Riding in the Balkans

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The wander lust really built up in the last few years, so it was time for an epic riding trip!

A little over a year ago I started thinking about doing a guided tour, something I have never done. I have had riding trips to Europe alone and with friends, but decided doing solo again was a bit too much stress thinking about the "what if's" if something went sideways (yeah, I can be a worry wart) and as we know, there is SO MUCH planning involved but before you go and then on the ground when you are there. Yes it can be fun, but I found just focusing on the riding when I was there was very liberating.

I fairly quickly decided on Adriatic Moto Tours. The reviews were great, and Club members who had used them for their more independent options had very positive things to say as well. They have a lot of options ranging from bike rental with GPS programed to great riding roads, hotel reservations on route, and what I chose: fully guided, including dinners, mostly 4 star hotels (one had to 5) with full breakfast, transport of bags with delivery to room, ferry tickets, national park admission, walking tour of Dubrovnik, and taxi rides to dinner if not walking.

While Adriatic has tours in other parts of Europe, the Balkans is their specialty as the company was headquartered in Slovenia. They are incredibly (and rightfully) proud to show off the region. It was settled - I was going on the "Adriatic Riviera" tour which showcases Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia.

The experience from my pre booking questions to the last ride to the airport was exemplary. The company has several bikes available but from what I could tell only one bike, the BMW 310r would really fit me (28" inseam here). While this bike has a taller seat than that, it's light weight helps offset that. As it turns out their lowered Yamaha MT-07 twin also would have fit but I did not to take a chance and reserve a bike I had never sat on. I imagined all kinds of interesting parking scenarios and riding in ancient cities and wanted something light and easy as I would not be asking anyone to valet my bike like I sometimes do at home on my r1200r when riding mates choose janky places to park. Spoiler alert: there was valeting of EVERYONE'S bike (!).

I also have a 310r, but it is commuter/city bike. I did not want to let my short legs to keep me from participating in this kind of trip, but I admit I had some reservations. A couple of weeks before the trip I took it on a couple of partial day rides to fully see what I was getting myself into. I dug up and packed my Cramp Buster for poor woman's cruise control. Other than a couple of higher speed stretches, it was perfectly capable with the grown up bikes. My lower back ominously voiced its concerns though.

My travel to Slovenia was long and uneventful. I took the Lufthansa direct flight from San Diego to Munich, then on to Frankfort for my flight to Ljubljana, Slovenia where the tour starts. I carefully planned long

enough layovers to prevent lost luggage. Amex Travel kept trying to put me on flights with 45 min layovers. Just say no. Unfortunately flying out of San Diego means there is no way around taking 3 flights to get to smaller regions in Europe. Ljubljana is the capital city and it is actually quite small. The population is just over 250,000 in a heavily forested country with a 2.2 million people. I also thought it was wise to go a bit early since I wanted to make sure my gear made it. I put an Apple AirTag in my gear bag so I could monitor the transfers of my special cargo and locate it if lost. Other than it glitching out once and showing my bag stalled in Iceland, it worked well and offered a lot of peace of mind.

Normally when arriving anywhere I take public transportation which is always fun to figure out with jet lag, doubly so hauling gear. Not this time. I was greeted by a driver arranged by the tour and led to a Mercedes limo. Nope not really a typical part of the tour, he just happened to have it that day. I sunk into the lap of luxury for the 25 minute ride to my hotel. I get terrible jet lag so I went a few days early to acclimate and explore and booked my own budget friendly hotel for those days.

Ljubljana is a compact, friendly, sparkling clean, dragon loving city (they are everywhere!). Its population was only 31,000 when a devastating earthquake hit the city in 1895. Most of the buildings were built after then in the "Vienna Succession" style which was quite beautiful. Up until 1991 Slovenia was part of Yugoslavia, until it became independent and Ljubljana became the capital of the newly formed country.

After miles and miles of beautiful walks, visiting attractions, and some amazing food, tour day had arrived! We were introduced to our tour lead Matej and to Jure, another tour lead who was taking his turn from being a ride lead to driving the van and delivering luggage to our rooms on this trip. They were both native Slovenians whose cheerful, positive attitudes (and competence) made this trip memorable. We met fellow participants which were from the U.S, Australia, Canada, and India. There were 11 bikes, one pillion. I admit I was not initially happy to see so many bikes. Apparently this is their max. But my worry was for naught, it all worked out fine and I was delighted to get to know everyone in the group over the week we were together. One participant took the tour in a car as he did not ride and wanted to join his good friend on the trip. Besides being an all around nice person, his having the car turned out to be a great asset. He was named the "super sweeper" as he followed us the whole time.

