

BEACH-COMBER

THE BEAR JOINS BEACH'S MOTORCYCLE ADVENTURES TO RESEARCH HIS BUCKET LIST AND GETS MUCH MORE THAN HE BARGAINED FOR.





THE CORSICAN CAPER

Countersteering is your friend. I didn't actually think about that with the Peugeot's left headlight aimed straight at my knee at a closing speed of some 35km/h; I just applied it. Hard.

As I skidded along the edge of the road in a spray of gravel, sliding on my side but still hanging onto the BMW, I played back in my mind what had just happened, including the explosive bang as the car hit my pannier just outboard of my knee.

It's funny; usually I have protective amnesia about my crashes. This time it's

all crystal clear. Well, except for the layer of dirt which now coated my Touratech Compañero suit and the right-hand side of the F 650 GS. The Peugeot had come around the hairpin in a slight slide — I'm sure he would have said that he was on the right side of the narrow tar, but I would have claimed the same for myself — just as I was turning into the same bend, a corner or two below the Col de Verde high in the Corsican mountains. The damage to the car was a smashed headlight and some bent tin. The BMW suffered a ripped plastic pannier, found a dozen metres away in the scrub, and a few scrapes. There was no damage to me whatsoever, except for a sore shoulder.

Thank you, Touratech, And thank you, a lifetime of riding and unconsciously practising countersteering.

The driver made sure I was okay, but

he wasn't interested in exchanging details for insurance ("pour l'Assurance? Pah.") or anything else. He did give me a luggage shoulder strap to secure the pannier back on. We stood there among the fragrant conifers, his dented car on one side and my bike on the other. We gave each other the approved Gallic shrug complete with protruding lower lip and hand gesture, wished each other bon voyage and carried on.

Zis is 'ow she is done, ze crash, in La France — or at least in Haute Corse.

LET'S START AT THE BEGINNING

Indeed, let's start before the beginning. Rob Beach, who has run the tours with his wife Gretchen since the retirement of the founders, his parents, read in this magazine that I was compiling my Bucket List of roads to ride before "the day on which you don't get out of the way of the Peugeot with your name on it". He emailed me to say that any Beach's tour would offer me at least a couple of mountain passes that would be serious candidates and I finally managed to get the time to take him up on his kind offer to demonstrate. I joined the 2012 Corsican Caper which started in Munich, traversed the Western Alps and then the Alpes-Maritimes before crossing to Corsica, which is where you found me sliding along through the roadside dirt.

But enough of that for now. *This* is where the story really starts.

When I arrived in Munich, Lufthansa had lost my luggage. Not entirely their fault; Qantas had been late into Frankfurt. Beach's van driver, Kiwi Al Walker (Ghost Who Drives Van), didn't seem perturbed — it happens all the time — and introduced me to two of my fellow tourers who

had also just arrived, Lorelei and Gabe French from California. Later that day at the pleasant hotel I met most of the others: Steve Peterson from Colorado, Pip Pullen-Swope and Susan Swope from Louisville and of course Gretchen and Rob themselves. It would be a couple of days before my roommate Uwe Krauss, a German journalist, joined us. With the addition of Luke, Rob and Gretchen's large and even-tempered brown dog, that was the team. Luke was very good about my Australian brown dog jokes, just looking at me quizzically instead of biting me.

FEST, FEAST AND THE FIRST PASS

A day at Oktoberfest demonstrated that this enormous celebration hasn't really changed since I last attended forty years ago. I'll bet that the bikes they were using for the Wall of Death were the same ones.

Our bikes were waiting in the morning — mostly R 1200 GSs, except for an F 800 R for Lorelei and F 650 GSs for Pip (who didn't have a lot of experience — something that would be sorted for him on the ride) and me. They were equipped with pre-programmed GPS units set up for use as maps and not for directions, which worked very well. Getting away was delayed slightly when Steve broke a valve stem off while checking tyre pressures. Nobody knew how he could possibly have done that, but fortunately we were at a bike shop and the drastically shortened item was replaced on the spot.

