

# ALPS

*The Easy Way*

**BEACH'S MOTORCYCLE  
ADVENTURES' ALPINE  
ADVENTURE WEST TOUR**

**A** motorcycle trip in Europe's Alps is likely on your bucket list, but such a trip is daunting. You'll have to arrange for a bike, book hotels and, possibly, convince others to share the experience with you. Finally, if anything goes wrong during your trip, who would you call? Well, traveling with a motorcycle tour company solves all those problems at once.

Last July, I took a Beach's Motorcycle Adventures tour of the western Alps that attracted 20 participants, 18 of whom were veterans of previous Beach tours; this percentage of repeat riders speaks volumes about these tours and the support that tour leaders Rob and Gretchen Beach provide for their customers. Most members of our tour group had flown into Zurich, Switzerland, and converged upon nearby Baden. All were from the United States except for a delightful couple from New Zealand.

When our bikes arrived, we were introduced to the BMW motorcycles we had reserved from Beach's rental fleet. Besides saddlebags, each was equipped with a GPS unit programmed so that we could ride one of several recommended daily routes or explore on our own. Rob instructed us on how to use the GPS units, and we were on our way.

Our 12-day tour through Switzerland, France and Italy began with a Tuesday ride from Baden southwest to Ornans, France. We first passed through an industrialized area with a good deal of traffic, but the Europeans often utilize roundabouts rather than stop lights so we kept moving regardless. The tour book we were given was filled with all sorts of historical and practical information about our two or three daily suggested routes, along with a map, all loaded into the GPS. They were often on small, local roads we would not likely have found on our own.

## STORY AND PHOTOS BY BILL STERMER

In the Alps, a motorcycle is the best means by which to explore the rugged terrain, twisty roads, cafés and summer snow fields. And a tour company, such as Beach's Motorcycle Adventures, makes it all possible. (Photo by Gretchen Beach.)



For weeks prior to the tour we had been receiving correspondence from the Beaches enlightening us to such considerations as foreign currencies, tipping, overseas phone calls, use of ATMs, credit cards, dress codes, packing tips and more. Then a month prior, here came a beautiful luggage bag for each participant, embroidered with the Beach's logo and our names! The strong suggestion was to pack no more (other than riding gear) than what could fit in this bag. On traveling days we would set this packed bag in the hotel lobby, then van driver Henri would transport it to our next hotel and the bag would be waiting in our rooms when we arrived.

**Above: An impromptu cruise on Lake Lucerne revealed views of gorgeous homes, hotels and mountains. Left: In Gruyères, Switzerland, we were treated to a dinner of its famous cheese fondue in an outdoor setting. Inset: Dinners, such as this salmon plate in Moustiers-Saint-Marie, France, were universally impressive and delicious.**



Soon our trip settled into a pleasant rhythm. European hotel breakfasts usually consist of sliced meats and cheeses, with croissants and breads, plus tea or coffee. Breakfasts and our varied, delicious dinners were included with the tour price, except for two dinners when we stayed a second night at the same hotel. This allowed us to explore the local restaurants.

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On our first Wednesday we rode to Talloires, France, where our hotel overlooked Lake Annecy and a distant castle across the water. This was followed by a free day on which most of the riders went off to explore the countryside, while our passengers stayed in town to explore the local shops.

As we gathered for breakfast Friday morning, we found Rob at a table surrounded by a stack of GPS units. We learned that the Tour de France bicycle race was passing near our intended route, roads were closed, and we would have to re-route if we hoped to reach our next hotel at a reasonable hour. Now Rob was hard at work programming a new route for our convenience.

