary, our final destination.

Leaving Urdos this morning we rode north up the N134 to **Escot**, and then east over the Col de Marie Blanche on the D924 to **Bielle**. The N134 is an excellent road but the pass over the D924 is nothing to write home about. From Bielle we headed south on the D934 to **Laruns** which took us up to the Col du Pourtalet.

Whether you are going south from Laruns on the French side, as we were, or heading north up from Biescas on the Spanish side, the Pourtalet is a wonderful pass to ride. It's tight at the bottom if you're coming from Laruns but as it climbs it opens out and you get some wonderful views. In a car you'd be stuck behind slower traffic until the pass opens out but you could enjoy the road further up. On a bike though traffic is rarely a problem for more than a minute.

On the way up the Pourtalet the group split by the time Phil, Chris, Pete and Kyle reached the top there was no sign of the others. The views up top were good so rather than chasing after them it looked like a good place to take a break and stop for a coffee. Meanwhile Gaz, Taj, Cat and Mark had also stopped for a coffee, except they were a mile further down the road on the Spanish side of the Pourtalet. Coffee stops over we regrouped for the ride down the other side.

From the Pourtalet we then rode down to **Biescas** and took the N260 through **Broto** to **Boltana**. The first part from Biescas to Broto was okay but the road surface deteriorated significantly between Broto and Boltana. Not a road to travel on if you're in a car as you could be stuck behind a coach or something similar for miles.

After Boltana the road has been modernised and for the next 20 miles this became a really nice fast section of road until it reached the gorge near **Campo**. The scenery from here all the way to **Castejon de Sos** was quite spectacular.

At Castejon the N260 continued over a couple of nice passes, the Coll de Fadas and the Coll de Espina, until it joined the N230 where we headed north to **Vielha** and eventually back into France. The N230 is a fast modern road but we did have to sit and suffer a long dusty tunnel before Vielha.

After Vielha it was fast until we reached **Saint-Beat** where we turned right over the Col de Mente – a typical hairpin pass – and then over the Col de Portet d'Aspet to **Saint-Lary**.

Both of these passes have memorials to Tour de France riders. On the eastern side of the Mente there's a plaque for the Spanish rider Luis Ocana, who crashed out on the 14th stage of the 1971 race while he was wearing the leaders yellow jersey. On the Portet d'Aspet we noticed another larger memorial with fresh flowers on it. This is for Fabio Casartelli, an Olympic gold medal winning cyclist from Italy who tragically died descending the pass on the 15th stage of the 1995 race.

At Saint-Lary we stayed at Auberge a l'Isard. This hotel is run by a very friendly family. It's clean and comfortable with good food and it comes highly recommended.

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## Andorra

Today the plan was to ride a 250 mile loop that would take us from Saint-Lary, into Andorra, and back again. We would be entering on the French side, then exiting the other side in Spain, eventually picking up the same road that we'd ridden into Saint-Lary on yesterday.

Unfortunately Pete couldn't make it, he was in quite a bit of pain from an old shoulder injury and it had been playing up for the last couple of days, so he decided to give the ride today a miss. The vast quantity of wine consumed last night may also have contributed to his absence.

For the rest of us, we fought off our hangovers with coffee and croissants. Saddling up we left Saint-Lary and headed east down the D618 to **St. Girons** through **Massat** and up to the Col de Port. It's only 40 miles or so from Saint-Lary to the top of the pass but heavy holiday traffic and a local cycle race turned a 75 minute ride into a couple of hours. The fact that there were 7 of us didn't help much either.

With all the overtakes in the heavy traffic it made life tricky for anyone at the back to keep up with whoever was leading at the front. Whoever happened to be tail-end Charlie had to work very hard to make all the overtakes just to keep in touch. As a result there was a lot of jostling for position and needless to say by the time we got to the top of the pass we were ready for a coffee break.

Fully refreshed we made our way down the other side to the N20 where we turned off left and headed south towards **Tarascon-sur-Ariege**. The N20 had heavy traffic until beyond **Ax-les-Thermes**. This is a superb biking road and since much of the traffic decided to use the tunnels into Andorra, we were able to crack on, up and over the Port d'Envalira – at 2,407m it's the highest surfaced pass in the Pyrenees.

In fact going over the d'Envalira was a good call because all the traffic we'd experienced before wasn't a problem again until we got near the customs post and the busy ski resort of **Pas de la Casa**. After we'd made our way through the ski resort we

dropped down the CG-2 – Carretera General – towards **Andorra la Vella** where we looked for somewhere to stop for lunch.

After a ridiculously large lunch we split into two groups. Chris, Gaz, Cat and Mark wanted to go shopping for cheap leathers and lids while Phil, Taj and Kyle wanted to push on. The main drag through Andorra la Vella wasn't much fun, it was very busy and very hot, and it was a relief to get to the customs post and cross into Spain. From here we took the N145 briefly to **La Seu d'Urgell** where we turned right onto the N260 towards **Adrall** all the way to **Sort**.

The N260 has to be one of the best roads in Europe, regardless of whether you're in a car or riding a bike. It's 29 miles of well surfaced road, with plenty of bends to play with, that takes you over mountains and across the Port de Canto. At Sort we picked up the C13/C28 to **Sorpe** and this is an equally good section of road. It was from here that we climbed up the Port de la Bonaigua, a pass that ultimately led us down into Vielha.

Unfortunately there were extensive roadworks on the run up to the top and it was a bit hit and miss. In fact it was here that Chris had a front wheel slide on some loose gravel. Luckily it was at low speed resulting in only minor scuffs on the fairing and a broken bracket that held the rear brake lever. The run down from the ski resort on the other side wasn't much better either as there were extensive roadworks here too.

At Vielha though the road dramatically improved and from this point the route back to the hotel – for Phil, Taj and Kyle at least, was exactly the same as the night before. Vielha to **Saint-Beat**, turn right over the Col de Mente, and then over the Col de Portet d'Aspet into **Saint-Lary**.

However the group behind had misprogrammed their sat navs for the shortest route possible and the result of this was they ended up following loose gravel forestry tracks for most of the way back. We like sat navs but they're only as good as you programme them to be. Cat, Pete and Kyle learnt that lesson on their run down to Millau. And Chris, Gaz, Cat and Mark found out the hard way too, eventually rocking up at the hotel an hour and a half after everyone else.

## Part 4:

### Return to Santander and the ferry back home

#### Saint-Lary to Esterencuby

Today saw us heading west across the Pyrenees to Esterencuby, about 5 miles from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port. However we were split on how to get there. While Gaz and Pete preferred the most direct route, the rest of us decided to go the scenic way. Before we left Saint-Lary this morning though Madame presented us with two apple pies for the onward journey.

She also arranged for her father – who ran the local garage, to make a temporary repair on Chris's bike. Yesterday he'd dropped his bike on some loose gravel and the bracket that held the rear brake lever had broken. Madame's father refused to accept any money saying, "today it is you, maybe tomorrow it is me".

For the past couple of days we'd finished our rides over the Col de Portet d'Aspet. Today we left Saint-Lary over it and headed for **Bagnères-de-Luchon**. From here we joined the D618 which took us up and over the Col de Peyresourde to **Arreau**. And from Arreau we picked up the D918 and rode over the Col d'Aspin and Col du Tourmalet to **Luz-Saint-Sauveur**. The Peyresourde, d'Aspin and Tourmalet were all enjoyable and for Phil it was his second time to ride over them, having ridden them last in 2005.

What the Peyresourde did highlight though was when riding in France be aware that they often patch roads up and leave a lot of loose gravel around after the repair – a nightmare when the gravel is left mid corner. In fact we came across one patch of road later in the day where they just appeared to have dumped tons and tons of gravel over a 4 mile stretch and it was like riding on marbles.

At the top of the Tourmalet we stopped for a coffee and watched all the cyclists we'd passed on the way up grind their way to the summit. Unfortunately we rode straight past the classic Tourmalet photo opportunity – *Le Geant du Tourmalet* – a giant steel sculpture of a naked man on a bicycle. It was created by Jean Bernard Metais to commemorate the first passage of the Tour de France across the pass in 1910.

At Luz-Saint-Sauveur the weather had closed in to the west, just where we were planning on riding over the Col du Soulor and Col d'Aubisque to **Laruns**. Unfortunately we made the mistake of continuing with the planned route and when we got above 1,300m we were in thick cloud and could see next to nothing. The road surface over the d'Aubisque was dreadful too, very narrow and deformed, and not recommended.

From Laruns we hacked our way cross country to **Esterencuby** where we received a truly miserable welcome at Hotel des Sources de la Nive. Without doubt this must be the worst hotel any of us have ever stayed at which is a shame because the location is good and very picturesque. While the rooms are clean and comfortable, and food very good, sadly the attitude of the staff is appalling and they really shouldn't be running a hotel if it makes them that miserable.

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### **Esterencuby to Santander**

Today was our final day in the Pyrenees and saw us returning to Santander. Nobody wanted to stay in the hotel for a minute longer than was absolutely necessary and Gaz and Pete left a good while before anyone else. The rest of us left in ones and twos and less by design and more by accident ended up meeting a few miles down the road for breakfast in **Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port** – the customary starting point of the *Camino de Santiago* pilgrimage route, or the Way of Saint James as it's known in English.

The fastest route suggested by our sat navs was straightforward enough however our early breakout from the hotel from hell meant time wasn't an issue today. Over coffee we agreed that we didn't want to be kicking our heels at the ferry terminal so decided to squeeze in one more pass before beginning our run down the motorway. Leaving Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port we turned left up the D933 and headed towards the Puerto de Ibaneta.

The pass itself lies just outside Saint-Jean between the towns of **Luzaide/Valcarlos** and **Roncesvalles** and goes by several other names including the Roncesvalles Pass and the Roncevaux Pass. It serves as a link between France and Spain and the D933/N135 really is a fabulous biking road. We particularly liked the first 30 mile section that had been completely resurfaced all the way to **Zubiri**.

