

ABOVE *AND* BEYOND

Have we discovered the best European motorcycle tour ever, all in just two weeks?





ALPS ADRIATIC ADVENTURE

STORY & PHOTOS: MICK MATHESON

Ljubljana made me fall in love with it, which is doubly remarkable because I'm not one for cities. All it took was a single afternoon strolling around Slovenia's small, friendly and stunningly pretty capital. If I'd gone there and not thrown a leg over a motorcycle I'd have loved the trip, but what came next lifted it to another level altogether and expanded my newfound love to embrace the entire country. All this and I was still going to visit Croatia's Adriatic islands and ride Italy's Dolomites passes before my holiday was over.

One of my friends asked, "What, so you didn't believe me when I said Ljubljana was beautiful?" It's not that I hadn't believed her, it's more that I couldn't imagine it might be beautiful. No, I didn't Google it first. I just rocked up a day early to give myself time to settle in before the ride, and was blown away. I will also gladly admit that I had no concept of Slovenia, either. To a bloke of my age it was just a former Yugoslavian country tucked away in that cluster of little south-eastern European nations that were portrayed as dark and dingy under the Soviet regime, and while its post-Yugoslavian neighbours warred and got all the attention for the wrong reasons, Slovenia never even blipped on the radar.

I got talking to Martina from Adriatic Moto Tours at one of the bike shows in Australia and she convinced me that their Alps Adriatic Adventure was a standout — her favourite, in fact. She said something about Slovenia but I'd heard Alps and Adriatic coast roads. That was enough and I booked in. Slovenia turned out to be the highlight, and that's saying something!

We rode the first days of the tour in eastern Slovenia, starting with a run north to the first of many passes we'd ride over. A bit over 50km from Ljubljana we climbed Jezersko Pass and dropped briefly into Austria, then immediately zig-zagged over Pavličevo Pass back into Slovenia. In that short introductory ride I'd decided Slovenia was about the prettiest place I'd ever seen. More like Austria or Switzerland than I could have guessed, it was lusciously green, dotted with impossibly cute villages, spotlessly clean, almost manicured and, well, hopelessly storybook. It wasn't busy or crowded, the pace was relaxed, the drivers were nice.



↑ Rok (left) and Primož talk us through the ride ahead, a daily ritual



↑ The group heads down from Jeruzalem on a crisp, hazy morning



ADRIATIC MOTO TOURS

Adriatic Moto Tours is almost as much of a surprise as Slovenia, the country it calls home. Large and highly professional, AMT is at the same time small and personal. AMT has a fleet of nearly 100 motorcycles, all of them current models with low mileage, and numerous staff. But at the same time I always felt I was dealing with a tight-knit team of enthusiasts whose focus was on me and my group. The personal service belies the corporate expertise.

It is run by Matej and Martina Malovrh, who are hands-on in everything that happens. You'll even talk to them at Australian shows where they regularly exhibit.

Matej says he's happy with the size of his company now, and while the temptation is to keep expanding, he's avoiding it. If it gets too big, he'll have no time for doing what he really loves — guiding his guests on the best rides he knows.

Contact AMT via adriaticmototours.com.



And at the end of the day we stayed at a B&B in a winery in Kog, which they reckoned was an acronym for Kingdom of God and is right next door to Jeruzalem. I kid you not. Crusaders coming back from the east decided this place was as far as they needed to go, abandoned plans to go home and named it for the Holy Land. Standing there that evening as the sun set, I almost cried at its beauty. Maybe the delicious, cheap local wine had a bit to do with it ...

Have I mentioned the food? OK, I know, this isn't *Gourmet Traveller* and we are on a motorcycle expedition so I'll get on with the ride. But I reckon I could pitch a story to them.

There were nine of us on the tour, four couples and me, trying not to feel lonely. BJ and Paul were from the US, each riding their own bike. Riël and Jeannine came from South Africa and doubled on a 650 V-Strom. There were four Canadians: Rick and Sharon on an R1200GS, and Andre and Wendy who set out on a Harley 1200T Low but quickly ditched the little cruiser for a more two-up-friendly F700GS. Another group ran parallel with us, such was the number of people who'd booked this tour, and there were a couple of Aussies among them: David from Port Macquarie and Sue from Brisbane. We crossed paths regularly.

The ride out of Kog set a great mood for the ▶



↑ The Alpine skies, mountains and roads are dramatic, and a rider's dream



↑ Some remote villages on Lošinj Island have a history spanning several thousand years



■ Exploring an ancient roadway on Lošinj Island, Croatia

THE ALPS ADRIATIC ADVENTURE

The Alps Adriatic Adventure is a 13-day tour if you include the day of departure. I'd advise arriving a day or two early, too, so you can look around Ljubljana and shake some of the jet lag.

There are four rest days, but you'll probably choose to ride on those days too; "rest day" simply means not moving on to another town.

You'll visit Slovenia, Croatia and Italy; Aussie don't need visas.

The tour price is €3390 and upwards, depending upon your choice of bike and other options. That's about \$5250 if the exchange rate hasn't moved too far recently.