We were on our way, luggage (including the terrific embroidered Beach's roller bags supplied to everyone) safely in the van and day-use luggage in our panniers. The lower Bavarian weather was fairly kind and we made good time south to and

through Liechtenstein and Switzerland. I wonder if the somewhat dour attitude of the Liechtensteiners is part of the package they get from the Swiss that includes the money and the postage stamps?

The Swiss coffee, by the way, was awful. Thin.

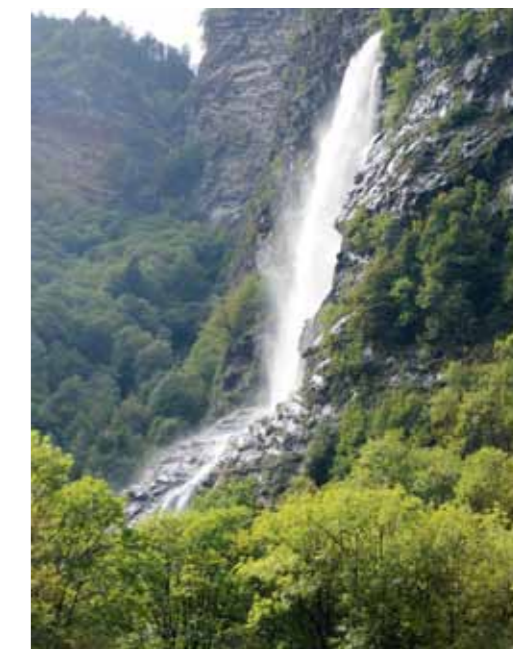
This first day was really a bit of a shakedown cruise over a few minor passes. Our first overnight stop in Feldkirch, Austria, was a pleasant hotel called the Alpenrose (that doesn't need translating, eh?) and dinner in the hotel was excellent. Dinners on "riding days" are included in the cost of the tour, while on "rest days" you're on your own. Rob took the opportunity to reinforce the basic "Beach attitude" he had explained at the original briefing — in short, you take responsibility for yourself but they're always there as backup. Can't ask for fairer than that.

My roomie Uwe had arrived by now, riding his own KTM, and we headed off to a local bar for a couple of drinks after dinner. Interesting bloke — he'd taken six years to ride around the world, going just about everywhere, before settling down in his home town in what had been East Germany. Good photographer, too.

The first of the serious passes was waiting the next day. I had never tackled the San Bernardino Pass. Back on our around-the-world ride, my mate Charlie and I took the Saint Gotthard Pass, a little further to the west and slightly higher. I remember that it was so cold that we had icicles in our beards by the time we were across, so I was ready for the ice and snow. The San Bernardino fooled me completely by being only moderately cold despite extensive snowfields. I think you will read more about this pass in future; it

is certainly much more entertaining than the Stelvio.


Into each life, they say, some rain must fall — and a bucket of it fell on us after we'd crossed the main range. It continued more or less until we reached our hotel for the night in Verbania Pallanza on Lago Maggiore. We also hit heavy traffic, apparently unavoidable through Bellinzona. A short stop to look over a castle in Bellinzona made a good break, especially when Gretchen took us on an underground walk halfway around the town's walls. Don't sightseers usually walk on top of the walls? We were so grateful to see daylight again. 60





POO TO THE PO

The Grand Hotel Majestic on Lago Maggiore was exactly that — grand and majestic, and beautifully set in manicured gardens by the lake. I stripped off my wet outer suit and hung it up to dry. Then I headed off to the bar for a celebratory beer wearing the inner suit, because Al had had a problem with the van and our luggage wasn't there. Nobody seemed to mind; everyone was happy despite the rain.

I should just mention the Touratech Compañero suit I was testing on this ride. I've described it in detail elsewhere in this issue, but let me mention that it had been perfect so far. I had had the full suit on — inner and outer — with just bike shorts and a t-shirt underneath and it had been both comfortable in freezing weather and dry in the rain. The signs were good so far and of course the suit came through with flying colours even in a crash test. 

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Milan pumped its raw sewage into the Po River until 2005. Maybe, I thought, that was why it was called the Po. This came to mind on the next day as we made our way across the tragically polluted Po River plain, west of Milan. Something as simple as a genuinely blue sky is almost unknown here due to the muck in the air, and in a way I was just as glad that we were on a transport stage on the Autostrada.