Matej talked about the route, local road signs and markings, plentiful speed cameras (boo!), and "corner marking". This is similar to our club's posting corners but the marker is the person behind the lead and only used when the group has a risk of separating at the turn.

We Southern Californians don't do a lot of rain riding, at least voluntarily. Just look at this hot mess.

During the intro meeting I anxiously refreshed the weather map over and over (and over) until I made

the decision to get the added insurance that lowered the deductible to €500.

Adriatic has been doing this a long time and runs an efficient ship. Gas, coffee breaks, and lunches are not included in the tour price. Yes, you could pay on your own at every stop but they offer a system which everyone opted for to be more efficient. I am not sure if they do this on every tour, but on our trip they had a kitty system for coffee stops and lunches (we ate like kings, often a few courses) that totaled a little over $100, and for gas Matej had us line up at the pump and he filled us all up, keeping track of each bike's fuel cost. My gas for the trip was bit over $80. Apparently I have a lead wrist and enjoy feeling a little torque because my consumption was not appreciably less than a 1250GS.

After the welcome meeting, we were shuttled to the Adriatic Motor Tours garage to gather our bikes and ride them back to the hotel. My 310r was a 2022 model with a couple of scratches. To be fair, for good reason it is not a particularly popular touring bike so I would not expect them to have new one waiting. I patted the bike and together we made a pact for no scratches for either of us during our time together.

Many of the other bikes were brand new, as in peel the adhesive off the dash display new. We soon cued up the GPS' and took a scenic ride back to the hotel through the country side and tried out the corner marking (worked great!). Then it was time for a delicious welcome dinner with local dishes. Food in this region which varies by distance to the Adriatic Sea does not disappoint!

Ok so the trip. I was unable to journal the day by day because we had a number of long days typically with a break before dinner. This was a plus and minus. The minus was, I was pretty darn tired with the jet lag coupled with lots of riding on a wee bike with at times challenging weather. The plus was we experienced so much! Rides days typically were from 8:15-5:00 (give or take) with a coffee stop, relaxed lunch, and often a short walk into nature. I will try and give highlights in sequential order.

Every morning started with a briefing of the route on the map. Note: this van carried all our bags, a spare bike (750GS) likely to fit all but me, and could accommodate up to 1-2 more bikes and 2 passengers if someone did not want to ride. How this is possible I do not know. Jure must have been a Jenga champion. The van did not actually follow us on the scenic route. After we put our bags outside our room every morning, Jure would load them and head the fast way to the next night's stop where they would be waiting for us in our rooms.

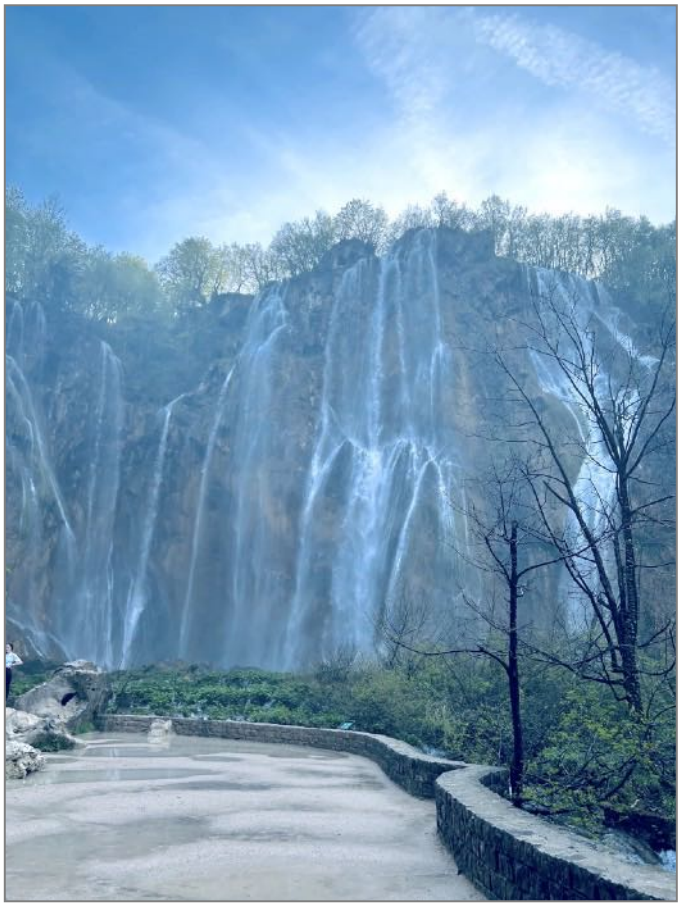
Our first day from Ljubljana, Slovenia to Plitvice Lake National Park in Croatia was not a long one as we were going to the park after arrival. It was mixture of some scenic twisties and more brisk roads. Weather threatened, but held off. Matej was excited to report that the border stop between Slovenia and Croatia

