

Wonderland

Western Alps Adventure with Adriatic Moto Tours

What do Evian spring water, Gruyère cheese, and St. Bernard dogs have in common? Prior to going on the Western Alps Adventure with Adriatic Moto Tours, I didn't have a clue. But on the seven-day motorcycle tour through Italy, Switzerland, and France this past July, we got to visit the places where these things originated.

No one goes to the Alps – especially not motorcyclists – for overpriced bottled water, strong cheese, or big slobbering dogs. We go for the roads, particularly the winding sort that rise and fall as they crest passes where the air is ethereal and the sky is so blue it looks like a backdoor to heaven.

We go to lose ourselves in wonder, to have our heads in the clouds – literally and figuratively – as we take in heart-achingly beautiful vistas and admire peaks and valleys worth fighting wars over.

But, ugh, planning a motorcycle trip through the Alps is such a pain. How will you rent a bike? What route should you take? Where should you stay? Where should you eat? And what's French for "I'll have another large beer, please"?

Instead, I rely on the experts, the folks who have scouted the routes, the hotels, and the restaurants. It's all new to me anyway, so I'll take a curated, stress-free experience over being my own bumbling tour guide any day.

I flew into Milan, Italy, a day early to get acclimated. Coincidentally, I arrived on the same flight as Jim, an attorney from Seattle who's a veteran of more than a dozen tours with AMT. After checking into our hotel, a former royal villa built in the early 1900s that now has modern air-conditioned rooms, a restaurant, and a lovely pool, Jim and I took the train into Milan to visit the Duomo, one of the largest cathedrals in the world.

Story & photos by
GREG DREVENSTEDT

Combe Laval, a "balcony" road carved into the limestone cliffs in the French Alps, is not for the faint of heart.

Talk about delayed gratification – construction of the Duomo in Milan took 579 years! The rooftop walking tour is highly recommended.





Our motley crew at Col de Vars in France on our “rest” day. The laughter and stories we shared throughout the tour were priceless.

The next day, we met our guides and fellow riders. In addition to Jim and me, we met a third American, David, a tanned retiree from Florida. Hailing from Canada were Ben from Toronto and Simon and Marie-Claude from Quebec City, and there was Linda from Aus-

tralia and Malcolm from New Zealand. Matej, our tour leader, and Jure, our van driver, are both experienced guides from AMT’s home country of Slovenia, and they kept the tour running like a well-oiled machine. Everyone was easy to get along with, and we quickly gelled as a group and shared inside jokes and friendly comments on WhatsApp.

AMT’s rental fleet includes mostly BMWs plus a few Ducatis, Harley-

Davidson, Honda, Suzuki, and Yamaha models. Bikes come equipped with a top box and a GPS unit pre-programmed with daily routes, which allows riders to venture off on their own without worrying about getting lost or finding the hotel. Accommodations on this tour were comfortable and charming, our luggage was always delivered to our room before check-in, and meals were delicious and unique to local areas.

Some tours start off gradually, but the Western Alps Adventure kicked off like a cowabunga cannonball into the deep end of the pool. After a short

David, Linda, and Ben enjoying the curves and scenery on the climb up to Switzerland’s Susten Pass (7,297 feet), our third of four high alpine passes on Day 1.

stint on the freeway to get out of Milan, we crossed into Switzerland, and it was game on.

First, we summited Nufenen Pass. Next, we stopped at the Hotel Belvedere, which is situated inside a hairpin overlooking the Rhône Glacier and was featured in a car chase scene in the 1964 James Bond film *Goldfinger*. Then we climbed a little higher to Furka Pass, all before having lunch in the ski resort town of Andermatt.

While trying to digest *quattro stagioni* pizza, we rocked and rolled our way to Susten Pass. Down, down, down we went into the valley before making our fourth and final climb of the day to Grimsel Pass, where our hotel was located on the shore of a postcard-perfect alpine lake. Before dinner, a few of us took a bonus ride on a narrow panoramic road that goes to a glacier.

We ended our first day with beers on the patio overlooking the lake and a comfort food dinner of potato soup, veal piccata with pasta, and panna cotta. Sleep was well-earned, deep, and enhanced by clean, cool alpine air drifting in through the windows.

Day 2 started with sunrise over Grimsel Lake and a hearty Swiss breakfast, fortifying us for another full day of riding. Bombing back down the winding road from Grimsel Pass with zero traffic was like being on a private track.