This was the only time on the entire trip when I was a little sorry that I was on the 800 (they're only *called* a 650) rather than a 1200 GS. The company was hooking along and the smaller bike couldn't match the big bruisers for overtaking response. All the rest of the time I felt a bit smug on my "little" vertical twin.

We looped around Turin and continued south-west. After lunch in a remote mountain restaurant — I have no idea how anyone would ever find this place! — we continued to the Colle Di Sampeyre. Happily, it was absolute magic; a tiny, narrow road through thick forest, with almost no space at the edges of the tar (as Pip found out when he encountered a car coming the other way and transferred some of its paint to his pannier). The border crossing into France was at the Col Agnel, the fourth-highest paved pass in the Alps and lots of curvy fun, especially at the end of a day mostly spent on the Autostrada.

The road then went down, and down, and down — more than 60km of what seemed like uninterrupted downhill — to our overnight stop in Embrun where the Hotel de la Mairie was waiting for us. I asked, in my "Arab" French, "Madam, avez-vous un ascenseur?"

"Oui, la," she responded, pointing to the back of the restaurant. Just as well; I would not have been able to carry my bag up two flights of stairs.

FREEDOM'S JUST ANOTHER WORD

The next day was "free" and we could choose what to do, but the bikes were available if we wanted them. What's this "if"? Like me, almost everyone was here to ride.

With my interest in Bucket List roads in mind, Rob suggested that I take a look at the Col du Galibier, north of Briançon and an offshoot from the Col du Lautaret. Two passes for the price of one, plus a small detour also allowed me to include the Col d'Izoard, a pass that several of you readers had suggested for the list.

An early start had me heading up the spectacular valley on the left bank of the Durance River, high up on a cliffside road with wonderful views over to the mountains on the other side. Unlike Italy across the range to my right, France seems to have worked out how to keep its air transparent.

I didn't zoom in enough on the GPS at the big roundabout outside Guillestre and headed up to the Col de Vars instead of the Izoard, but eventually figured it out. Navigating by GPS takes a little bit of learning if you want to follow your route instead of the one the satellites insist on, but it can be done successfully. Once on the right road and backtracking on the route we had come the previous day, I soon found the correct turnoff. **60**



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The Col d'Izoard is like most Alpine passes in one way — it's quite different depending on which way you approach it. Usually there is some rain shadow or other climatic difference, which makes not only for a change in vegetation but also quite dissimilar erosion, and therefore a different road pattern. The Stelvio Pass is a perfect example with which many of you may be acquainted; its southern side is much gentler than the north. With the Col d'Izoard it's also a gentler climb from the south, although in this case it is through forest and along ridges, with a hairpin-strewn drop on the northern side. But what really makes this pass is the bit at the top — an eerie moonscape that reminded me more of the Bungle Bungles in Western Australia than of anything else.

You come around a right-hander near the top and find yourself facing a vast scree slope where many thousands of tonnes of rock must have thundered down into the valley at one time. But that's not the weird part. Sticking out of this mass of loose stones is a collection of vertical rock pillars, which seem to both anchor the slope and make its steepness more impressive. The road just kind of wanders through this, looking a bit apologetic and apprehensive about more rock falls.

An amazing place, in the real sense of the word. The average gradient over its short 14km is seven per cent, with some of it at 10 per cent or more. It's even part of the Tour de France.

I enjoyed Briançon as well, even though the main gate to the old city was closed and undergoing repairs. I sneaked around the back instead and found a warren of tiny streets between the stone buildings, almost impossible for cars to negotiate (although

the French manage fine) but ideal for a bike like the F 650 GS. Not for the first or the last time I blessed my decision to ask for the smaller bike rather than a 1200.

TWO FOR THE PRICE OF ONE

The run up the N91 to the Col du Lautaret is one of those valley roads that just sucks you in with its relatively gentle and beautifully surveyed curves until you're going properly fast. At various places you can see the old road tunnels which have been replaced by more sophisticated (and also, I suspect, expensive) open air road with much better corners. Fortunately, the gendarmes were not interested in German-rego BMWs and let me slip by. Actually, they didn't seem very interested in anything. Maybe they were thinking of the French equivalent of doughnuts — beignets?