was very recently no more which really sped things up. No one likes to fiddle for passports and registrations with no tank bag so we were happy too. At coffee Matej said he would be staging/ arranging our bike parking for the whole trip. Wait. WHAT? As a stubby legged person, I had won a lottery in my mind. As much as we tried to nicely park, he would just say "leave it", and we would come out and find all of our bikes perfectly arranged for a speedy departure.

I am not sure how this policy developed. I am guessing it is a time saver, conserves space in small parking lots, and prevents damage from dropped bikes. Don't know but loved it, even though I felt shameful about it… at least for the first few stops, and then the feeling faded. I wished I had filmed him spinning a 1250 GS on the side stand like it was a toy. Masterful! Hopefully I will be able to park my own bike again. I will keep you posted.

We arrived at the beautiful boutique hotel outside the park at about 2:30PM. We met shortly after changing into hiking clothes for a very short cab ride to Plitvice Lake National Park. I was not at all prepared to see this place. It truly was one of the most beautiful places I have every seen, a gem of Croatia (like Yosemite or Yellowstone is to the US). It was absolutely pristine, no development, and little manmade intervention outside of the wooden walkways, open air bus and ferry that moved visitors from one part of the park to the other. Did we think we would do a 5 mile hike after 6 hours of motorcycling? No, but we loved it. We were treated to more waterfalls than you could count, multiple beautiful clear blue lakes and lush vegetation. Truly stunning!

As we got on the ferry to explore another part of the park we had a heavy rain shower just as we got on. Perfect timing since it was covered. It was true serenity hearing the rain on the metal roof with the gentle thunder in the distance.



After a straight-from-the-river trout dinner, I sank into my comfy bed for a good night sleep. The next day we were riding through the forest along the border to Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, a 212 mile day.

In the morning we awoke to light showers. Time to test out if my riding gear is actually waterproof. I had packed and unpacked 2 different jackets before this trip at least a dozen times trying to anticipate the right one.

I have an Alpinestars "Andes" jacket with built in rain liner which made the final cut for the trip. A perfect jacket except this this thing has strange vents to nowhere so there were some times where I got overheated. This is the second time I have toured in it in varied weather, and it did well (almost) the whole trip. For pants, I had Dianese D - "Dry" pants (you'll see why dry is in quotes later). I had only worn them a couple times before this trip and never in the rain because remember, we don't ride in the rain voluntarily. Gloves were Klim Gore-tex winter gloves (you stink Klim!). For the light showers all the gear held up well, although my hands were a bit damp [insert foreshadowing music].

Here is where I give a shout out to the pavement over there. I am not sure how exactly but I am guessing it is compounded differently. The grip on wet pavement was amazing. I know they don't have a the build up of oil that we do, and probably better drainage, and no sand, but it was more than that. As long as the visibility was good enough you could really keep speeds up. Although we ran into a shower most days we never had an issue until one special day (keep reading!). I sprayed Rain-X on my visor, but not sure if it helped because once again, I don't ride in the rain much so had no way to compare. My Shark helmet has no pin lock so I opened the vents on top and in the front and it seemed to help the fogging up some.

In a matter of time, the light rain soon disappeared and the sun was shining and I was right behind Matej lost in the lines as we spirited through more serpentine curves than I felt I deserved in life. Yup, I was pressed deep into that zone of smooth asphalt delivering glimpses of nature as far as the eye could see. A few surprise switch backs here and there would snap my brain from disappearing into the meditative abyss completely.

It was an absolute pleasure to let loose after some relatively well-behaved riding. I can say having a guide had some significant benefit. The roads post very civilized speed limits and Matej knew where the speed cameras were, and apparently there were plenty. It would be very easy, even on a 310, to stack up a lot of tickets without our minder. It was a bit agonizing at times to not really rip things up a bit more because some pretty epic motorcycle roads were unfolding in front of us. With that said it made it quite the treat when we would switch from a leisurely pace, to suddenly brisk. Just when you thought your face would break from smiling it was time to roll off the throttle and go back to enjoying the scenery again like a respectable tourist.