Our route took us to Rencurel, France, passing through several tunnels and a stunning gorge in which the road actually undercut the mountain. When riding in the States, I spend most of my travel time in fifth and sixth gear. In the Alps, however, I spent most of my time in second and third gear. As a result, a 150-mile ride in the U.S. that takes three hours may take twice that long on the tight, twisty roads and first-gear hairpins of the Alps. Most of our riding days here were four to six hours, plus stops. Also, summers can be hot in the Alps and

Left, top: The old bridge in Lucerne, Switzerland, lured us to take a stroll. Far left: Rob and Gretchen Beach were our amiable and informed guides. Left: The interior of the Atrium Hotel Blume in Baden, Switzerland, was inviting indeed. Below: Our hotel in Moustiers-Saint-Marie, France, offered a charming view of the mountains.

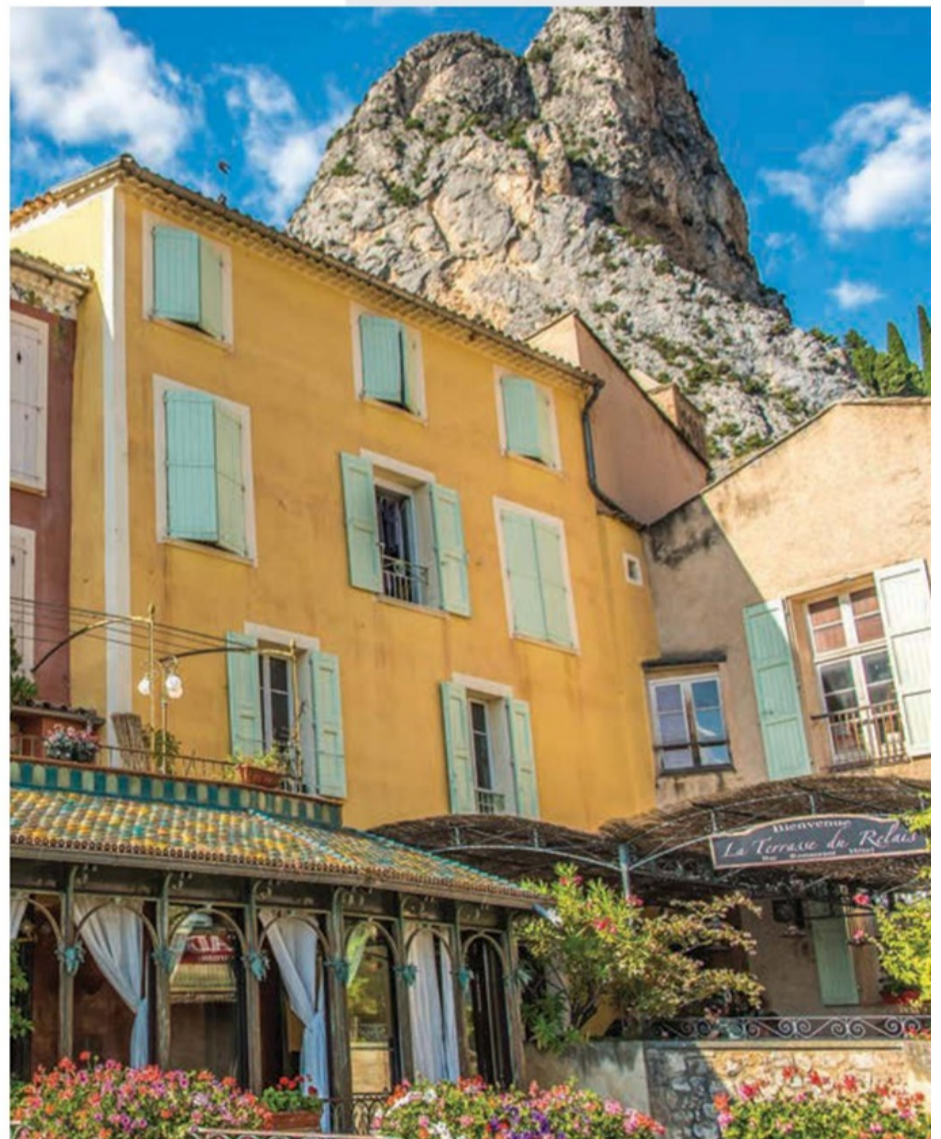


PHOTO BY GRETCHEN BEACH



Above: Our tour members quickly coalesced into a group of riding friends. Top right: The Grand St. Bernard Pass offers food, lodging and spectacular views. Inset: St. Bernard's statue still stands guard at the pass named in his honor. Bottom: Narrow roads and tight turns indicate that a smaller bike may be preferable to a larger one in the Alps.

most hotels here—though delightful—do not have air conditioning.