The top of the pass opens up to a seriously impressive panorama of the snow-capped Massif des Écrins, or the Big Jewel Cases. I ordered lunch at the small café that faces the mountains and sat outside, despite the fact that it was cool even in the sunshine. I wanted to make the most of that view.

The turnoff to the real target of this diversion was back a little, almost exactly at the top of the present pass. A narrow but recently surfaced road strikes off to the north to the Col du Galibier, a fairly remote pass that gives access to the valley of the Isère River. It's only about 600 metres higher than Lautaret but, as the crow flies, the road climbs it in about the same distance. Naturally it's a bit further to ride because there is a seemingly endless series of switchbacks, hairpins and other assorted corners with a steep uphill slope on one



side, a steep downhill slope on the other and absolutely no runoff. The road finishes with the edge of the narrow tar.

I almost visited the trackless valley a thousand feet or two below when I mistook a sharp hairpin for no corner at all, and fervently thanked Mr Brembo when the front wheel stopped a few millimetres from the edge.

The top of Galibier was cold, much colder than my lunch stop below. I admired the dedication of the small group of lycra-clad bicyclists until I noticed that they were simultaneously sweat-soaked and shivering with the chill. Rather than riding down, they were loading their bikes into a van after making the climb from the north. Isn't

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it good that there's room in this world for everyone?

On the way back to Embrun I took one of Rob's recommended back roads, commonly known as "Rob Routes". It ran back down the right bank of the Durance and high up on the hillside along tracks that frequently bisected farmyards, running between barn and smelly animal stalls or wood shed after wood shed. It was great fun anticipating just what the narrow, broken tar would do next and sneaking the occasional look down into the highly scenic (and probably far less malodorous) valley.

For a while. I had been eyeing the GPS display with some interest because it suddenly stopped at a dot called Les Clots. Quite a long way from Embrun, far below in the valley, it just stopped. What did this mean? There was no enlightenment as I reached the dot. In front of me was a T junction and there was no more guidance from the GPS. I was, both physically and mentally, lost. Fortunately a woodcutter — just like in

the *Snow White* movie but shorter and kind of nuggety, and with a chain saw rather than an axe — was busy by the side of the road.

"Embrun?" he asked with raised eyebrows and jutting chin, engaged in the timeless and international game of "correct the tourist's pronunciation". "Hmm. Embrun. Ah, *Ambrun!* A bas." Down the hill? Yes, it seemed, and I couldn't miss it because there were no side roads on the way to the Route Nationale.

I later found out that you should just reload the route on your GPS if this sort of thing happens. I don't know; I had more fun having my pronunciation corrected.

TASTE FRENCH MUD, ÉTRANGER

There was a typical and typically wonderful farmers' market in Embrun the next morning, and then our forces were divided. This was unusual because most days you are free to ride any way you like — there are usually several suggestions in the excellent route book.

"Uwe, the Bear and Gabe will come with us on the dirt through the Tunnel de Parpaillon. The rest of you will take the Col de Vars and we'll meet in Jausiers," Rob said.

Alarm bells should have rung, of course, especially since it was raining and it always rains when I take really awful roads. But I'm a tough old Bear and I can take it. Anywhere that Rob's old Rubber Cow GS can go — two up — I can go. Just not necessarily upright.

Gabe captured the crash in video on his GoPro camera and showed it at dinner that night. It's not impressive; one moment I'm riding happily through the mixture of sharp rocks and sloppy mud that makes up the track at maybe 40km/h, the next I fall down. The front wheel slipped into a wheel track. There was no real damage done to the bike or, despite the rocks I landed on, to me. That Touratech suit was doing its job.

I rode a bit more slowly after that and

there were no more drops, not even in the horrendous tunnel itself: unlit, half a kilometre long, dirt-floored and equipped with potholes deep enough to swallow the BMW's front wheel. Gabe kindly stayed behind me and kept the video camera running, just in case. Once we reached the tree line again, the sun even came out as if to celebrate our success.

The Col de la Bonette, apparently with the highest sealed road of any pass in the Alps, is a truly spectacular ride, especially when you're being followed by a serious thunderstorm. You will read more of it — the pass, rather than the thunderstorm — in the Bucket List series.

