

TOURING

Riding through Italy is a celebration of sights, sounds, history and two-wheeled fun along scenic and meandering roads that keeps you on your toes.



ITALIAN Idyllic

**AN OLD WORLD FEAST OF TASTES, TEXTURES,
HISTORY AND TWISTIES AWAITS IN ITALY**

> By **Alisa Clickenger**

Just try to keep your focus on the road when you come upon a 500-year-old hilltop castle or other marvels of the Italian countryside.



The sun hung low in the sky, a gentle breeze waved the wheat, and the only sounds were the crunch of my motorcycle boots on the pavement and the random chirping of birds. Such a moment in time was indelibly linked to the land and the machines and the roads from which we were taking a quiet break. We had climbed to Greve—which was breathtaking—and back down again, lunched in San Gimignano and sampled gelato in Volterra.

Refreshed with water, enjoying a quiet roadside moment, my rider's heart was full on the second day of my Beach's Motorcycle Adventures Italian Idyll tour.

One of our group, Frank, had ridden off on his own, leaving Rob Beach and I as the "pack," since the others in the group had chosen different routes that morning. With only two of us, Rob picked up the pace of our BMWs and I chased him over some incredibly twisty back roads. With alternating combinations of switchback passes, narrow lanes through deep forest and gently sweeping roads through golden, sun-hazed farmland, today's route was a "best of" route, in and of itself. As I removed my helmet back at the hotel, I shared that I was tired, yet exhilarated. In his usual deadpan, Rob said, "Feel like you've been somewhere and done something today?"

FABULOUS FIRENZE

Birthplace of the Italian Renaissance, Florence is also the official start of the Italian Idyll. Still sparkling after three days of rain prior to our arrival, Florence is a city better for walking than riding, and our foot tour gave our group time to acclimate to the European time zone as our local guide steered us by the Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore, Palazzo Strozzi, Santa Croce church and the Piazza de la Republica. Pedestrian-frenzied Ponte Vecchio offered reminder that we'd made the right choice, walking the crowded streets instead of riding to town and visiting in full motorcycle apparel. A private van shuttled us back to Fiesole and our quiet 14th Century villa overlooking Florence.

With bikes assigned, paperwork sorted and panniers packed, we headed out behind Beach in one group for our Day 1 ride. My 2017 BMW R1200 GS had less than 300 kilometers on it when the tour started, and it was the perfect bike for the Italian Idyll, with its smooth shifting and ample power to overtake a slow tour bus or tractor.

I admit I was a bit nervous with all the various stimuli—new gloves, a new bike, foreign road signs, plus a different pace of traffic than in the United



In America, Boar's Head is brand of fine foods. In Italy, the food may require a bit more investigation and a hearty stomach. We passed on the ham sandwiches.

States. Though I had ridden extensively in Europe a decade earlier, it was comforting to know that I could choose to ride with a guide for a couple of days (or not), until I got my Italian riding groove going. Beach led us along twisting, winding country roads to an enchanted—and well hidden—wood-fired, family-style lunch under an arbor. We dined as a group, then headed back to the villa in the gentle afternoon rain.

WINE AND OTHER FINE THINGS

Gretchen Beach, Rob's wife, was our logistics manager and van driver for this particular trip. She is a foodie, my fellow travelers all wine aficionados, and both of these facts were a surprising bonus for me, the neophyte of the group. This was my first time on a Beach's Motorcycle Adventures tour. The others were veterans of multiple tours, including one couple that had 10 different tours with Beach's Motorcycle Adventures under their belts. A single female traveler, I meshed easily with the easygoing group of single men and couples.

In Italy in general, and Tuscany in particular, it is all about wine, olive oil and balsamic vinegar. I had been hearing about the Banfi Winery from




Come out of a blind turn on a country road and you are just as likely to meet a plodding horse-drawn wagon as a speeding Ferrari.

the wine connoisseurs since the start of the tour. I found it easily thanks to the pre-programmed route in the GPS that was included with the tour package. I wound my way up the olive tree-lined drive just as Scott and Jo were about to take off. They were riding one of the other routes that day and it was fun to cross paths with them since I was riding on my own this particular day.