If time and money are a bit tighter, check out AMT's sLOVEnia Tour (their emphasis, not mine, but it works for me) at only €2220 (AUD3325).

Visit adriaticmototours.com.

day. The autumn air was cool with that misty quality that makes the sunlight glow brightly. From up on the ridges we rode along we looked out over long views into the hazy distance, seeing hillsides covered in grape vines, clusters of white-washed, red-roofed buildings with church spires pointing up from among them. We paused to look across a saddle at the church of Jeruzalem, in which an original tapestry brought by the Crusaders still hangs.

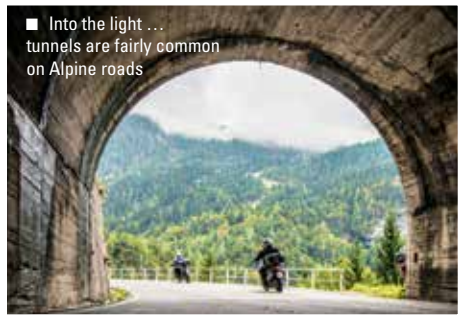
The roads wound constantly. As we headed east the foothills of the Alps petered out but the tarmac rarely ran straight for more than a kilometre, and regularly bent left and right through a small forest or along a little river. The ride was cruisy, punctuated by short bursts of twisties. We got used to the routine of slowing frequently for the next village.

The scenery was distracting. It's probably why BJ ran wide on a sudden, sharp left-hander into a village. She crashed heavily, and everything changed. A few hours later

she was in hospital, Paul was with her, and their tour was over. Our guide, Rok, had rejoined us after dealing with the aftermath, his characteristically upbeat and lighthearted personality dulled into sombre quietness. It'd be a couple of days and news that BJ would be OK before our reduced group got back into the swing of things.

So we rode gently that afternoon. I know I reflected on the facts of motorcycling: that it can bite you if you take your eye off the ball for a moment, and that it's easy to let your riding focus slip when you're absorbed in exotic surroundings on the holiday of a lifetime. There's not just the mindset, either. Travel insurance, first-aid skills, language barriers, the training and professionalism of your guide ... so many things contribute to limiting the fallout if things go wrong. (And here I'll add another plug for Slovenia, in that the standard of medical care appears to be excellent.)

This night's accommodation began to steer ►



■ Into the light ... tunnels are fairly common on Alpine roads



■ Andrea chills out on a bridge over the Drava River in Ptuj, Slovenia



■ Pordoi Pass curls in the background as Riël enjoys a solo run in the mountains

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us back into a cheerful mood. We stayed in a castle. A castle on an island. OK, it was a small island in a shallow river, but what a treat! Again, the food and wine were extraordinary.

Some of the riding into Croatia the next day was immense fun, especially the descent into a deep valley where we had to produce passports for the token formalities of leaving the EU for a non-EU country that probably should be. There's no longer a no-man's land, as both border officials had decided to share the Slovenian booth, where they chatted like old friends. The steep, slightly rough but serpentine climb up the Croatian side of the valley was great fun but I couldn't help stopping to look back at the views. Croatia looked poorer and a bit dilapidated after Slovenia, but I realised you can't judge things on appearance when I spotted two lovingly restored classic cars in a carport over the road, and watched a pristine BMW R25 single come chuffing past, its proud rider wearing a contented grin.

We hit the Adriatic Coast with its arid feel and sparse vegetation, looked down over Rijeka from the hills high above the waterfront city, and crossed the arched bridge onto Krk, the first of the islands we'd hop over on our way to the southern tip of Lošinj for a two-night stay in a large resort. The seafood served in the tiny cove below us was divine. We chilled out, explored the island, had a good time.

A day off was good but it was better to be riding again, and we headed north-west back to Slovenia, stopping to tour the astounding Škocjan caves where the caverns are as high as 146m, then riding through the world-famous Lipica Stud, whose horses are so prized they've been a contentious element of negotiations to set international borders.

The route continued into the Dolomites, a section of the Alps in Italy, and the thrill of riding stepped up a notch or two. Sometimes three. We based ourselves in Corvara for three nights while we chased our front tyres up ▶



↑ Rick ziplines through an idyllic canyon near Bovec, Slovenia



↑ Hanging around on the shores of Lake Bled before hiring boats and rowing out



↑ Morning mist caresses the hills while rain gathers behind ... but it cleared!

■ Rick, Sharon and the imposing backdrop of the Dolomites on an autumn day



EXCELLING ON THE XR

I got lucky. A last-minute cancellation freed up a BMW S1000XR, the bike I'd most hoped to ride on the tour but thought I'd missed out on. In hindsight, I couldn't have had better.

The thing about our route is that it was almost invariably on narrow roads, even by Aussie standards, and the surfaces varied in texture as well as traction. The BMW's handling and agility were great there, as were the electronic aids that I called into operation several times. On the passes in the Dolomites I loved the superbike chassis; through the stunning and ever-changing scenery I loved the relaxed posture.