It rained again when that thunderstorm caught us and then it handed us on to another one when it was finished at St Sauveur-sur-Tinée (the patron saint of athlete's foot). We rode through a whole series of thunderstorms on some stunningly beautiful roads and made it to Nice and our hotel in time to dry out and have a terrific dinner on the harbour front. From the highest pass in the Alps to sea level — not a bad day's riding.

FERRY GOOD INDEED

Next morning, the Corsica ferry was the usual ferry turmoil — "Non, you need to go there for your paperwork, then there for your sticker, then..."etc. But it didn't take long and we found ourselves a corner of the brasserie to talk, eat and snooze during the eight-hour crossing. Gretchen got a photo of me snoozing that you will not be seeing. Ever. The ride from the ferry port at Bastia across the spine of the island to our hotel at Saint-Florent (excellent, but with seriously expensive beer) was sadly in the dark. I made up for that by riding it in reverse the next day.

This was another "rest day" and like some of the others I took advantage of it to ride the "finger" of Corsica, the peninsula that stretches north from about the level of Bastia. It is another demonstration of



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the potential difference between one side of a pass, island or whatever landform, and the other. The eastern side is relatively gentle, although it has some pleasant curves and is dotted with fishing villages. The western shore is quite another matter, with precipitous cliff side roads high above the water, and families of meditative goats dotted about the rocks.

In Nonza I felt like a goat or even a shepherd as I made my way through the seemingly endless packs of tourists who had just been disgorged by their coaches and were on their way to the cafés and souvenir shops. Fortunately these coaches do not go further north, so you don't have to worry much about oncoming traffic on blind corners — just real goats sleeping on the road.

Back on track the next day we rode across to Calvi, getting a look at quite a different Corsica. This is dry, arid and very rugged. It reminded me of the Croatian coast around Split or Senj. The road is narrow but well surveyed and fast. We were haunted for most of the day by a couple of Norwegian riders who were all dressed out in yellow fluoro clothing — one even had a helmet that colour. If I ever needed any demonstration of how naff that kind of colour scheme looks, I had it right here in front of me. They looked like a couple of road workers or warehousemen on their lunch break.

But the best was to come. The road starting at Calvi and running down to Porto has probably had more enthusiastic

recommendations from you, the readers, than any other. It deserves every one.

The very narrow and mostly heavily patched road runs either high above the sea on the cliff sides, with low rock walls or nothing at all for protection on the downhill side, or through the typical Corsican maquis scrub. There are few fuel or food stops, toilet facilities or anything else along here. The road is a ribbon that takes you ever further through a wondrous experience that every motorcyclist should have once in their life. Once you've had some experience; this could be — is — a seriously scary road for a beginner. Fortunately there is not a huge amount of traffic, and indeed part of the road is not even listed as a tourist route on the Michelin map.

A Bucket List road? Oh yes. Calvi to Porto is in — going south because that way you're on the outside of the road on the cliffs.

That night we stayed in Piana, just past the remarkable rock formation of Les Calanches. When you consider that Corsica is full of remarkable rock formations, you will understand that these are something truly special. Watch for the many tourists mooning about the roadway and parking in impossibly tiny spaces, though.

LOW AND HIGH

I like coast roads so I stuck as close to the shoreline as I could the next day on the ride down to Olmeto. Like the day before I was on my own, because I wanted to have



the freedom to stop and take photos at any time without holding up others.

Sadly (err, umm) that also translates into the ability to go for it without having to worry about how fast your fellow riders want to travel. I'm afraid I went scratching for a while, the sheer joy of taking advantage of these superb corners (but less than superb road surfaces) taking over. I got lost in Ajaccio, the birthplace of Napoleon and quite a big and remarkably polluted city, and decided that I didn't need



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cities. Not here. The road out was easy to find, fortunately.

I did remember to stop for photos a couple of times. But I also got to our hotel at Olmeto, overlooking the Golfe de Valinco, quite early. That was no hardship, as it happened. The very stylish Marinca Hotel and Spa is right on its own beach and the clear water was most enticing. A swim and a little time in the sun seemed a pretty good way to fill in the afternoon. A drink on the terrace before dinner didn't go astray, either.