Once we hit **Pamplona** we jumped on the motorway and from here it was simply a case of following signs to **Vitoria-Gasteiz** and **Bilbao** and eventually **Santander**. Despite the heavy traffic on the run into Santander we arrived with plenty of time spare although for those with wider panniers, filtering past all the cars had proved tricky. As a result we all got split up before finally arriving at the ferry terminal in dribs and drabs.

We didn't actually meet up again until we were on the ferry. One by one we checked in to our respective cabins, got showered and changed, and headed to the bar where we knew everyone would be waiting – except we appeared to be short to the tune of two – there was no sign of Gaz or Pete.

Now there are three sides to every story. There's yours, there's mine... and then there's the truth. However this is the version that the rest of us were given by Gaz and Pete. Their plan had involved giving Pamplona a miss and taking the direct route to Santander via Biarritz using the coastal motorway. However somewhere between the hotel in Esterencuby and them stopping for breakfast Pete's immobiliser button had fallen off his key ring. The result of this was after they'd stopped for breakfast – coincidentally in the same town we'd all stopped at, Pete couldn't restart his bike.



It took 3 hours to remove the bike plastics, find the wiring loom, and then remove the immobiliser from it. Now Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port isn't a big town but unluckily for them we'd missed them because while we'd turned left up the D933 to go over the Puerto de Ibaneta, they were parked up a couple of hundred yards after the turning. By the time Pete's bike had been put back together it was midday. Now this still left them with more than enough time get to Santander and make the ferry. It was 185 miles, 150 of which were motorway miles, and they were both riding Honda Blackbirds that will cruise all day long at 100mph.

For some reason though they'd got it into their heads that the 4pm departure time marked on their tickets meant 5pm local time. At 4.25pm Phil got a call asking "where are you?" and "where's the ferry?". Not quite understanding Phil answered that he was in the bar, on the ferry, that had left 25 minutes ago. "Oh" was the response followed by silence before the call was dropped. Another 5 minutes and Phil's phone rang again. "No problem" said Pete, "we're going to stay in Santander tonight and catch the next crossing tomorrow". Phil informed him that the next sailing wasn't for another 4 days. Stunned silence on the other end of the line before a "we'll speak later" and for a second time the call was dropped.

In any event, after a bit of phoning around they eventually managed to get themselves booked on the Bilbao-Portsmouth crossing that left the following day. And they were lucky to get that because the biggest gay pride festival in Europe, held in Madrid, had just finished and virtually every bike space had been pre-booked by the UK attendees who were returning home. Mind you they looked a lovely couple with their matching silver Blackbirds.

The moral of the story – one of them at least, is take a spare key with you. Oh, and read your ferry ticket properly!

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### **Plymouth to Bewdley**

The overnight crossing was good. We had a great meal and a few bottles of fine wine between us, and a decent nights sleep. All that remained was a 200 mile dash up the motorway. The ride back was pretty uneventful and we all made it back in time for lunch – except Gaz and Pete of course who didn't make it back to Bewdley until 10pm the following day.

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It was a good second tour and everyone had a great time with the *Millau* group eventually covering around 2,600 miles and *Santander* group around 1,600 miles. We were split as to which the better option had been, to ride to down through France or take the ferry to Spain.

Taking into account fuel and accommodation, and wear and tear on the bikes, it was definitely more expensive to ride down. On the other hand by taking the ferry you lose a few days of riding time, and after all, it was a riding holiday.

Next year we're thinking of returning to the Haute-Alpes in south-eastern France. Possibly putting the bikes on the Motorail from Calais to Nice and letting the train take the strain this time.

## 2008 The Hautes-Alpes

With a couple of successful motorcycle tours behind us, for our third installment we decided to base ourselves in Briancon, in south-eastern France, and tour the Hautes-Alpes. Our only dilemma was how to get there. In 2006 we discovered that riding down to Chamonix was a long way and if you have time restraints it takes up valuable touring time. After all we tour to ride great roads with scenic views, not motorways and dual carriageways. After some discussion and a bit of investigation we had our answer – we could catch the Motorail from Calais down to Nice and ride back.

We'd also come to realise after our tour to the Pyrenees last year that changing hotels each day can become tiresome. Constantly being on the move, checking in and checking out, unpacking and packing again, it took its toll. Staying in remote villages with no nightlife and nothing for us to do outside the hotel wasn't for us either. We should focus our attentions on reasonably sized towns or cities.

So we formed a plan where we'd let the train take the strain all the way to Nice. Upon arrival we'd head straight into the mountains and ride to Briancon – over the mighty Col de de la Bonette – where Hotel de la Chaussee would serve as our base for the next 3 nights. We would then spend a day riding up to Belfort where the Grand Hotel du Tonneau d'Or would become our base for a couple more nights. For our final night in France we'd stay at Le Clos du Montvinage, the hotel we stayed at in 2006 on our way back from Chamonix. Sorted.

We were a rider down from last year – Mark couldn't make it due to work commitments, so for our third tour it would be Phil **BMW K1200S**, Chris **BMW R1100S Boxer Cup**, Gaz **Honda Blackbird**, Taj **Honda Fireblade**, Kyle **Suzuki SV1000S**, Cat **Aprilia Tuono** and Pete **Kawasaki GTR1400**. Our 8 day trip would see us ride 15 different mountain passes and roads, and cover 1,800 miles.

## **Part 1:**

### **Letting the train take the strain**

#### **Bewdley to Calais & Motorail to Nice**

Over a few pre-tour beers last night it was agreed we needed an early start this morning. We settled on a 7am meet at Kyle's house. We had a midday ferry crossing booked and it's 220 miles and an easy 4 hours from Bewdley down to the docks. The weather this morning was glorious, all blue skies and the sun was already out. For those that arrived on time there was a cup of tea and sausage sandwich waiting courtesy of Kyle's partner Kay. And for those arriving late they had to wait until Dover for their breakfast.

Arriving pretty much together we all fuelled up just outside the ferry terminal and then checked in for our P&O crossing to Calais. The ferry got us into Calais just after 3pm and as soon as we'd disembarked we rode straight round to the Motorail terminal located next to the main train station. Once you're in, you're in, and the only way out is on foot. So you need to stock up on whatever food and drink you want for journey before you arrive. At the terminal you can buy a picnic and wine to take on board the train, and you can buy wine by the half bottle on the train. But the train has no restaurant car, only a buffet car where the service is limited.

The train only runs during the summer months and by the look of it, it clearly hasn't had much invested in it for a few years. Compared with the Santander ferry that we took down to Spain last year it rates poorly in both cost – £265 one way per bike against £240 return on the ferry – and amenities. On the ferry you have the full run of bars and restaurants and there's even a cinema. Having said that it does cut out about 900 miles of riding, of which 500-600 miles is quite tedious. We reckoned that petrol, an overnight stop in a hotel, plus peage charges would have cost about £200 so the net cost was about £60-£70. And we avoided squaring off our tyres and some wear and tear.

Getting the bikes loaded onto the train took a bit of time and actually it's securing them that takes the time. We should really have taken some photos at this point but to be honest we were more concerned that everything was secure and the bikes were still going to be there when we got to the other end.

At 6.05pm the train duly departed and a 16 hour journey lay in front of us. We would be arriving in Nice at 9.58am tomorrow morning but what to do in all that time? The journey started off quietly enough in the buffet car, eating our picnic and discussing tomorrow's ride to Briançon over a few beers. We then decamped to Gaz and Pete's couchette where the wine started to flow – and needless to say it all went downhill from there.

## Nice to Briancon

Despite having a late one last night we woke up early this morning and we're glad we did. As the train slowly made its way into Nice for the final hour of the journey we were treated to some truly beautiful views of the coastline. As we began to get that sun, sea and sand feeling, we instinctively knew that we'd arrived on the Cote d'Azur. At 10.00am the train pulled into Nice as scheduled and it was hot, seriously hot – well over 30°C in the shade. Then the bombshell when we were told that our bikes wouldn't be unloaded until 11.30am.

Uncomfortable doesn't come close to describing how we felt over the course of the next 90 minutes as we sat there in leathers being slowly poached. Our mood was lightened a little when we bumped into the 5 BMW riders that we'd met back in Calais before boarding the train. They were expecting to be in Avignon this morning but like us they'd tied one on last night. Unfortunately for them though they'd missed their early hours alarm call to get off the train. The result was they were now in Nice while their bikes were 160 miles away in Avignon.

After what felt like an eternity the bikes were finally unloaded and by 12.15pm we were on the road and rolling, and 15 minutes after that Nice was behind us and we were heading up the D6202 Route de Grenoble towards **Digne-les-Bains**. Another 20 fairly rapid minutes later and we left the D6202 and picked up the D2205 Route de la Tinee – the road that would take us all the way to the Col de la Bonette.

The D6202 takes you high, in fact the scenic loop road that runs around the peak is as high as it gets in Europe topping out at a whopping 2,802m. This stretch of road was a lot of fun to ride, with a decent surface and some good twisties, but as we approached **Saint-Sauveur-sur-Tinee**, 60 minutes and 40 miles into our ride, the consensus was we should stop for lunch and take on some much needed fluids before chronic dehydration caused irreversible kidney failure.

From Saint-Sauveur we headed up to **Saint-Etienne-de-Tinee** and this 18 mile stretch was quite modern with fast sweeping bends. Nice for a car or a bike. At St. Etienne the pass road up to the Bonette began in earnest and our gradual climb up the southern ramp started. As you'd expect the scenery here is outstanding and from this point there are few passing places and we were pleased to be on bikes where we could get past virtually everything given half a chance. Eventually we got above the tree line and were rewarded with the panoramic views that we'd looking forward to.