The average speed over the entire 12 days was only 58km/h, according to the bike's trip computer. You spend a lot of time going slow if you're not on the main highways, and so even though I barely came close to using the bike's 160hp top end, I happily took its flexible and strong bottom-end and midrange for granted. Ditto with the Quickshift Pro gear changing.

We never spend long enough in the saddle at any one time for me to even think about the hard seat. However, I wouldn't go so far as to say the XR might have been a better option for any of the two-up couples in the group; the GSs were the pick for that.

Everyone asked if I'd buy an XR back home in Australia. Me? No. A GS is definitely more my kind of all-rounder because of my love for unsealed routes and long days in the saddle. But in every other way I reckon the S1000XR is an astonishingly good bike.

and down over all the Alpine passes we could find. We'd caught the very edge of some rain at times on the tour but now the weather came good in a big way and we rode, saw and savoured the gorgeousness of the Dolomites with heightened enthusiasm.

I had to consciously stop ordering coffee at every break. I'd ride a bit, park on top of a pass and go to the cafe or restaurant, ride down, find somewhere else, fang back up a pass and so on, until the coffee consumption became ridiculous. But that's the way it is here: you ride a lot of short distances and stop a lot. You stop for the views, for the social aspect, for the rests you need, even just to suck it all in before doing it again. But I had to remove coffee from the equation!

Few riders hit these roads as hard as they can. They're not fast roads anyway, and the traffic is pretty constant, though you do get a lot of good uninterrupted runs and the cars will usually move over to let you pass. However, everyone's aware of how narrow and unforgiving the roads are, drivers have respect for others on the road (well, most do), and in my case I got my enjoyment from the satisfaction of getting lines right and my keeping up a smooth flow.

It took me a day to twig to the speed cameras here, though, and I expect I'll get a few nasty surprises in the mail soon. Once you can



▲ Throughout the tour, the food was fantastic. Much of it was local, too

recognise them, there's no real excuse for being booked and generally you're able to ride the passes with freedom from anything like the persecution we have in Australia. Part of this is the fact the roads are slower anyway, but mainly it's that they're far less anal about their speed limits over there.

Riders aren't the only ones who appreciate the roads. A Porsche event came through. Classic British sports cars were having a rally there. Eight Ferraris in convoy blared past when we stopped on Falzarego Pass. Only the camper vans ruined it for everyone as they laboured up these mountains like tin snails.

The roads back to Slovenia crossed more passes, followed vee-shaped valleys on roads halfway up their precipitous sides and, as we crossed the border, passed the first hints of ▶



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the enormous battles that raged here on the Isonzo Front in WWI. Rok maximised the fun on today's route, taking us on a detour over extra passes and a side trip to the top of Slovenia's third-highest mountain along a tiny road that won't do you any good if you fear heights. We stayed in Bovec for a couple of nights, learning more about the terrible history of the war here and getting non-biking thrills on flying foxes, or ziplines, on an Alpine scale.

Long ago the locals found the easiest way to move goods through these steep mountains was to string cables across the valleys and send loads careening over on them. The ziplines now are one of the many adventure-sport activities you do here in the Soča Valley. I recall the guide telling us the highest was 140m over the valley floor, the longest a bit more than 400m. It was great fun. Rok and Sue, the Brisbane woman from the other tour group, swallowed their terror and conquered the wires, though Rok admitted once was enough.



↑ The backdrops of the Dolomites are captivating



↑ Slovenian wines are sensational yet pleasantly cheap



↑ That's Dave following Sue, Aussies in the second Alps Adriatic Adventure tour running alongside ours

I liked the last line, a shorter one that glided between the walls of a narrow canyon above the pale-blue river.

We had just one more day on the bikes, which would take us back to Ljubljana and a farewell dinner in the imposing castle that dominates the city from high above. It was a short ride, too, of 195km, but it packed a lot in and took our minds off the impending end of the tour. We set off up the Soča Valley and over Vršič Pass and its 50 hairpins. This precarious road was built by Russian prisoners during WWI to supply the front lines, and the north side is characterised by the cobblestoned corners which don't do much for traction but make you wonder at the work and hardships involved.

We rowed wooden boats out to the island in the middle of Lake Bled. The church there has a bell that visitors can ring so you regularly hear an irregular clanging echo over the water and around the valley. The lake was yet another of Slovenia's pristine attractions, so full of fairytale charm it's mesmerising. The lake confirmed what I now knew about the country. It's laid back. It's quiet and uncrowded in spite of being well populated. It is clean and tidy, yet also the opposite of snobby and officious. It's a happy and contented place. And it's a great place to ride a bike.

Rok and Primož, who'd sort of become our second guide as he flipped between the two groups and took photos and video, loved their homeland, pointing out they've not only got a great lifestyle and so much right on their doorstep, they're just an hour from Alpine passes, from winter skiing, the coast, Austria and all sorts of other great things. I'd become rather envious, not a familiar feeling for this Aussie bloke.

The tour had been amazing. The standard of food, wine and accommodation was very high, the bikes were great, the guides were brilliant and the riding was terrific. To discover that Slovenia was such a treat was an unexpected bonus. **ARR**