The run down to Bonifacio at the southern tip of Corsica was pretty much more of the same thing, except that it was over significantly better roads. Bonifacio is a tourist town, but because many of the large scale

tourist activities are concentrated at the bottom of the rock occupied by the fortified town itself, it escapes some of the pressure. The location and the walls are impressive, and there are some nice shops in the small back streets of the upper town. If you look carefully you can even find free bike parking!

Rob had recommended the boat trips to see the fortress and its rock foundations from below, but I was on a roll and wanted to ride. Porto Vecchio turned out to be a particularly attractive coastal town with a tree-lined avenue along the harbour, but even there I just wanted to keep going. I finally managed to make myself stop for a quick lunch just outside town at a terrific little café in an industrial area. Luck of the draw,

SON OF A BEACH

Rob Beach is the son of Bob Beach, who started Beach's tours more than three decades ago. As such he has a long background in running tours — and it shows. Everything from the comprehensive trip book to programming of GPS units and choice of routes and hotels shows thoroughness and a clear understanding of what organised bike tours are about: organisation, bikes and above all the riders.

Once you book a tour, you receive a steady flow of information about the route and the countries you will be traversing. This is wonderful for planning — and dreaming. You are picked up at the beginning of the tour and returned to your choice of transport at the end. You are looked after, but not mollycoddled, in between.

Assisted more than ably by his wife Gretchen, driver Al Walker and hound Luke, Rob made it all seem easy. I can commend Beach's Motorcycle Adventures to you no matter what your specific requirements may be. Beach's Motorcycle Adventures
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I suppose, but I don't think I could have done better on the corniche overlooking the Golfe de Porto-Vecchio.

What followed was one of the best days' riding I've had. The road wound its way up into the Forêt de l'Ospedale and

then just kept going up and down over ridge after ridge and through some truly precipitous valleys. The Michelin map of Corsica has a green line all along this road, marking it as a scenic route, and I would not dispute that. One pass follows the other. After the Col de la Vacchia comes the remote, forested (and well-named) Col de Verde, which is where you came in.

I must admit I was a bit subdued after that, but I still managed to enjoy both the Col de Serba and the Belle Granaje, before reaching yet another top hotel at Corte. The Hotel Dominique Colonna is right on a mountain stream, with terraces lined with comfortable seating and tables overlooking the bubbling

water. When darkness fell someone came along and lit dozens of candles, which turned the whole thing into something from *Fantasia*. I mean that in a good way.

Both my camera — a near-new Nikon D800 in the tank bag — and my computer and iPad in the saddlebag that had been torn off had survived the crash intact; I was impressed.

The next morning Rob took us through an intricate network of "Rob Roads" high into the hills above Bastia, followed by a high-speed ride to catch the ferry to Livorno. Let's just say that we made it and nobody was hurt.

LEAVING FROM LUCCA

A short ride after our arrival in Italy took us

to our hotel in Castiglioncello. The next day I enjoyed the finer weather by wandering the back roads of Tuscany to the ancient walled city of Lucca and yet another terrific hotel. Let me just explain that finding a good hotel is one of the most onerous of tasks when you're travelling alone and it can go disastrously wrong. It has for me, a couple of times.

At dinner we pretty much all decided that this would not be our last Beach's tour — seriously, this was an outstanding trip. Next morning the car came to take me to the train station in Pisa, on my way to Rome and my flight home. What happened on that trip is worth a separate story, one in which you get to laugh at me quite a lot, but that will have to wait. For a while, I think.

PIC – UWE KRAUSS



BEST BIKE

I could not have chosen a better bike than the F 650 GS for this tour. The F 700 GS may possibly have been better, but that hadn't been released at the time.

You may recall that I recommended the bike very highly after my Peru trip, and I can only repeat what I said then. This is the ideal bike for travelling and it's pretty damn good for other uses as well. Above all it is remarkably user-friendly, which is what you want when you're in another country with different road rules and unpredictable roads. It's pretty handy at home as well.

Why don't I own one? Well, I have an earlier model, the G 650 XCountry. But that's for sale and don't be surprised if it is replaced by an F 700 GS.

The Bear took part in the Corsican Caper as a guest of Beach's. We paid for the air fare and incidental expenses.