At the top of the southern ramp we turned left and headed up to the **Cime de la Bonette** – a 2km long teardrop shaped scenic loop road that runs around the peak. The road was shut at the bottom for resurfacing so we had to go up anticlockwise and then return the same way. While the view from the top is spectacular the road is completely pointless and we could only imagine that the only reason it was built was so it could lay claim to the title of the highest paved road in Europe – at 2,802m it's 32m higher than Col de l'Iseran.

After a few obligatory photos at the top of the pass we started to make our way down the northern ramp, barely noticing the Col de Restefond. The passage over the Restefond is easy to miss because the actual pass is situated on a gravel track leading

off the D64 close to its summit. There's no signpost to mark the top but you'll know you're there because of the numerous ancient blockhouses, remnants of the Maginot Line's Alpine extension, the Alpine Line. The Ouvrage Col de Restefond consisted of three infantry blocks, all facing Italy.

The northern ramp from the Restefond down to **Jausiers** is about 14 miles and has been completely resurfaced. It's a superb road with something to please everyone from moderate straights to long sweepers, twisties and tight hairpins. At Jausiers we turned right towards **Guillestre** and headed up and over the Col de Vars and from there it was simply a case of joining the N94 for a straightforward 20 mile run into **Briançon** and Hotel de la Chaussee.

Our hotel for the next few nights was a real find and ticks just about every box. Located in the centre of the lower town it's family run with nice clean rooms and secure parking for bikes, and at €70 a night it's good value for money. Conveniently it's located close to plenty of bars and restaurants and it didn't take us long before we got stuck into them. The restaurant we chose for our first night was alfresco at L'Alpin – very good food and excellent service but a bit pricey.

In fairness we did go a bit overboard with the wine selection and we also took them up on their offer of a **Friendship Bowl** despite not having a clue what one was. It turns out that it's a hand carved wooden Grole filled with a mixture of wine and espresso with a dash of grappa. It's a traditional Alpine drinking vessel and you pass it from person to person, with everyone drinking from their own spout, until it's finished.

## Part 2:

### Two days in the high Alps

#### Barcelonnette

Suffering the effects of sleep deprivation compounded by too much wine Gaz, Taj and Pete decided not to ride today. Instead they spent their day exploring Briançon's rich history – that's what they told the rest of us anyway. On 8th July 2008 – next week – several buildings including the city walls, Redoute des Salettes, Fort des Trois-Tetes, Fort du Randouillet and the Asfeld Bridge are due to be classified as UNESCO World Heritage sites.

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For the rest of us – who aren't adverse to a bit of culture but had different priorities – the plan had always been to ride south to Lac de Serre-Ponçon and cut across to Barcelonnette to ride a 75 mile loop over 3 passes. Our ride home would depend entirely upon how we felt when we arrived back at Barcelonnette. We could either retrace our steps and return via the lake or head back over another pass and return via Guillestre.

Leaving Briançon we immediately picked up the N94 and headed south towards Lac de Serre-Ponçon. This was a really enjoyable 35 mile run that took us past **Embrun**. It was here that a desperate search for fuel by Cat and Kyle ensued leaving Phil and Chris waiting patiently on the side of the road in the shade – those damn V-twins with their tiny fuel tanks and short ranges.

At **Savines-le-Lac** we turned left onto the D954 which ran around the edge of the lake and this flowing stretch of road was superb. Whether you're on a bike or in a car the views are absolutely stunning. In fact our ride around the lake rates as one of the rides of this tour with a mix of sweepers, twisties and hairpins that provided plenty of opportunities to get your knee down.

It's obviously a bit of a favourite with the locals too as there were some seriously quick bikes out there. Chris particularly liked the Italian he saw coming round a tight left-hander, Ducati cranked right over, knee to the ground with a grin that stretched from ear to ear. His left-handed thumbs-up made riding on the wrong – take that as right – side of the road look very cool.

At the end of the lake we picked up the D900 which took us into **Barcelonnette** where our 75 mile loop started and would ultimately finish. Turning right we briefly picked up the D902 until turning right again to pick up the D908 where the loop effectively began.

Our first pass today was the Col d'Allos and our run up on this side was very pretty with some stunning views. The road is very narrow though and in some places our overtakes needed to be planned. Having said that, the few cars that we did encounter were easily passed.

Stopping at the refuge at the top of the pass we couldn't help noticing that we weren't the only petrol heads in the area today when we spotted 4 Lotus Elise's parked up on the side of the road. At this point it was lunchtime and seeming like as good a place as any, we pulled over and stopped for something to eat.

After lunch we dropped down the other side of the Allos and while nice enough it didn't quite offer the same stunning views that we'd experienced on our ride up. Near the top there was a series of tight switchbacks and once negotiated we rolled down through a number of dreary looking ski resorts until we reached **Colmars**.

At Colmars there was a sign pointing left for the Col des Champs, towards **Saint-Martin-d'Entraunes**, and to be honest this road was pretty dreadful. Actually it was worse than that, after more than 3 hours in the saddle it was downright uncomfortable. However, once we reached the top the road down the other side was very nice – ideally this pass would have been better ridden in reverse.

At St. Martin we turned north onto the D2202 and began making our way back to **Barcelonnette**. This road took us over the Col de la Cayolle and this was great to ride on both sides. It was possibly a pass too far though because at this point we were all beginning to tire a little.

Arriving in Barcelonnette we had a decision to make. We could either retrace our steps and ride back to Lac de Serre-Poncon picking up the N94 to Embrun and Briancon. Or we could turn right towards **Jausiers** and make our way over the Col de Vars – as we'd done yesterday on our way in from the Bonette – to **Guillestre** and from there pick up the N94 to Briancon.

In terms of time and distance there isn't much in either of these routes. They both take around 1h 45mins to ride and via the lake it's 60 miles while via the Vars it's 50 miles – we opted for the shorter route.

We arrived back in Briancon at 5pm to find that Gaz, Taj and Pete had decamped to the bar that we'd been to last night. And it was significantly busier today than it had been yesterday. The majority of us aren't great fans of football so it came as a surprise to find out that tonight was the Euro 2008 Final between Germany and Spain. We had a cunning plan though that would cut down the queuing time at the bar.

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## **Col d'Izoard, Col Agnel & Col du Galibier**

Despite our heavy night spent in the bar celebrating Spain's win over Germany there was a full complement of us today and we had big plans to ride some seriously big mountains. These included a 2,744m monster that would take us out of France and into Italy.

Once in Italy we would ride towards Cuneo and find somewhere to stop for lunch before returning to Briancon by way of the Maddalena Pass and yet another trip over the Col de Vars. In all a 7 hour and 180 mile day out. But as the saying goes, the best laid plans of mice and men and all that.

We left Briancon and headed for our first port of call, the Col d'Izoard. The Izoard starts pretty much from the centre of Briancon and it really was superb. In general it was well surfaced with a really fast lower section followed by hairpin after hairpin after hairpin as we neared the top.

We stopped at the monument that marks the top of the pass and on closer inspection we spotted a date on it, 12th August 1934. This is the date the road was completed by the French military and apparently many of the Alpine roads we've been riding were built by the French military in the 30s in an effort to guard against an invasion by the Italians.

A couple of miles down the other side of the Izoard we rode past the barely noticeable Col de la Platriere and followed the road all the way down to the bottom of the pass. At the D947 junction we turned left towards **Chateau-Ville-Vieille** and then right onto the D5 towards **Molines-en-Queyras**. At Molines the D5 effectively ends and from here becomes the D2205 to the Col Agnel – the 2,744m monster that was to be the highlight of our day.

As we approached the bottom of the pass however there was a sign that said “ouvert” on the French side but “ferme” on the Italian side. We paid no attention to this though because as John Hermann's book, *Motorcycle Journeys Through the Alps and Beyond*, had told us, this was frequently the case and to just ignore it.

The ride up the valley was sensational, very highly recommended, and while there were a few roadworks early on this didn't dampen our enthusiasm for this pass. The road surface was brand new and it was another wonderful mix of sweepers, twisties and finally knee down hairpins all the way up to the French-Italian border at the top.

Unfortunately this is where our ride over the Agnel ended because the road was indeed closed. Looking south into Italy though the road looked fine so Gaz volunteered to squeeze his Blackbird past the concrete barrier and ride down the other side to see if the road really was closed.

Our intrepid volunteer headed off down the valley managing to get about 5 miles into Italy before he encountered an excitable group of Italian road workers. They seemed to be quite agitated waving their arms about and gesturing a lot. Not speaking a word of Italian Gaz decided discretion was the better part of valour and made a retreat back to France.

It later transpired that the road was closed for resurfacing work because on 20th July stage 15 of this year's edition of the Tour de France would be coming up and over the Agnel for the first time in the history of the race. With no other option the only thing to do was head back down the valley the way we'd just come and make a new plan.

The new plan we hatched involved us riding back into **Briancon** and out the other side along the D1091 up to the Col du Lautaret. From here we would have access to another monster mountain – the Col du Galibier. By now it was lunchtime so on our way to the Galibier we stopped off for a bite to eat in **Le Monetier-les-Bains** where we found a very nice cafe run by a pleasant British couple.



During lunch there was a bit of chatter between Chris and Pete and they decided it was too hot to ride any further today. They were going to head back to Briancon and on the way find somewhere to stop off for a swim to cool down. Meanwhile the rest of us set off in the opposite direction with the thought, at a lofty 2,645m, the top of Galibier might be an equally good place to cool off.

The road up the Lauteret was wide and fast although it was barely noticeable as being a col. At the top we turned right onto the D902 and were immediately on the Galibier. The road up was good but many of the bends on this side are blind where campervans seem oblivious to road markings. As a result we could almost guarantee they'd be on our side of the road when we entered or exited a corner.