Before long we were enjoying a staple of the Balkans, delicious grilled Cevapi (sausages), and a beautiful salad before a nature walk to to the Blue and Red Lakes. After this is was on to the border crossing into Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). While we waited for all the bikes to get through, I chatted road side with the agent, telling him I had been looking forward to seeing this area for a long time. He was earnest in telling me about how the war trauma is worn on the sleeves of locals. His brother disappeared in 1992 and was never found. He was warm and pleasant and brightened telling me about his GS, which of course he showed me a picture. Connection is everywhere.

Shortly after getting through the border, we made our way very slowly down a steep mountain behind trucks. It had been a long day, and we were all happy to arrive at the hotel for a quick shower before visiting the old town of Mostar and to hear the experience of a Muslim survivor of the war who lost her beloved father in the conflict. We were shown a gut wrenching video of the iconic bridge being destroyed. To remind you that there had been a brutal war there were still multiple bombed buildings, with only the

shell remaining.

The bridge was built in 1566 under the Ottoman Empire, and destroyed in 1993 after 24 hours of shelling. The main reason it was bombed was to crush moral as it had significant cultural importance to the community. Apparently the architect who designed it took his own life the day before it opened as he doubted its integrity. One can imagine it would have lasted for centuries more without the attack.

As part of the reconstruction stones were salvaged from the river bed to try and incorporate them as much as possible into the new structure. The new bridge was completed in 2004 with much fanfare. The stones were so polished from centuries of footsteps there were rope "handrails" across it to avoid slipping when walking.

The next day we would head from Mostar to Dubrovnik, Croatia. Heading out of Mostar, we made a stop at the in Blagaj a tiny community at the source of the Buna River. This Sufi Devish monastery has the same distinctive design seen around Mostar. This building was originally constructed in the 1520's but according to the Internet, has had numerous repair/ renovations since then.

Later, lunch was "meat under a lid", very popular and delicious. Many restaurants in the region had outdoor ovens to make this specialty. Moving along…

Entering beautiful Dubrovnik, our jaws dropped as the old city came into view. Through the centuries the city rivaled Venice in trading. The walls and other structures were built starting in the 11th century (!).

According the our local guide, when the walls needed to it fortified it was required to bring a rock - the biggest you can carry - into the city for entrance. I hope this story is true because I love it.

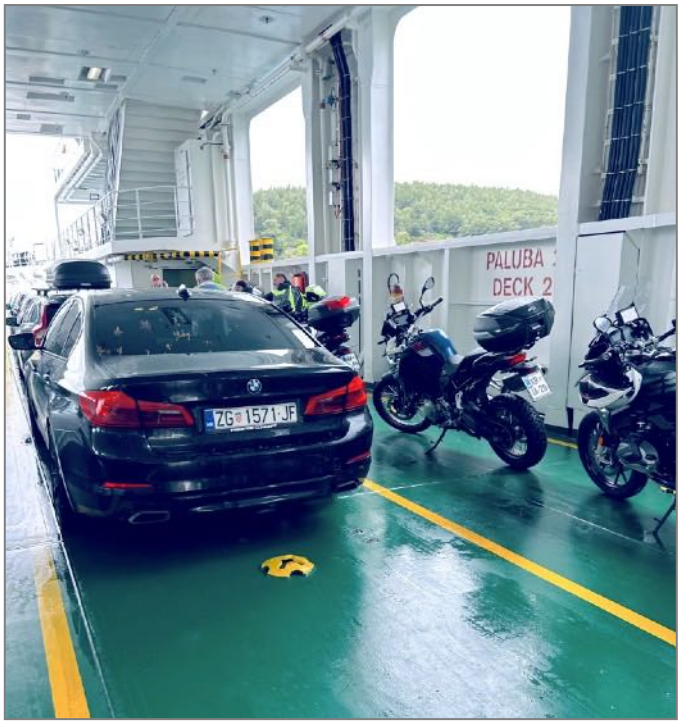
We made our way through the busy streets to our lovely hotel where Jure was waiting with local beer to greet us in the garage. I promptly acted out my version of the ugly American when I trudged into the refined lobby and promptly spilled my beer on the front reception desk in front of dozens of onlookers. I pretended to be Canadian.

