

CORSICA

April 2014

The inebriated sun worshippers weren't too pleased when I parked up amongst them in the alleyway but a couple of friendly knuckle heads, known to the Landlord and I, soon put me in the ascendancy. I'd left for Portsmouth and the ferry to St Malo via a friend's pub in Winchester.



Gorge du Tarn

An uneventful crossing apart from my phone automatically resetting to CET and waking me up an hour early, doubly worse as I'd already lost an hour. I was first off the ferry and away in glorious sunshine along the dual carriage-way and past Rennes where I took up with the provincial roads to Angers and the Loire valley. An afternoon of glorious sunshine along the banks of the Loire. A feast of châteaux's and architecture beckoned. Angers, Saumer, Chinon and wonderful Richeleuax, the Cardinals home town. I stayed overnight in a "Silence Hotel" although someone should tell the gardener and his lawn mower!

A grey damp morning but things brightened up later. Unexpectedly, I crossed the upper reaches of the Dordogne, a pleasant surprise, followed by sweeping undulating roads through the hills and forests of the Auvergne. Superb, particularly on my new bike, a joy to ride.

As I entered Rodez at the end of the day, I was greeted by two Police motorcyclists. They enquired where I was going and beckoned me to follow. No blue light, just obedient traffic that let them through as I followed behind. However, the time saved getting to my hotel was lost as we talked bikes and travels in a sort of Franglais de Mid Channel language. Kissing of the cheeks and the surrounding air seems to be the thing down here. Men, women and young chaps all greeting each other with a Gaelic kiss! I'm not so sure it will catch on in Yorkshire.

I set off from Rodez in the morning under grey skies and gusting winds. I soon learnt to be aware of the gaps in the hedgerow that were acting as a wind break. Once in the Gorge du Tarn the wind subsided and although it had started raining the views were still magnificent. I stopped at the roadside and listened to the silence that was only interrupted by the call of a cuckoo. Medieval buildings clustered by the river and hung below the towering cliffs. There was a single wire with a basket hung across the Gorge, used to transport both supplies and people. An intrepid pair sat in the basket hanging on to the upright, as they completed a journey across the ravine.

The Gorge took some time to ride through but eventually I left it behind and entered the Cevenne. The Cevenne is an area of rolling hills and valleys of extinct volcanoes once visited by Robert Louis Stevenson and well documented in his Travels with a Donkey. Much is known about Stevenson but little is known about his Donkey and what it thought of all this.

The temperature climbed as I left the hills and crossed the Carmargue. For the first time in my life I felt the Mistral winds in my face before arriving in Toulon for the overnight ferry to Corsica. Goodness, the piano player in the bar was beyond bad!

Read more overleaf...

CORSICA (cont.)

For those of you who can sleep comfortably on a scaffold plank then my cabin bunk would have suited you just fine but for the rest of us I advise putting the bedding on the floor, I slept much better there.

I was soon out of the Port on the north of the Island in the morning and heading up towards the Col del Vergio. The road climbed a steep ravine with almost vertical sides that seemed to have been cut like a knife through butter. I passed under Monte Cinto, the highest mountain on the Island that I last saw in the year 2000 after a successful summit attempt. The road clung to the mountains in descent, thousands of feet above the torrent below. Still clinging on to the mountainside I emerged high above the azure blue sea on the west coast with the road still winding its way south to Ajaccio.

It was here in September 2000 that I decided to buy my first BMW GS motorcycle. The rest is history, seven Continents and all that. I'm now back in Corsica on my sixth GS having swapped two feet for two wheels.

Corsican feral pigs can be a formidable foe if you take a break in their chosen forest park and similarly local cows wandering the highway need to be avoided and navigated with care. I presumed that the coach I passed that morning in the mountains, firmly stuck on a hairpin bend, was still there. Much like Norway, Corsica is a must visit destination for motorcyclists. Wonderful mountain vistas, rugged coasts and great undulating roads with boot scraping bends that can entertain you all day long. I never tired of the fast open curves and the demanding passes, hugging the hillsides, with nothing but low castellated walls for safety, all in splendid sunshine.

I couldn't get Bill Wyman's lyrics "Je suis un Rock Star Je habitez la, a la South of France" out of my head that morning as the overnight ferry sailed along the coast before docking. I left Toulon behind as quickly as possible and rode along the Cote d'Azur in glorious sunshine before turning off up wonderful mountain roads and on through the Gorge du Verdon with its huge vertical cliffs. If you suffer from vertigo you'd want to stand well back here. The temperature dropped with each incremental rise in altitude but it was still a stunning day.

The old guy sat in the window kept staring at me, so I did the obvious thing and put my thumb up to my nose and wiggled my fingers. His wife didn't know where to look for laughing but he didn't stare anymore.

Superlatives can often be used to describe experiences that are merely average but today's ride was truly magnificent. The Haute Alpes, with their fresh cover of snow, sparkled in the sunshine as I rode through the mountains and alpine villages with their flower adorned balconies. On and further up to the Col du Lauteret at 2058 metres. I had hoped to cross the Col du Galibier, as that would have been the icing on the cake but the snow and icing on the road meant that it was firmly ferme'd.

The descent down the mountains to Grenoble seemed to take for ever, so high up was I but it was eventually reached and on to Lyon.

Read more overleaf...

CORSICA (cont.)

I'd finally left the mountains behind and as some of you know, mountains have been one of my life's passions. William Blake said it all....

"Great things are done when men and mountains meet. These things aren't achieved by jostling in the street".

I chose a road out of Lyon to start my last two days riding from the Michelin map. Roads with a green stripe signify a scenic route and this was a cracker, undulating hills of fields and forests as I headed for the Champagne and Ardenne Regions of north east France. The last day began on long straight roads, across the killing fields of France, past immaculately kept War Cemeteries with row upon row of spotless white crosses that were bounded by banks of bright red poppies. My last few hours were spent riding along the banks of the Muese in the Ardeche before a final blast to the ferry.

It's not always that you experience a trip as good as this, I can thoroughly recommend it.



Contact Gordon

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