The views from the top of the Galibier were probably the best of the entire trip however not everyone made it up there. Gaz and Cat swapped bikes at the bottom of the Galibier and on their way up Cat's Tuono had developed a death rattle – in all likelihood a broken cam chain tensioner.

A mile or so below the summit Phil, Taj and Kyle passed them parked up on the side of the road, and thinking they were just swapping bikes back again, carried on with their run up to the top.

After a good 15 minutes spent waiting at the top the penny finally dropped that there was bike trouble. And that pretty much brought an end to our day, and in all certainty the end of Cat's tour. It wasn't a total disaster though, he did manage to limp back to Briancon – rolling most of the 20 miles – but that was as far as Cat's Tuono would make it on this tour.

## Part 3:

### Belfort and loving it up the Ballon

#### Briancon to Belfort

After the catastrophic failure of Cat's Tuono on the Galibier yesterday, this morning saw him waiting for a man with a van to take him and his bike to Grenoble. It wasn't exactly clear what was going to happen after that but if the problem was terminal – which was looking likely – he'd have to make arrangements to get his bike shipped back to the UK. This hiccup wasn't going to end his tour though and in a worst case scenario he said he'd hire a car and meet us in Belfort tomorrow.

While for the rest of us there was a lot of riding to be done today. Before we left Briancon though there was some dissent within the ranks. Phil's planned a route to Belfort included a short incursion into Italy before the ride north proper started. This wasn't for Gaz and Pete. They wanted to get the journey over and done with in the least amount of time possible and that didn't include going over another pass.

Phil's route to Belfort started with a run over the Col de Montgenevre. As it turned out this first leg of the journey wasn't too bad after all although from a biker's perspective it did suffer from the heavy volume of traffic using it and overtaking wasn't always easy. From here we headed along the E70 to the Frejus Tunnel and from there it was up the A43/E70 virtually all the way to **Albetrville**.

At Alberville it was only a short distance along the D1212 before we got to **Ugine** and from there we took an enforced ride on the D109 over the Col de l'Arpettaz to **Flumet**. The D1212 was closed between Ugine and Flumet due to roadworks and this little diversion added 10 miles and the best part of 50 minutes to our journey.

The Arpettaz is slow, it's narrow, and it twists and turns under the cover of trees for the best part of 20 miles with barely a straight stretch of road in all that time. At Flumet though we were able to rejoin the D1212 to **Megeve** and at this point we were only 20 miles from **Chamonix** and could clearly see Mont Blanc in the distance.

By now it was lunchtime and knowing Chamonix reasonably well we knew the perfect place to stop so pressed on past Megeve, briefly picked up the D909, and then took the N205 all the way up the valley. Heading into town we made a beeline for the train station and pulled up outside Chambre Neuf. Anyone that's spent any time in Chamonix will know this place and for the next hour we spent our time eating and drinking, taking a well earned break from riding.

Our route out of Chamonix was very familiar to us and instinctively we headed up the valley through **Argentiere** and over the Col des Montets to **Vallorcine**. As usual there was nobody to be seen as we crossed the French-Swiss border and from there it was

on to an old favourite of ours – the Col de la Forclaz – and then down to **Martigny** where we picked up the A9/E62 heading towards **Montreux** and **Lausanne**.

At Lausanne we picked up the E23 to the Swiss-French border where for the next 15 miles it became the N57 all the way to **Pontarlier**. Once we got to Pontarlier we'd broken the back of the ride and from here it was a straightforward 75 miles up the A36/E60 all the way into **Belfort**. It had been a very long and very hot day in saddle and by the time we eventually arrived at Grand Hotel du Tonneau d'Or it had gone 6pm and Gaz and Pete were already relaxing in a bar.

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Meanwhile Cat had spent the entire day trying to sort his bike out. This morning the man with a van had taken him and his bike to an Aprilia dealership in Grenoble. Someone there had taken a quick look at it and after some teeth sucking and a bit of head scratching told him it was knackered and it needed to be shipped back to the UK.

So Cat was stuck in Grenoble, at least for the night, but rather than moan about it and fly home with his tail between his legs he decided to carry out his threat, bike or no bike, he fully intended to join the rest of us in Belfort tomorrow and continue his holiday.

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## **Col du Ballon d'Alsace**

We didn't have anything in particular planned for today, just the vague notion that at some point we'd head for a short ride someplace and find somewhere to have lunch. So, after a late breakfast, we spent a cultural morning exploring the attractions of Belfort, which pretty much meant a walk up to the castle and of course its most famous icon, the enormous sandstone sculpture *Le Lion du Belfort*.

The sculpture is by Frederic Bartholdi who also happens to be the architect of New York's Statue of Liberty. It's constructed from sandstone blocks that were individually sculpted and then moved to the bottom of the castle and assembled. The sculpture is 22 metres long and 11 metres wide and it's quite impressive dominating the local landscape. It symbolises the heroic resistance of Belfort during a 103 days long Prussian assault in 1870-71.

Decamping to a cafe in the centre of town we ordered a round of coffees and formed a plan of action. The final decision was unanimous, we were going to take a ride out to the Col du Ballon d'Alsace where we'd get some lunch at the restaurant at the top of the pass.

We have ridden over the Ballon before, in fact it was the first pass of the first tour we ever rode. Coincidentally that was 2 years ago to the day so it seemed somehow fitting that we take another ride over it today and see what, if anything, had changed.

The last time we went over the Ballon we were riding south, today though we were riding it in the opposite direction so leaving the hotel we headed towards **Giromagny**.

It's only a short ride from Belfort, no more than 20 miles, so we didn't bother putting our leathers on. And when we arrived at the top of the pass we found the views up there were as good as we remembered them to be.

We ordered lunch at the auberge and proceeded to spend the next 60 minutes discussing all things bikes, in particular Cat's kaput Tuono and the whys and wherefores of his bike trouble – being careful not to attribute blame to Gaz for being ham-fisted with the throttle. Unable to shed any further light on the subject we decided that we'd had enough and duly headed off.

Not being a group that willingly goes the same way twice we carried on over the top of the Ballon and down the other side to **Saint-Maurice-sur-Moselle**. At the bottom we turned left onto the N66 towards **Le Thillot** and then left again onto the D488. This was a nice enough road that took us over a small col, Col des Croix, and then down to **Melisey**, and from here we picked up signs to **Ronchamp**.

As we approached **Champagney** we spotted a reservoir – Bassin de Champagney – that looked like a popular spot for swimming. It was hot again today so wanting to cool down we parked up and joined the locals for an impromptu swim. Today's weather forecast predicted storms for this afternoon and by the time we'd dried off we could see the clouds beginning to gather so not wanting to get wet twice in the same day we headed back to **Belfort**.

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While we were enjoying our day in the sun Cat was in his hire car heading up the autoroute from Grenoble. Making good time he expected to arrive at 6pm so while he negotiated the early evening traffic the rest of us headed to a bar and waited for him to make an appearance.

Cat finally appeared, bang on his predicted time, and over a few beers gave us the low-down on his bike. Basically it was knackered and he was tired of talking about it so the conversation swiftly moved on to food. We fancied something to eat that wasn't pasta or pizza and Pete knew of a Moroccan restaurant in the old city called La Gazelle D'Or.

We could have done with booking because it was quite busy but they were helpful and found us a table. The food was good, if a little different, and from here we headed over to the opposite side of the city, to a dodgy karaoke bar that Pete also knew of. We just about made it there before the gathering storm set in.

Sensing that the weather was getting worse we started to make our way closer to home finally finishing off the night at the Irish bar next to our hotel. It would have been shortly after midnight when we called it a night, by which time it was blowing a gale and lashing it down with rain. Tomorrow was going to be a wet ride.

## Part 4:

### A day of days up to Etreaupont

#### Belfort to Etreaupont

Everyone envied Cat this morning. We might have laughed at his hire car when he finally turned up in Belfort yesterday, but today we were set for a very wet day and it was Cat who'd be having the last laugh. The forecast today was for heavy rain across the whole of northern France and there would be no escaping from it. The plan was simple. We were going to take the fastest most direct route possible to Etreaupont.

The route we took was simple and involved us taking the D438 to **Vesoul**, picking up the N19/E54 to **Langres**, and then the A5/E17 to the E54 towards **Troyes**. From there it was an 80 mile run up the A26 all the way to **Reims** getting off at junction 13 to pick up the N2 for another 55 miles through to **Vervins**. This is where we'd leave the motorway network and from here all that remained was a straightforward 5 mile run into **Etreaupont**.

It sounds easy when it's put like that but right from the get-go it was a race to Le Clos du Montvinage, our hotel for tonight. With no prior discussion alliances were quickly formed and without consciously thinking about it we naturally split into pairs based on the bikes we were riding. Phil and Chris were both on BMWs. Gaz and Pete were on high-speed, long-range tourers. While Taj and Kyle were both on sports orientated bikes.

The result was a surprise – to some. Gaz and Pete managed to get the jump on everyone and took the early lead, but after only 40 miles they were caught and passed by Taj and Kyle, who didn't look back again until they reached Etreaupont. Gaz and Pete rocked up a full 60 minutes later protesting that the only thing that had slowed their progress was a stop for lunch, and that it wasn't a race anyway.

In the meantime Cat, looking smug, and who'd left sometime after everyone else, made his appearance. But the question remained, what had happened to the pair of BMWs? Another hour passed before Phil and Chris finally arrived. Chris's Boxer Cup had developed an electrical fault – possibly water related – just after leaving Belfort and it had taken the best part of an hour – and some toing and froing to a local garage – for the problem to be sorted.

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#### Etreaupont to Bewdley

The drill today was exactly the same as it had been a couple of years ago when we last stayed in Etreaupont. It would begin with a 40 mile cross country dash to **Cambrai** followed by a 90 mile run up the A26 all the way to **Calais**. We'd then catch a cross-

Channel ferry to **Dover**. And from there it's a 220 mile charge up the M20/A20, M25 and M40 to **Bewdley**.