The next day was our one and only rest day. Jure graciously led a small group to the small nation of Montenegro. Another group of us met up with a local guide that Matej had arranged as we had a remarkably interesting walking tour where we avoided the throngs of cruise ship passengers as much as possible. After the tour, Matej took us to a hidden cliffside cafe for coffee/wine/beer. Then we were turned loose. I explored tiny museums, and I think I walked every corner of the city, where I decided I earned lunch #1 (cuttlefish risotto on the waterfront) and lunch #2 (grilled octopus). It was truly a marvel but I did not take many pics, as there were so.many.cruise ship tourists…and more than a few acting out Game of Thrones since it was filmed here (I have never watched).

At some point in my peaceful slumber that night I heard a huge crash of thunder, my ajar window blew open, and torrential rain could be heard. Oh dang it. Before long it was wake up time, and I peered out the the window again to see gusty wind and heavy rain [insert California girl gasp!]. I opened the weather app and cringed. Ugh. So much yellow and orange on the map. Down at breakfast I chatted with Jure who cheerfully offered to throw the 310 in the van and deliver to the next stop, Hvar Island. Sold to the charming Slovenia man!

Now I could have ridden with Jure in the van but he is all business loading luggage and rushing to get to the next stop. So no Delicious Lunch Stop. Enter Chris, an Australian taking the tour in a car which means I could participate in the Delicious Lunch Stop (and also good company). As it happened three us ended up with Chris. We followed behind the bikes as they slogged through the heavy rain, hit by waves of water if they happened to be passing oncoming vehicles at the wrong time.

We reconnected at coffee and lunch. This is an area where Bosnia has a snippet of coastline and as such up until recently this required border crossings to get in and out. Croatia decided to build the cable stayed



Pelješac Bridge from the peninsula to the mainland to skirt this requirement. It was open less than a year so we were pioneers trying it out. Then it was time for a short ferry ride to the very special Hvar Island where the bikes hung out next to the cars.

As the ferry approached Hvar, the clouds parted showing the beautiful jewel of an island with a wonderful twisty road running the length of it. I quickly forgot that unlike my riding companions I had been warm and dry for the last few hours and suddenly yearned for the 310, but alas I had made my boring bed by sending it away in the van and now had to lie in it.

We checked into the most stunning hotel of the trip, a gorgeous resort overlooking the Adriatic. Jure walked me to my room and I was surprised by the sea view. I should note that today was my birthday. I am not into making fanfare for birthday AT ALL, but this day was starting to feel really special, and my heart swelled. I soaked up the beauty of the room in the hour or so before we met up again to take a walk to the harbor/ town to explore.

There was helpful signage to make sure we behaved. Jure sternly went over the rules, yet made suggestions for later.

Then it was time for a very special dining experience. We were shuttled to a hidden charming farm along the coast for dinner. They only accept a few private parties at a time. The Adriatic owner has developed a relationship with the proprietor years ago and even though he had scaled back, he still welcomed Adriatic guests. Everything was harvested locally from land and sea, a highlight being the sea bass. The wine and grappa were even made on site. We were all blown away.

Matej our ride lead and restaurant owner sharing his homemade grappa. My birthday desert plate was so kind and unexpected!

The next day we were happy to see the sun as Matej had told us if it was raining we would not take the scenic route to the ferry for Split. We left the hotel, traveling through narrow streets of town, and headed up into the hills to see panoramic views unfold.

We felt like we were on top of the world in every sense of the word (please note in this picture I am on the left side of the road as out of frame there is pull out that we stopped at, I did not ride ride on the wrong side otherwise!). Spoiler alert is in the sky.

Before long, it was time for the 2 hour ferry ride to Split, and on to Zadar to the north. Leaving gentle Hvar to bustling Split definitely woke us up as we went from narrow island twisties with no cars to bustling urban traffic in the popular Split.

Finally we were out of the city and underway again. I think at some point my memories of the rest of the day got a bit scrambled. We had been heading along the beautiful coast line and Matej pulled us over and strongly suggested rain gear. The sunshine was

fighting with the black clouds, and the flickers of lightening to the east began.