After that early burst of adrenaline, the rest of the day was mellow. We rode into a valley of high cliffs with glacier-fed waterfalls and had coffee near Lauterbrunnen. We had lunch in Gruyères, a medieval walled hilltop village where we had the eponymous cheese mixed in a shredded potato dish called *rösti*. In the afternoon, we summited Jaun Pass and crossed into France for an overnight stop in

Right top: In France, we took a gondola from Chamonix to an observation deck atop 12,605-foot Aiguille du Midi, where we had clear views of Mont Blanc (15,778 feet), the tallest mountain in Western Europe. That cluster of dots on the side of the glacier is a tent camp for mountain climbers. **Right:** Matej, Simon, and Marie-Claude on the descent from Col du Grand St-Bernard. **Below:** Our hotel at Grimsel Pass in Switzerland. **Below right:** “The hills are alive with the sound of motorcycles!”





Above left: We had a coffee stop in Annecy, France, a city known for its cobblestone streets, canals through the old quarter, and pastel-colored buildings. **Above right:** No wonder Evian water is so expensive! They have little old ladies filling bottles by hand.

Évian-les-Bains, a city on Lake Geneva that sends its bottled mineral water around the world.

Riding in the Alps is like a yo-yo: up and down, mountain to valley, valley to mountain, again and again, with hairpins, sweepers, and every conceivable type of curve. Day 3 was scenic, pleasant, and exotic enough to remind us that we were far from home, experiencing another part of the world. We had coffee in Annecy, known as the “Venice of France” because of the canals that run through the old town, and then lunch at an outdoor cafe at Col de Granier, a notch carved in the Massif de Chartreuse. At our hotel in the ski area of Villard-de-Lans, we had a gourmet dinner on a patio with mountains rising all around us.

On Day 4, we rode through the damp, dark, narrow Gorge de la Bourne, where the road cuts into the limestone walls as it runs along a mountain stream. We climbed high and rode Combe Laval, one of France’s “balcony” roads chiseled into and through limestone cliffs.

Then we summited several passes – Col de la Machine, Col de Rosset, and Col de Grimone – and cruised through fertile valleys full of sunflowers and lavender.

Make no mistake, this is a rider’s tour, with days full of twisties, climbs, and descents and minimal sightseeing. On Day 5, our rest day, we forfeited the “rest” part and rode over Col de Vars and into the thin air of Mercantour National Park. Just below Col de la Bonette, we relaxed in Adirondack chairs and sipped coffee in the pure alpine air on a bluebird day and then looped around the treeless Cime de la Bonette. What goes up must come down, and we retraced our route for a totally different experience. Every right became a left, every foot of climbing became a descent.

From Col de la Bonette (8,907 feet), we rode a short loop around Cime de la Bonette.



Left: Ben on the scenic, winding descent from Col de l’Iseran, the highest paved pass in the Alps. **Right:** Back in Milan, we toasted prosecco to celebrate a successful tour.

Day 6, July 14, was Bastille Day, France’s national holiday, and we celebrated by bagging four alpine passes, including Col de Montgenèvre and Col du Mont-Cenis, where we rode along the shore of a turquoise lake. After having oven-fired pizzas on a patio for lunch, the high point of the day was climbing more than 3,000 feet in 8 miles through green mountains covered with wildflowers and cut deeply by snowmelt waterfalls and creeks to Col de l’Iseran (9,068 feet), the highest paved pass in the Alps.

After our fourth pass of the day, Col du Petit St-Bernard, where we crossed back into Italy, we rode through the 7.2-mile Mont Blanc Tunnel. We emerged back in France near our hotel in Chamonix, a bustling alpine city full of hikers, mountain climbers, and tourists.

We began our last day with a gondola ride to the top of Aiguille du Midi to see Mont Blanc (15,778 feet), the highest mountain in Western Europe, and the surrounding peaks and glaciers. After summiting Col de la Forclaz, we began the long climb to our last pass, Col du Grand St-Bernard, where a hospice founded in 1049 used St. Bernard dogs in mountain rescues.

Upon arriving back in Milan, Matej and Jure popped corks on bottles of prosecco, and we all toasted to a fantastic tour. Grazie mille, Adriatic Moto Tours!

The next Western Alps Adventure runs July 13-21, 2024. Visit AdriaticMotoTours.com for more information. ①

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