But this morning, possibly triggered by yesterday's race that wasn't a race, or even, for some with a point to prove, it turned into a bizarre every man for himself race to catch an earlier ferry. We may have all started together but one by one riders – and driver – became detached. Either getting caught at traffic lights, having to stop for fuel, or getting lost in the most ridiculous diversion ever around Cambrai. In the end it was Phil who was victorious – and the only one to make that early crossing.

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Cat's Tuono aside, this was another great tour, this time seeing us cover almost 1,800 miles. A little down on previous years but only because we caught the train down to Nice. And as for letting the train take the strain? It's not the most luxurious of train services, and more expensive than riding down, but it was a good call and something we'd recommend.

Next year we're thinking of heading to Italy and touring the Dolomites, this time having the bikes transported there in advance and flying out to meet them.

## 2018 Le Grand-Bornand & Briancon

After our hiatus from touring last year, this year saw us returning to the French Alps for the first time since 2014. Our numbers were a little depleted – down to a trio; Phil, Taj and Kyle – and route planning and hotel booking was left until the eleventh hour. Nevertheless there was a tour and as it transpired what a great tour it was.

We assumed accommodation wouldn't be a problem as there were only three of us however it appears France gets busy in August with hotels filling up fast, and prices skyrocketing. Who'd have thought? By the end of July though we had an outline plan for the tour, with routes and rides mapped out, and all hotels booked, bar the one for our final stopover. There was one stipulation though, unless deemed impractical autoroutes were strictly off limits.

Our plan was to take the ferry to Calais and initially ride down to Le Grand-Bornand, close to Lake Annecy. On the way we'd stay at Auberge du Bon Fermier in Valenciennes and Hotel Victor Hugo in Besancon. We'd spend a couple of nights in Le Grand-Bornand, staying at Chalet Les Saytels, before moving on to Briancon for a further two nights.

In Briancon we were booked in at the familiar Hotel de la Chaussee and after leaving there our remaining time would be spent heading back up north to Calais. The first night staying at Hotel de Bourgogne in Macon and, as it eventually transpired, the final night at Hotel du Tramway in Laon.

Briancon would be familiar territory and a chance to rediscover some of the iconic mountain passes that we've ridden over the years. Le Grand-Bornand on the other hand was new to the itinerary and would provide the opportunity to ride some previously unexplored, yet equally stunning passes and roads.

So for our twelfth tour it would be Phil **BMW R1200 GSA**, Taj **Kawasaki ZZR 1400** and Kyle **Kawasaki Versys 1000 LT**. Our 9 day trip would see us ride 21 different mountain passes and roads, and cover 2,400 miles.

## Part 1:

### Le Grand-Bornand via Valenciennes and Besancon

#### Bewdley to Valenciennes

As with every tour this one began at the customary starting point, Kyle's house in the centre of **Bewdley**. It was the usual straightforward motorway run down to Dover; M40, M25 and M20/A20, enlivened only by the need to filter through the heavy traffic on the mobile car park that is the M25 London Orbital Motorway.

Arriving in **Dover** for our cross channel ferry we had to endure the now customary long queues in 30°C heat. Eventually we passed through passport control and after a brief customs check to see if we were carrying any explosives, or had fired a gun recently, we were waved through and headed off to the DFDS Seaways check-in. Not long after we were on the ferry and making our way over to France.

Disembarkation the other side was simple and within minutes we were leaving **Calais** and on the A16 motorway heading for **Dunkirk**. The only point of note on this leg was the two very large groups of British bikers all riding like numpties and getting in each others way, not to mention ours. We made short work of them and at Dunkirk we picked up the A25 motorway to Lille and then the A23 to **Valenciennes** – in all a little over 320 miles.

For our first night we were booked in to the very pleasant Auberge du Bon Fermier. There was secure bike parking a short walk away – something we always look for if possible, and after checking in we agreed a 30 minute turnaround to meet up in the hotel bar for a drink. After a fair amount of strong local beer, and a very nice meal in the hotel restaurant, we were done for the day.

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#### Valenciennes to Besancon

The following morning we were up and about early. First order of the day was breakfast and a quick chat about the route we were taking to Besancon. From this point onward the plan was to stay off motorways and stick to N and D roads – Nationale and Departmental roads. In fact the roads we finally agreed upon could have been pretty much anywhere, particularly the aread around **Verdun** and **Neufchateau**.

Having said that they were good riding roads, and with it being Sunday they were also very quiet. The real riding would start in earnest tomorrow though. By early evening, and after another 320 miles covered, we arrived in **Besancon**, a city quite familiar to us by now. We were booked in to Hotel Victor Hugo, another hotel with secure parking and one we've used a couple of times before. A nice hotel, reasonably priced, about a 10 minute walk away from the city centre.



Besancon is a nice city located on the Doubs River, close to the Jura mountains and the border with Switzerland. The fortifications of the city are listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and it's been labeled a *Town of Art and History*. Since we first started coming here there have always been extensive works going on but it looks like the new tram network they've been building is now complete.

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## **Besancon to Le Grand-Bornand**

Monday dawned and Le Grand-Bornand was only 120 miles away by the most direct route. We hadn't come all this way to just travel though, we'd come to ride. So our preferred route was just shy of 290 miles and would take all day. But we had to get to Martigny first before the fun could start.

Leaving Besancon we spent the first 50 miles of the day riding down the N57 across the Jura, a nice but increasingly busy stretch of road that took us past **Pontarlier** and over the Col de Jougne to **Vallorbe** where we crossed into Switzerland. From there it was another means-to-an-end motorway run straight down the A9 into **Martigny** – about 120 fast miles leaving 168 slow miles ahead of us.

The bulk of our route today was going to take us over 6 mountain passes – 7 if you count the Meraillet, and began with a particular favourite of ours, Col du Grand St. Bernard. This pass is very well signposted from Martigny and from here the road surface is excellent. It's wide and open all the way up to **Orsieres**, in fact **Bourg-Saint-Pierre** too where it reaches the tunnel.

The tunnel is open throughout the year but you don't want to take it – be sure to branch right onto the slip road that leads to the actual pass road. The Grand St. Bernard is a must ride pass and we never tire of riding it. Heading up on the Swiss side the road just gets narrower, tighter and steeper the higher you climb. Finally you reach the hostel at the top before rolling down the other side past the lake and you're into Italy.

The ride down the Italian side was a really nice 25 mile run all the way to **Aosta**. The road surface on this side of the pass is much better and the views are stunning so we didn't rush. After making our way through the town we joined the SS26 and headed down the Aosta Valley to **Morgex**. Approaching Morgex we picked up signs for **Arpy** and from there the Colle San Carlo was well signposted.

The San Carlo is pretty in its own way, the road surface is fairly poor and it's steep, but the entire 6 mile run up from Arpy is tree-lined which means there aren't really any views to speak of. About half way up there's a memorial to Diego Pellegrini, an Italian cyclist who died while descending it in 1993.

After cresting the San Carlo we dropped down into **La Thuile** which sits at the base of the Col du Petit St. Bernard. This busy little town marks the start of the climb and from here, with a few exceptions, the road up is well surfaced. It's also fairly wide which means the hairpins aren't too tight. This is mainly due to there being a ski station at the top.

Near the top we passed Lago Verney that told us we were almost there, and when we did reach the summit the road flattened out for the next few miles. It was here that we left Italy and entered France, and passing various cafes and restaurants we finally reached the monument to St. Bernard of Menthon that marks the end of the plateau.

Before starting our descent we stopped to take some photos of Saint Bernard, stopping again a few miles later just after the ski station at **La Rosiere**. The last time we stopped here the entire mountain was shrouded in mist but today we were fortunate and had a great view looking down at the base of Tarentaise Valley – and the 19 hairpins that lay between us and **Bourg-Saint-Maurice**.

At Bourg-Saint-Maurice the traffic was particularly heavy and the inevitable happened when Phil became separated from Kyle and Taj. Kyle's understanding was we were running later than anticipated and to cut down the journey time to the hotel we were giving the Cormet de Roselend a miss today. Possibly riding it another day. Phil's understanding was we were riding it. So while Kyle and Taj took the fastest most direct route to the hotel, expecting Phil to catch up, Phil headed for the Cormet, expecting them to be somewhere in front of him.

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The Cormet de Roselend, along with the Col de Meraillet, connects Bourg-Saint-Maurice with **Beaufort**. The first part is single track, although there are passing places, and early on there is a series of 10 tight hairpins. Once negotiated you then enter a high Alpine valley which truly is beautiful. We all agree the Cormet is one of the prettiest passes in the Alps and for Phil today there came a point where if it wasn't for the clouds, he would have been able to see the summit of Mont Blanc.

From the top it's a fairly fast descent into Beaufort and before you know it you're straight onto the Col des Saisies. Quite frankly the Saisies isn't much to write home about but cyclists may remember it as the backdrop to the infamous Floyd Landis solo attack on stage 17 of the 2006 Tour de France. The previous day he'd haemorrhaged time and dropped to 11th place overall yet miraculously managed to put himself back in contention the following day by winning the stage with an epic 120 km - 75 mile - breakaway, taking back almost 6 minutes.

After dropping down from the Saisies it was on to **Flumet** and then up the final pass of the day, the Col des Aravis. This was okay but in reality it was more of a box ticking exercise.

By the time Phil finally arrived in Le Grand-Bornand and spotted Kyle's Versys and Taj's ZZR parked up it was approaching 7pm and they'd already unloaded their luggage and made themselves comfortable at Chalet Les Saytels – our home for the next couple of nights. It's a nice enough hotel, centrally located and reasonably priced, but no secure parking, although the bikes were all safe enough parked out front.