Then the rain started. Heavy rain. I noticed it really hurt. More so than the other rain. I also noticed the road had….piles of white gravel? Salt? I wondered what kind of trucks would be dropping this mess for perhaps a couple of miles. And it got slick. The 310's tiny rear wheel was not liking this one bit. The thunder and lightening made my heart sink. My mind was not computing what it really was: Hail. We mostly stayed in the tracks cars had made, but at times I had to cross over the piles where water/mud pooled in the road. It had iced under the piles, and it was slick. A 310r is not known as an adventure bike, but it sure became one that day. I reminded him, whispering (ok maybe yelling) in my helmet of the pact we made the first day: NO scratches. I darkly added "or making me dead" (ok maybe I was being dramatic). I decided to take my chances with riding in the pooling water over crossing a hail pile. Finally, a place to pull off, a gas station. Matej told us to wait and headed back the other way. Our mood sunk when we noticed two bikes missing. Then as we looked at phones we saw the dreaded text from the ride sweep pillion Janet on the WhatsApp group chat: SOS. Bike down.

As we fretted at the gas station Matej called with news. One of our group had indeed gone down. Most importantly he was OK!! But the poor V-Strom was not. Unrideable. The rim was bent so much the tire was flat and bits and pieces had broken off. He let us know we should use the GPS to go to the hotel, about an hour or so away. Meanwhile he would sort out getting the bike picked up by Jure who was almost at the hotel with the luggage, which he valiantly delivered to our rooms before doubling back for the V-Strom. Luckily Australian Chris with the car was on scene and drove our fellow rider to the hotel (otherwise he would have been Matej's pillion or waited for the Adriatic van).

This was some monster hail. Luckily most of it fell just before us, so we did not experience the brunt, at least as it was falling. I cannot imagine. It had melted quite a bit when the pic with the bike was taken, at the time the tracks were more narrow.

We made our way to the hotel. Slowly. The rain had stopped but I think we were all somewhat rattled. It did not help that we passed 2 car accidents, one of them pretty bad looking. If cars could not handle this, we were pretty bad a** for doing it on two wheels. Arriving at the hotel in Zadar, an otherwise basic undertaking felt like an absolute triumph. We were greeted with sunshine, beautiful Zadar pretending

like nothing had ever happened.

Once again, a quick refresh before a before an exploring walk to dinner. Zadar was a lovely city. Along the waterfront we experienced the famous "Sea Organ" which were tubes placed at the waterfront which played depending on waves. It was a wonderful juxtaposition of nature, design, and physics. Dozens of people sat on the steps just peacefully taking it in. On to dinner, our still somewhat pensive crew seemed especially ready for pre dinner beverages.

After dinner Matej had wanted to take us back to the waterfront to experience a unique light installation but we all quickly banned together and vetoed this idea hard. We were cooked. Night-night time. When we returned to the hotel, Jure was just returning from the V-Strom retrieval. Bless him for a long day and muscling a flat-tired bike on the van solo.

It was hard to believe, but our last riding day had arrived. Matej informed us we were in for a treat, one of the most beautiful stretches of the Magitrala, AKA the Adriatic Coastal Road. The sun was shining, this was going to be amazing. This road is a destination for motorcyclists from several countries in the region, and for good reason. We were treated to sweeper, after sweeper on perfect pavement along the sparkling Adriatic. It was Saturday morning and for quite some time all we ever saw was motorcyclists.

This felt like the perfect cap off to days of wonderful riding. We started to head north and through beautiful forest back into Slovenia. After a wonderful lunch we saw the black clouds forming. Rain gear time. Again. The rain was very light at first and did not slow us down going through the countryside. After awhile it picked up and Matej got on the highway to reduce the travel time back. By then the rain was very heavy. We just forged on, maybe an hour in the downpour. With only the white pavement line on the shoulder and a faint taillight ahead of me to guide me, I hoped for the best! At least my Helite vest got a power washing and returned to looking brand-new. Also at this point I was starting to get wet. Pants, gloves and even the jacket were at the breaking point. I definitely need to find better gloves, or glove covers. As fas as the rest of it…I don't anticipate in riding in the rain this heavy anytime soon, so as long as they do their job in regular rain showers I am good for now. But Dianese should not claim these "D Dry" pants are waterproof!

Pulling into the AMT garage I breathed a sigh of relief, we made it! We enjoyed a champagne toast and I thanked the 310r for keeping up on his end of the pact: no scratches. But it was also sad to say good bye to the experience. Participating in a group tour exceeded my exceptions. The people in this region had kind and welcoming energy, the roads were beautiful, food amazing and fellow riders and tour leaders was the icing on the cake. I am already dreaming about my next trip. Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions. More info on Adriatic Moto Tours:

https://www.adriaticmototours.com/

(Many thanks to my riding companions for letting me steal some of their pics for this)

Comments