We chatted as they suited up, and Scott gave me the insider tip to visit the

balsamery, then ask for the excellent and elusive "Etruscan Salsa." Apparently, this rare piece of culinary craftsmanship is too sacred to be shared with the general public at the winery so it's stored out of sight and available only by special request. At \$45 for a 250ml bottle, it's expensive, but assuredly worthwhile. I decided it was a worthy take-home for my man, who had encouraged me to travel alone on the trip, fluffeonly because he could not come with me.

GRETCHEN BEACH



Not all of the castles in Europe are dark, damp and cold. Many in Italy, such as this one from the 13th Century, have been converted into luxuriant lodging stops.

ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROME

“Rome is like lasagna,” said Giovanni, our Roman-American van driver and tour guide for the day. “It’s built from many layers, yes?” From the air-conditioned comfort of our private coach, we soon learned why Gretchen and Rob hired him for our group; Rome might just surpass Florence in terms of wildly chaotic traffic and one-way roads. Giovanni casually wove in and out of the hectic traffic, simultaneously narrating all the neighborhoods and giving fascinating insights into the town’s multi-layered history.

First stop, the Colosseum and its multicultural tourist mayhem. After standing in line for 45 minutes, I had exactly eight minutes left to tour the inside before I needed to be back at the van. Later, I learned that the more experienced tour members wisely had chosen to enjoy it from the outside instead of stressing themselves like yours truly. Giovanni then drove us to

several sights including Circus Maximus, where chariot races were held, Palatine Hill, and the Children’s Hospital, which is on an island and has been in existence since the ancient Roman times. Lunch was a brief affair at a market where we were encouraged to forage alongside the locals.

Next stop, the Vatican. Maria Laura, our vivacious and extremely knowledgeable tour guide, was waiting for us. It’s hard to be solemn in a place with thousands of tourists, yet the Vatican struck such awe in most visitors the reverence was not lost even in the crowded halls and salons. Thanks to Maria Laura we were able to view many places not available to “regular” tourists. The Pope was in residence but not making an appearance that day, so we consoled ourselves with gelato, savored by Trevi Fountain. Giovanni then chauffeured us back to our fancy lodgings in a 13th Century castle for the night.

ADVENTURES IN EATING

Storied past meets curvy road meets gastronomical delight in Umbria. After another great day of riding, the group dinner in Trevi that night was a charming affair in the basement of my medieval stone building. The restaurant’s hostess explained the flow of the meal—served family style, arriving course after course— and the locally sourced ingredients of the traditional dishes with a clever chef’s twist. The flaming grappa used to melt the cheese inside a Parmesan wheel, then mixed with handmade pasta and served with large cheese flakes was my favorite pasta—in a country known for its pasta.

The following day, I chose to ride the back way to Assisi up and over a dirt road. The fog and low clouds in the valley and on the way up were a disappointment that gave way to unabashed and astonished delight as I exited the clouds and was treat-



Where else can one ride through Roman arches and through 1,000-year-old villages? The purr of uneven cobblestones below the tires and the bend of narrow streets bring added realism to the Old World experience.

ed to the brilliant splendor of a crisp day up above. The valley below still obscured with low-slung clouds, the reward for my persistence was undulating ranges of mountains painted in varying hues of blue as far as the eye could see.

The only vehicle on the meandering gravel road through the mountaintop pasture, I came upon a nursery of placidly grazing golden horses, foals at their sides. I stopped, cut the motor and sat quietly on the GS, kickstand down. Unperturbed by my presence the mares continued to quietly crop the grass. Close as I was to the town, I imagined I could feel Saint Francis of Assisi's presence in the tranquility of the scene.

Our second night in Trevi, we were on our own for dinner, and I met up with Frank, Rob and Gretchen. Just outside the small town square we lucked into a cozy 10-seat cafe run by a man who was a neighborhood shopkeeper by day and restaurateur by night. The courses kept arriving, simple yet succulent, and in their own time as he prepared each dish fresh for each customer. This handcrafted intimate experience wasn't planned, and I wasn't even sure of the names of



what I was sampling, yet it was one of the most memorable moments of the journey.

UMBRIA, THE GRAN SASSO AND BEYOND

Santo Stefano Sessanio was where we stayed in our first Albergo Diffuso, a unique form of hospitality in which the rooms are dispersed all over town. Conceptualized in the 1980's as a way to revitalize the numerous virtually abandoned small towns, these unique lodgings are in the countryside, exposing travelers to ancient dwellings.