For our first night in Le Grand-Bornand there was certainly lots going on with live music in the centre of town and plenty of street food available. The town also has

more than enough bars and restaurants to choose from and it didn't take us long to find one of each that suited our needs. A really pleasant end to a very good day.

## Part 2:

### Semnoz, Revard, Saisies and la Colombiere

#### Semnoz, Revard, des Saisies and la Colombiere

We really weren't too sure what conditions we'd wake up to this morning. While this summer has been hot and sunny, up in the mountains this has often culminated in some spectacular thunderstorms. Yesterday evening we'd experienced thunder and lightning during dinner and the weather remained unsettled when we retired for the night.

It was blue skies this morning though and it looked like we were set for another beautiful day so worry over. Good news because we were going to ride a 175 mile loop on a route plotted by Kyle based on some cycling he'd done in this area back in 2013.

We anticipated the ride would take around 7 hours, and in that time would take us south down the western side of Lake Annecy, into the mountains of Semnoz and Revard, before returning via Albertville, the ski resort of Les Saisies, and finally a bit of a dog-leg up to Cluses so we could ride the Colombiere – a first for all of us.

First thing first though and Taj needed fuel asap. Looking back to our early tours when many of us were riding sports bikes we'd begin our search for a petrol station after 100 miles, getting anxious by 130. Now Taj's ZZR could comfortably cover 200 miles, Kyle's Versys 250, the Phil's GSA 300+ miles. The thing is, we now regularly ride up to 100 miles a day more than we did back then so we still seem to be on the same desperate hunt for fuel.

Leaving Le Grand-Bornand we turned right and headed down the valley towards **Les Villards-sur-Thones** where we knew there was a fuel, albeit with lengthy queues as the automatic card service at the pump was out of order. From there it was a straightforward run into **Annecy**, about 20 miles in all. Approaching Annecy the traffic started to build, until we hit the lakeside and the old town, where it was gridlocked.

Annecy is known as the *Venice of the Alps* because of its cobbled streets, canals, and pastel-coloured buildings. As a result it's almost always busy and best avoided if you don't intend stopping off there. For us it was a necessity though because it provided our access point to Mont Semnoz. The climb starts pretty much from the centre of town and we soon picked up the D41 and Route des Semnoz.

The run up Semnoz – or Cret de Chatillon as it's sometimes known, was 11 miles and we climbed 1,200 meters in this time which tells you there are some steep sections in there. We were in the trees for most of the way up and apart from a series of hairpins at the start, it was a straight run up to the top. Traffic wasn't too heavy but there were a lot of cyclists so we kept our speed down and enjoyed the ride.

About a mile before we reached the top the view down to Annecy and its lake began to open up and it was quite stunning. This is the place to stop and take photos because when you get to the hotel just before the summit there's no real view to speak of. After a quick coffee stop and feeling sufficiently refreshed we travelled the short distance that remained until the ski area at the very top and began our descent down the other side.

The run down had the potential to be good but unfortunately the road surface was appalling. Huge craters littered the road for most of the way although it did improve the closer we came to **Leschaux**. From there we turned right onto the D912 and then picked up the D911 Route des Bauges all the way to **Cusy**. This stretch was a nice run but that soon ended when we exited Cusy and turned left onto the D103 where Le Revard was signposted. It's easy to miss the sign and initially we did.

There must be easier ways to get to Mont Revard because the route Kyle took us on was more suited to enduro bikes than the ones we were riding. Eventually, after a lot of zigging and zagging, we came to a junction that offered a left turning and which enabled us to join the D913. This road took us all the way to Le Revard and in many respects the run up was very similar to Semnoz, the main difference being there was far less traffic and hardly any cyclists.

Not far from the top there's a turn off to the right. Initially we rode straight past it and a short way down the other side until it dawned on us that we'd missed an opportunity. Making a u-turn we headed back, took the now left turning, and set off on the short ride up to Le Plateau du Revard. We're glad we did too because we'd have kicked ourselves if we hadn't. The view from up there was simply breathtaking.

From the plateau you can see Chambéry Airport on the left, at the southern end of the lake, and Aix-les-Bains on the right. But what dominates the view is Lac du Bourget, the deepest, and depending upon the season, the largest natural lake in France. There's quite a bit of tourist information about Le Revard up top, such as it being one of the first ski resorts in France – created at the beginning of 1900.

The descent from Le Revard was a huge improvement on Le Semnoz and the next 25 miles was a really nice run on virtually traffic free roads. After passing through the ski resort of **La Feclaz** we turned right back onto the D912, and at **Lescheraines** briefly picked up the D59 and D206, then rejoined the D911 at **Le Chatelard**. From here we climbed up and over **Col du Frene** before finally dropping down to **Saint-Pierre-d'Albigny**.

Reaching Saint-Pierre-d'Albigny though the inevitable happened again. Phil had been taking photos on the descent so Kyle and Taj waited dutifully. When Phil appeared though he sailed straight past not noticing their bikes parked up at the side of the road. An attempt to locate him ensued but to no avail, so, for the second time in as many days, Phil was riding on his own for the remainder of the day.

This marked the half way point of the ride, both in terms of time and distance, and from here it was a short, but very slow, ride up the D201 into **Albertville**. After a number of diversions that seemed to pepper the city, directing us around a maze of

backstreets, we eventually found our way out and picked up the road we'd been looking for – the D925 heading towards **Villard-sur-Doron**.

At Villard you have a couple of options if you want to ride the Col des Saisies. You can either turn left onto the D123 and ride up to **Bisance 1500**, which is what Phil did. This is nice because the high point of this road is at 1,725m and offers a great view overlooking the ski resort of Les Saisies – Col des Saisies and Les Saisies are one and the same. Or you can continue a little further up the road and take the D2188 signposted **Hauteluce**, which is what Kyle and Taj did.

The road from Hauteluce is exactly the same route Phil had ridden over the Saisies yesterday after he'd left Bourg-Saint-Maurice. The difference being when Phil got to **Flumet** he took the D909 over the Col des Aravis to Le Grand-Bornand, whereas today we picked up the D1212 to **Sallanches** instead. This was our bail out point if we wanted to shorten the ride for any reason but we had plenty of time so we carried on.

It's only 13 miles from Flumet to Sallanches but it took the best part of 45 minutes to filter our way through all the towns and villages. They just kept coming one after another. Quite frankly at this point the heat was becoming unbearable and it was a relief when we finally reached the D1205. We liked this road but only because it was fast, which got some cool air circulating around us, and took us to **Cluses**, the starting point for our fourth and final pass of the day.

In fact the Col de la Colombiere climb doesn't really start in Cluses, it starts in earnest at **Scionzier**, and there are two distinct sections to it – above and below the village of **Le Reposoir**, or the *resting place*. The first section is in the forest and climbs along the flank of a valley with the gradient gradually increasing bit by bit, before eventually levelling out a little on the intermediate plateau.

From Reposoir the road gains height quickly by looping around before finally exiting the forest where the vista begins to open up. At this point the road follows the side of the valley, climbing steadily all the way up to the summit. Only a few weeks previously the Tour de France had used the Colombiere for the stage 10 finish into Le Grand-Bornand. This was a result for us because it meant the road surface today was as good as it gets.

The final 7 miles down the other side was as enjoyable as the ride up to the top had been. There were a couple of hairpins early on, then the road began to bend around as it descended into **Chinillon**. A fairly long straight stretch followed which led to a final section of nice, wide, open switchbacks that dropped us into the centre **Le Grand-Bornand**, virtually at the front door of our hotel.

## Part 3:

### On to Briancon over the Glandon and the Galibier

#### Le Grand-Bornand to Briancon

Like our ride from Besancon to Le Grand-Bornand a couple of days ago, our ride from Le Grand-Bornand to Briancon could be as short or as long as we wanted it to be. The fastest non-motorway route was 116 miles and 3 hours. Our preferred route was 6 hours and 155 miles. The plan was to ride 7 mountain passes that included some old favourites plus a couple of new ones – the Glandon and the Croix de Fer.

Despite the number of passes we weren't in a rush to get off today. Last night we'd arranged a later start for this morning and it was almost 10am when we finally checked out. When we got down to the bikes though we discovered a huge street market had sprung up overnight and our bikes were parked up slap bang in the centre of it. Not a problem but a little embarrassing as we slowly rode past all the stalls, avoiding eye contact with the traders and hordes of pedestrians.

Before we could start our journey though both Taj and Kyle needed fuel. Unsure where the next fuel stop was on today's route we took a brief deviation to the petrol station at Les Villards-sur-Thones. Retracing our steps we headed back up the hill to **La Clusaz** and from there we made our way over the Col des Aravis. The run down the other side was okay but after we passed through **La Giettaz** the traffic began to build culminating in a long queue at **Flumet** due to roadworks.

From Flumet we turned right onto the D1212 and headed towards **Ugine** and then **Albertville**. In a rare navigational error though we completely missed the turn for our second pass of the day, the Col de la Madeleine. Instead of taking the N90 and heading towards Pussy, which would have been our start point to ride the Madeleine, we carried straight on. Shame because it's a nice pass but by the time it dawned on us that we'd gone the wrong way it was too late to turn around.

Instead we rode the 35 miles to **La Chambre**, the entry point to the Col du Glandon and our now revised second pass of the day. This did save us an hour in time but made virtually no difference in terms of mileage. This is because regardless of which way we travelled, Madelaine or not, we were going to end up in La Chambre. Not only does it provide access to the Glandon, it also marks the end of the Madelaine when heading south from Pussy.

While the Glandon was new to Phil and Taj, Kyle had cycled up it from La Chambre in 2012, and again in 2013 from Le Bourg-d'Oisans. Knowing that it was long climb and aside from the view there wasn't a great deal up at the top, he suggested we stop half way up at **Saint-Colomban-des-Villards** for a coffee. The ride to the top was indeed long, and while the road surface wasn't great, it was very enjoyable and certainly worth riding. It also links up nicely with a lot of other significant passes in the area.