The Alps involve very tight, technical roads that will test your slow-speed riding ability on multiple series of hairpin turns. Some were so tight that, on several occasions, I swear I could see my own taillight in front of me! For these tight mountain roads you don't need a big bike, but something more agile. I had requested a BMW R 1200 RT for my passenger

Frances' comfort, but had I been solo would have preferred perhaps an F 700 GS.

That Sunday we came within sight of Moustiers-Saint-



Marie, France, a town set high against the backdrop of a massive gray wall of rocks, the buildings painted a complementary shade. This was to be our stop for the next two nights, and we found our hotel situated next to a beautiful arched bridge, below which flowed a steep, narrow, powerful waterfall. Its pleasant whoosh would be the backdrop for our sleep those nights.

Our next travel day, Tuesday, we headed for Auron, France, and were soon immersed in the sweet fragrance of lavender fields and the sight of acres of sunflowers shaking their yellow heads in the light breeze. Now we began to enjoy the ultimate mountain experience as we rode over some of the Alps' highest passes. All the way up Cime de la Bonette, the highest at 2,802 meters (9,193 feet), were cars,





Did someone say something about tight roads? At times I could swear I saw my own taillight in front of me!

motorcycles and bicycles, then a plaque at the top. I was feeling quite a sense of accomplishment for having ridden here...until I met a bicyclist from Chicago who had pedaled his way to the top.

On the next Thursday, from Sauze d'Oulx to Courmayeur, my co-pilot Frances and I encountered Rob and Gretchen who asked, "Do you want to have a picnic?" When we enthusiastically agreed they led us to a small specialty shop where we bought bread, sliced meats and cheeses. Then at an ancient bridge on the Col de l'Iseran (9,088 feet) we hiked past an old block building where, on a rocky, flower-strewn hilltop, Gretchen produced our repast as the far-off mountains shone with a necklace of glacial snow.


In Italy we were also fully immersed in the Alps experience, riding through small villages with streets barely wide enough for a car...or a wagon when they were constructed centuries ago. We encountered people strolling, flower boxes on windows from which emanated the fragrance of cooking or pipe tobacco. There is usually a war monument or two, sad reminders of those lost. Permanent glacial snow fields slump in the mountains, sending waterfalls rushing beside the road, sun so brilliant it can make you cry, rain so hard the pavement looks like a shag rug.

These tours allow one to interact with the locals on pre-selected routes. Rob led us to a restaurant in Courmayeur,

where over dinner the friendly owner sang and mingled with our group like the uncle I used to have.

I want to stress that the Alps with their narrow roads, hairpin turns and changeable weather can be daunting, but Rob, Gretchen and van driver Henri went out of their way to care for their tour participants. When one rider had a mishap four hours from the hotel, Rob and Henri drove out to retrieve him and his bike. When some had trouble understanding the GPS, Rob conducted a mini seminar in addition to the group seminar. When Frances needed a backrest, Henri rigged one up for her from a step stool and rear seat from the spare bike. Not confident finding your way around? You're invited to follow Rob and Gretchen to the next hotel.

In short, during our Alps experience with Beach's Motorcycle Adventures we were well informed and cared for, our bikes pre-arranged and we gained many new friends with whom to share the experience. With nearly 200 tours under his belt, Rob Beach has the details dialed in. And when we returned home, we found that Gretchen had posted a 23-minute video of our tour that we could show our friends via the Internet. In all, a thoroughly enjoyable time.

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*The Beach's Alpine Adventure West will run August 25-September 8, 2019; for more info visit [bmca.com](http://bmca.com). *