Our accommodations were in Sextanio Albergo Diffuso, run by Design Hotels, and it was a truly remarkable experience. Faithful to the origins of the town as much as possible, the rooms were a fusion of old fashioned

(furnishings restored antiques from the village, original low door lintels, heavy wool blankets with traditional designs) and ultra modern (gigantic art deco tub, designer toilet and bidet plus original stone floors remodeled with radiant heat). A note beside the bed assured guests that particular attention was paid to the early traditions, including the rather hard horsehair mattress.

Rob, Gretchen, Bob, Lois and I rode out together to explore the Gran Sasso and the mountains beyond. Last year's earthquake had the locals busy with restoration efforts, which at times necessitated a clever re-route to make our loop. Chasing each other up and over the mountains and through the curvy roads, I got schooled by the other riders who were able to ride much fast-

er than I, two-up, mind you, over the mountain passes and down the hairpin hillsides. It was a greedy pleasure to ride for kilometers on end with riders who helped me improve my skills with every turn they made.

Riding in different combinations of companions—or alone some days—was the way I could make the trip truly my own. The way Beach's Motorcycle Adventures organized the tour worked well for every rider type—single, two-up, solo traveler and couples. Each day we would choose our own route and as much riding companionship as we wanted. Some days, Rob would guide us, some days we'd join others in the group, or we could ride on our own. Most days, it was a mix of all of the above, as we'd often run into each other during the riding day and regroup in different combinations of riders. At dinner, we came together to share stories of our explorations and wonders found throughout the day.

Two days later, I found myself riding with Rob and Frank. This was the opportunity I'd been hoping for, and I asked Rob for some rider coaching. Rob had developed a professional riding school in the early 1980s and taught riding at a variety of racetracks all over America. Riding behind him, I'd been really impressed by the fluidity of his style and his vigilant attention to riding the right line through every corner. Rob coached Frank and I all day, the precipitous countryside with ample curves the perfect classroom.

With its seemingly endless curvy roads and its own interpretation of life's priorities, Italy is forever in my heart. It was a short two weeks, yet the layers of memories and superlative experience riding in central Italy with Beach's Motorcycle Adventures gave me stories to savor. I finished tired, but it was that good kind of tired that comes from giddy days in the saddle and a plethora of activities crammed into one extraordinary experience. As Rob Beach is fond of saying, I now feel like I've been somewhere and done something. **MCN**



WHEN IN ROME...

A FEW TIPS FOR MOTORCYCLE TOURING IN ITALY:

- » Bars are not bars as we know them; they serve coffee, food and alcohol.
- » There is a surcharge for sitting down and being served. It costs less to stand at the bar and drink or eat.
- » Tips are not required, but feel free to hand one directly to your server for exceptional service.
- » Check your speed through towns. Electronic cameras are prevalent, capturing your license plate and mailing you a ticket, after you thought you'd gotten away with it.
- » The roads' twists and turns follow the land, rather than an engineer's plan, so there are plenty of decreasing radius corners, hairpin turns and strange cambers.
- » Expect the unexpected in each corner. Italian drivers typically follow fast and close, so instead of letting them push you, slow down and ride in the right hand part of the lane so they'll pass you. Quite often they'll share your lane when going around you so don't be surprised.
- » Always double check which gas you are pumping. In Italy the Unleaded is the one with the green handle.
- » Right turn on red is not allowed anywhere in Italy.
- » Most businesses break for lunch from 2-4 p.m. Be sure to stop for lunch before 2 p.m. if you want a sit-down meal. Meals are often served much later than is typical in the U.S.

>>BEACH'S MOTORCYCLE ADVENTURES Beach's Motorcycle Adventures, Ltd. was started by Bob Beach in 1972. They are now the oldest motorcycle tour company in Europe. Bob was very active in the BMW MOA, and focused their rides exclusively on BMW motorcycles, a tradition that continues to this day. Beach's was an important part of the "fly and ride" BMW program in Europe, offering clients the opportunity to take delivery of a new motorcycle in Europe, ride it on tour, then have it shipped back to their stateside BMW dealer for pickup. Following in his father's footsteps, Rob found his own niche in the business and expanded the company's offerings to the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and South Africa.