For our purposes today that meant the Col de la Croix de Fer. After cresting the Glandon we came to a junction. Turn right and the road takes you to Bourg-d'Oisans – from where Kyle came in 2013. Turn left, which we did, and the road takes you the 2 miles up to the top of the Croix de Fer, where Kyle headed in 2012. The view up top was spectacular and looking down the other side we could clearly see the ski station of **Saint-Sorlin-d'Arves** below us.

The short run down to Saint-Sorlin-d'Arves was quite steep but from here the road levelled out a little, until **Saint-Jean-d'Arves** where we began to descend again. The midpoint on the ride down was marked by the right turn that takes you over Col du Mollard – the route Kyle followed in 2012, and from here we were in a grey rocky wilderness all the way to **Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne**. During this time, in a little over 18 miles from the top of the Croix de Fer, we'd lost an incredible 1,500m of altitude – that's almost 5,000ft.

Passing through Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne we headed down the valley to **Saint-Michel-de-Maurienne** where the traffic was particularly heavy. Filtering through the town we slowly made our way towards the head of the queue. There seemed to be quite a bit of irritation at this act but unperturbed we carried on regardless and at the traffic lights that mark the end of town we turned right and began making our way up the Col du Telegraphe.

The road up the Telegraphe was incredibly busy. In fact as far as any of us can recall it's been like this every time we've been up here. All it takes is a bus, a truck, or just a slow car, and very quickly the traffic starts to build up. The result of this, today at least, was much impatience and nobody willing to surrender even an inch of road. We were no exception to this, equally guilty, but the thing is bikes are usually given a certain degree of latitude. Not today though.

On crossing the Telegraphe we dropped down into the ski resort of **Valloire** and straight out the other side. At the small hamlet of **Les Verneys**, a couple of miles up the road from Valloire, we spotted something that caught our attention – the ***Sculptures sur Paille et Foin***. Every winter Valloire hosts a snow and ice sculpture contest. A month earlier it had hosted the equivalent summer competition. Over the course of a week 12 teams of 2 sculptors from all over the world had competed to create works of art made from straw and hay.

Valloire had marked the start of our fifth and penultimate pass of the day, the mighty Col du Galibier, and on leaving Les Verneys the road climbed gently for the next 4 miles. Running alongside the Valloirette river we made our way up the valley floor until eventually reaching a bridge that crossed the river. This is where the Galibier climb starts in earnest and from here it's a stunning final 5 miles to the summit.

At Les Granges du Galibier, about half way up from the bridge, there's the barely noticeable ***Pantani Forever*** monument. Unless you're a cycling enthusiast you probably won't be aware that it's even there. It's a memorial to the late Italian cyclist Marco Pantani and honours his historic 1998 Giro-Tour double. It was here on the Galibier during the 1998 Tour de France, at the end of stage 15, that Pantani launched a ferocious attack against then race leader Jan Ullrich.



Overhauling a 3 minute deficit, going on to take a further 6 minutes from the German, Pantani finished the day in yellow, while Ullrich was relegated to 4th overall. The monument is located at 2,301m, the exact point where Pantani began his attack. The monument was inaugurated in 2011, just in time for that years edition of the Tour, and celebrates 100 years since the first inclusion of the Galibier in the race.

The last time we rode the Galibier was in June 2010 when the weather was abysmal. Back then it had been raining down in Valloire when we started the climb. By the time we reached the tunnel, located 70m below the pass road that takes you over the top, it was snowing and the road was white over. With no choice but to use the tunnel we rolled through it and on exiting the other side we were confronted by a full blown blizzard. Today conditions were perfect so we took the left turn just before the tunnel and headed up to the top.

The views from the top were just awesome, both looking back to Valloire and looking out towards Briancon where we were heading. After a brief stop for the obligatory photos we began our descent. The traffic on this side was surprisingly light which made the 5 mile run down to the D1091 at the bottom a really enjoyable ride. To put things into perspective how big this mountain is, by the time we came to a halt at the junction we'd lost 600m of altitude – about 2,000ft – yet we were still more than 2,000m above sea level.

The junction at the bottom where the pass road meets the D1091 represents the Col du Lautaret and while barely noticeable as being a col technically it is one. Turn right here and the road will take you to Grenoble. Turn left and it will take you to Briancon. We turned left and set off on the final 17 miles of our journey, a straightforward 30 minute run down the Lautaret pretty much into the city centre.

Our hotel for the next couple of nights was Hotel de la Chaussee. We've stayed here a few times now and it's another hotel that provides secure parking. This is in the form of a private locked garage that had ample space for our 3 bikes. Being a short walk from hotel we unloaded our luggage first before moving the bikes to the lock-up for the night. We then checked in and fell into our by now familiar routine of shower and change, then retire to local bar and restaurant for the evening.

## Part 4:

### We really should have cut and run at Barcelonnette

#### Izoard, Vars & Allos

As a point of interest, if you want to ride mountain passes, big ones, then alongside Chamonix we can't think of a much better base to have than Briancon. This is the reason why we've stayed here so often over the years. There are literally dozens of fantastic roads and passes to choose from, many giants and icons of the Alps, and they all link up beautifully with Briancon. And incidentally at 1,326m it's the highest city in France.

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We had another late start this morning, our first but by no means last mistake today. There was no sign of Phil first thing so Kyle and Taj headed off to breakfast without him, which incidentally is very good at Hotel de la Chaussee. There's always plenty of coffee, a range of cereals, and ample supply of eggs, hams, cheeses, breads, and the like. Outside the weather was distinctly overcast so while Kyle waited for his eggs to boil he checked the weather app on his phone. The forecast for today wasn't good.

It was going to remain overcast until early afternoon when rain was due. The rain would start light but become heavier culminating in thunder and lightning sometime around 5pm. At this point it was barely 9.30am. Expecting our planned 220 mile ride to take somewhere in the region of 7 hours it seemed reasonable to think that if we got our skates on, we could still do the ride and be back before the worst of the weather arrived.

Originally the idea of a ride out to Col Agnel or Col de Mont Cenis, or possibly Col de la Bonette had been mooted for today. These are all great rides. In terms of distance though they can be fairly long and we were mindful that on leaving Briancon tomorrow a long 900 mile ride home lay ahead of us. So we settled on the 220 mile route that included the Izoard, Vars, and Allos – all practically on our doorstep.

On catching up with Phil, Kyle explained the weather situation and suggested a 10am start. Phil concurred and the plan was agreed. What was good about the proposed route was should the weather take a turn for the worse sooner than predicted, there were a couple of bail out points where we could cut the ride short and return to the hotel early. So suited and booted, and by appearances at least, looking like we were prepared for wet weather, we met up at the garage.

It's 12 miles from our hotel to the monument at the top of the Col d'Izoard so the first pass of the day really was on our doorstep. The Izoard is a popular climb for cyclists and this morning was no exception, maybe even more so with the forecast being for rain later in the day. So we took our time on the way up, enjoying the ride just as we had done going up Semnoz a couple of days ago.

The first half of the ride up was a relatively straight run, all the way up to **Cervieres** which is the village that lies at the foot of the Izoard. From this point on though the road began to twist and turn and became a lot of fun. The road surface was very good, wide too, and while some of the hairpins and switchbacks were tight there was always plenty of room to manoeuvre on them.

Arriving at the top we made a brief stop and took in the breathtaking panorama. Taking a closer look at the monument we gleaned that it's a memorial and the date on it, 12th August 1934, is the day the road was officially completed by the French military. A lot of Alpine roads were built by the French military in the 30s to guard against an invasion by either Italian or German forces.

Only a couple of miles down the other side and we came to Col de la Platriere, technically a col but could just as easily be mistaken for a lookout point, and then a further 4 or so miles down we arrived at **Arvieux**. This marks the foot of the Izoard in much the same way Cervieres did on the way up, and from this point it was a straight 3 mile run down to the D902 at the bottom of the valley.

At the junction that marked the end of the Izoard we turned right to join the D902. This road takes you all the way to the Col de Vars and we really enjoyed it. Particularly the first section where it runs down the valley alongside the Guil river, all the way to the Gorges du Guil. As you'd expect the scenery here was good although the road did begin to narrow as we entered the gorge. There were also a series of tunnels to negotiate with the final one, just outside **Guillestre**, being controlled by traffic lights.

When we got to Guillestre it was 11.30am and the weather was no worse than when we'd left Briancon. While it remained overcast, with rain threatening, there was no real evidence of it yet. We were now at our first bail out point – it's an easy 40 minute run up the N94 to Briancon from here – but didn't see the need to bail just yet. So we continued on our way. On the outskirts of Guillestre there were two sets of roundabouts. We took the second exit at each of them and headed up the Vars.

We hadn't ridden a mile up the Vars when we felt the first spots of rain. But we're a stubborn bunch – or over optimistic, and we carried on regardless, completely dismissing our opportunity to turn around and cut the ride short. In all fairness by the time we reached the top of the Vars the rain had stopped, with the worst of it falling at the bottom of the pass, and lasting for no more than 10 minutes.

After a coffee stop at the top we made our way down the other side to **Saint-Paul-sur-Ubaye**, effectively the bottom of the pass, and then **Les Gleizolles** where the D902 met the D900. We really enjoyed the descent and in fact we all remembered saying much the same 5 years ago when we last came down it. At the junction we turned right and joined the D900, another good stretch of road that took us down the Ubaye Valley through **Jausiers** and all the way to **Barcelonnette**.

There was however a brief interlude a couple of miles after we joined the D900. The **Fort de Tournoux** is a fortification complex that was built between 1843 and the early 20th century to defend France against invasion from Italy and Savoy. It last saw action during World War II but over subsequent years it was gradually

decommissioned before eventually being sold by the military to the local government. Ever since then it has been undergoing renovations.

It was almost 1pm when we got to Barcelonnette. This was our other bail out point. From here we could either retrace our steps back over the Vars and then pick up the N94 from Guillestre to Briancon. Or we could take the D954 towards Lac de Serre-Poncon and then pick up the N94 to Embrun and Briancon. There isn't much in either of these routes to be honest, both around 1hr 45 mins, but that's an irrelevance anyway because we carried on to the Col d'Allos regardless.

That was our second mistake of the day because just like it had on the Vars, a mile or so in to the Allos and the heavens opened, except this time it wasn't going to relent. And to boot we were riding up the northern ramp, not the easiest of rides in the dry, let alone the wet. It's mainly single track with a lot of blind bends and so for the next 10 miles, as the intensity of the rain increased, we crawled ever slower up to the top in the vain hope that things might be better on the other side.

They weren't, they were significantly worse. While the southern side of the Allos was preferable to the side we'd just come up, descending it in torrential rain was no fun. By the time we reached the ski resort half way down it we'd negotiated a dozen tight hairpins and were more than ready for a break. At the first cafe we came across we pulled over, ordered coffees all round, and collected ourselves.

In a nutshell our situation was like this: the rain was getting harder, it had begun thundering and lightning, and we were now as close to Briancon as we were far from it.

It was almost 2pm by now and from here, regardless of which route we took, and in these conditions, we faced a 4 hour ride. As we saw things retracing our steps made no sense – and would have been downright dangerous anyway. Our only viable option was to see our original plan through to its conclusion. That meant riding to **Digne-les-Bains**, picking up the D900 and eventually D954 to **Savines-le-Lac**, then hoofing it up the N94 into **Briancon**.

What transpired over the next 4 hours and 136 miles was quite frankly a war of attrition. Every mile we knocked off was fought for and the constant battle we faced against the elements was as much mental as it was physical. Not one single mile was easy and it's hard to put into words just how treacherous conditions became. It wasn't until the following day that we got the lowdown on the storm we'd ridden through.

It had caused widespread flooding across much of southern France resulting in the evacuation of more than 1,600 people, most of them campers. In the space of only a few hours more than 3 inches of rain had fallen causing landslides and washing away roads. As far as we were concerned though we hadn't fared too badly, and our bikes had stood up to the conditions even better. Which is more than could be said for our textiles, gloves and boots.

## Part 5:

### Heading home by way of Macon and Laon

#### Briancon to Macon

When we awoke this morning there was barely a trace of the storm we'd experienced yesterday. The first thing we did though was head down to the hotel basement to check on our kit. Last night the hotel kindly let us dry our textiles, gloves, and boots in their boiler room. For the most part everything had dried out although our boots were still sodden. While our boots were all waterproof, there had been so much surface water that it had simply washed up our trousers, then run down inside them.

Like most days on this tour there was no great rush to get off today. Conversely on previous tours mornings have always been one mad dash to get on the road. Maybe this year was different because we were only a trio. While having lower numbers certainly helps we suspect it's more than that though, more a combination of things. Such as being a little older and wiser, certainly riding bikes better suited to touring, and overall just being better at touring than we used to be. Spending less time in the bar has played its part too.

We were on the road just after 10am and for a change there was no need for a morning fuel stop. Our first port of call today was Bourg-d'Oisans and by the indirect route we were going to take it was 110 miles away and we all had more than enough fuel to get us there. While there was no fixed route today we had identified a couple of potential passes we could ride but by and large once we reached the area around Grenoble we would be saying goodbye to the mountains and begin hacking our way cross country up to Macon.

The start of our journey today, the first 35 miles at least, saw us retracing the final steps of yesterday's route back into Briancon by heading south down the N94 to **Savines-le-Lac** – except this time with the luxury of being able to see where we were going. Being peak holiday season there was a lot of traffic on this opening section, particularly around the lake, but once we'd turned right and crossed over Lac de Serre-Poncon it started to thin out.

Leaving the lake behind we continued west on the N94 past **Chorges** and on to **Gap**. As usual the traffic around Gap was quite heavy although we could have avoided most of it by taking a detour over the Col de Manse. Unfortunately we missed our turning which meant us filtering through the town to the very end of the N94 where it meets the N85. At this point our journey west stopped as we turned right and began making our way north-west instead, all the way up to **La Salle-en-Beaumont**.

Gap aside, the entire 55 mile section we'd ridden from the lake had been great but by now we'd been in the saddle for a couple of hours so it was about the right time, and La Salle-en-Beaumont the right place, to stretch our legs and grab a coffee. A couple of miles on from La Salle and we turned right off the N85 to pick up the D526. This was another enjoyable stretch of road and over the next 25 miles it took us up and

over the Col d'Ornon. The run up to the top from **Entraigues** was nice enough but to be honest it didn't look or feel much like a pass road.

The run down the other side though was a much more impressive affair and far more pass like. After leaving the plateau at the top we came to a series of hairpins that marked the start of descent proper. From this point the road began to narrow and for the next 5 miles dropped us down the Torrent de la Lignarre Valley, through forests and villages, all the way to the outskirts of **Le Bourg-d'Oisans** where the pass road met the D1091.

At the bottom of the Ornon we turned right into Le Bourg-d'Oisans and after a brief stop for fuel made the snap decision to ride up Alpe d'Huez. This isn't really a pass, it's more of an access road to the ski resort at the top. It is iconic though and the views on the way up are too good to miss. Quite frankly, as we were this close to it, we'd have been mad not to ride it. From a cyclists point of view it's a must ride and Kyle has cycled up it a few times, the last time as recently as a fortnight ago.

At 8 miles it's not a particularly long climb, and while steep there are tougher cycling climbs, but with its 21 hairpins and all the drama that has unfolded on it over the years, it has become synonymous with the Tour de France. To date it has featured in 29 editions of the race, the last being this year when Welshman, and eventual race winner, Geraint Thomas won on it. For us today though it was a quick dash to the top and straight back down again.

When we returned to the bottom we were surprised to see it was 3pm and according to our sat navs we were still 150 miles and 4 hours from our destination. The ride time could be drastically reduced by taking toll roads but we were on a strict no toll tour. So from this point, all the way to **Macon**, the ride became an every man for himself cross country charge. With each missed overtake, or a failure to filter, it wasn't long before the elastic broke and all 3 of us became detached.

Phil was the first to break free, with Taj cutting Kyle loose a short time after that. And this is how we all arrived in Macon, Kyle rolling in to Hotel de Bourgogne a little after 6.30pm. Despite being a last minute booking the hotel was good value. Located in Place de la Barre it was a good find and ticked all our boxes. Bars for beer, a couple of restaurants to choose from, and a cafe for coffee in the morning. The secure parking was a bonus although it was a bit of a squeeze to fit all 3 bikes inside the one available parking space.

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## **Macon to Laon**

The following morning we were up and about early and having decided to skip the hotel breakfast we met at the cafe across the road instead. As things stood last night we hadn't got a hotel booked for this evening. Phil had rectified that overnight though and so this morning, armed with the address, we all programmed our sat navs with the new destination. Looking at our proposed fastest routes today was going to be 300 mile no frills south to north cross country ride up to Laon.

In much the same way that our ride down from Valenciennes to Besancon had been a fairly anonymous affair, our route today could also have been pretty much anywhere. For much of the day we seemed to be riding through nothing but vast expanses of grain fields, interspersed with the odd one horse town. No complaints from us as the roads were good, fast, and very very quiet. It was however a little monotonous.

We did have a couple of interesting interludes that broke the journey up though. Our first unplanned stop was on the old Route Nationale 6, now the D906, near **La Rochepot**. Between the 50s and 70s the Bel-Air plateau was a favoured rest stop for French holiday makers. Situated 200 miles from Paris it marks the high point between Paris and Lyon and was the ideal place to fill up with petrol and take a break.

Abandoned for 40 years the RN6 has recently experienced a bit of a resurgence with fans and devotees of that Golden Age. It was here we stumbled upon *Station du Bel-Air* where, at first glance anyway, there appeared to be a classic car show in progress with more than 100 cars from all eras on display. We have subsequently found out that it is in fact a well known rallying point for old car collectors and amateurs.

Our other unplanned stop came at the other end of our journey, at the old *Circuit de Reims-Gueux* located in Gueux just west of **Reims**. The circuit was used extensively between 1926-1972 and had a triangular layout. This was comprised of public roads that formed three sectors between the villages of Thillois and Gueux over the La Garenne / Gueux intersection of Route Nationale 31.

The circuit became known to be among the fastest of the era due its two long straights that allowed maximum straight line speed, resulting in many famous slipstream battles. The circuit saw it's heyday in the 50s and 60s hosting both 12 hour endurance races and 14 Formula 1 Grands Prix. In fact it's debut in Formula 1 was during the inaugural World Championship year in 1950. All that remains today is the main grandstand and the pit area.

The remaining 35 miles from Gueux to **Laon** took us an hour to knock off and we were happy when we finally arrived at Hotel du Tramway. When Phil booked the hotel last night he believed it to be in the old town when in fact it's in the new town by the train station. We didn't mind though because the area was nice enough and the hotel was brand new. And like the one we'd left this morning it met all our requirements including secure parking, plus the bonus of fuel station just around the corner.

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## Laon to Bewdley

Sunday dawned and all that remained of this tour was the tedious ride home where our no toll policy no longer applied. Filling up for the penultimate time we began the last leg of our journey – a 147 mile dash up the A26 to **Calais**, a midday cross channel ferry to **Dover**, and finally a 220 mile charge up the M20/A20, M25 and M40 to **Bewdley**.

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There's not much more to add except it just goes to show that to do a tour like this, you don't need months and months of forward planning. For the most part this one was organised, booked up, with routes planned in under a week – and as motorcycle tours go this one definitely ranks highly.