

# SWISS ALPS

July 2023

Chablis



“Allez, allez...” he shouted, “you can’t stop here!” The St Malo customs official didn’t like me stopping in his layby to zip up one little bit. Welcome to France I thought.

Quickly past Rennes it was cross country all the way for the rest of the day. Very unusually for France the little town of Le Lude boasts a quintessentially British Pub, the Rose and Crown, found by chance. Just time for a chicken burger before riding on to Tours.

The sun sparkled off the waters of the Loire as I meandered along its left bank for most of the morning, a prelude to the fast sweeping roads through deep forests that were to come. Passing a

grey characterless three storey building I was disappointed to find that this soulless hotel was Maison Tatin, where Tarte Tatin was first conceived. The hilltop view across the Upper Loire and the village of Sancerre was surrounded by vineyards and on the distant horizon, golden wheat fields glowed in late afternoon sunlight.

Huge snails took centre stage on tonight’s amazing buffet and as far as I was concerned, that’s where they were going to stay. My one and only experience with snails, some years ago, ended in six attempts to extract the meaty portion flying in all directions but not one got anywhere near my mouth.

It was too early in the season for the aroma of ripe grapes to reach my nostrils but the broad expanse of vines stretching out to the horizon was still a magnificent sight. Saturday it was Vouvray, Sunday Sancerre and Pouilly Fumé, today it was Chablis. I didn’t sample them all but the Pouilly Fumé was very pleasant.

I entered Langres, a medieval town with ramparts, through the West Gate and navigated its narrow cobbled streets to find my hotel. A two Star Logis in the middle of town and as expected, the rooms were basic but the restaurant newly decorated and the cuisine the best so far, which was good, as it was raining too hard to venture outside.

The Vosges mountains in eastern France were in contrast to the Loire valley and led me down across the Rhine to the edge of the Black Forest. Four days seemed a long time to cross France but I did start in St Malo and intentionally planned shorter days.

Read more overleaf...



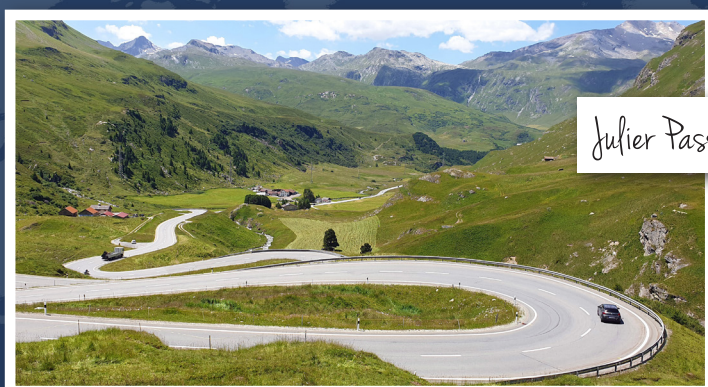
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My freshly sellotaped map of Switzerland replaced that of France and together we rode through the Black Forest and along the south shore of Lake Constance to the border with Lichtenstein, a much better route than the motorway I'd used in the past. The road climbed steeply up, firstly through trees, hairpin after hairpin, until finally the road opened out close to the summit of the Silvretta Pass, high amongst the Austrian Tyrol. The descent on the other side, down a wide mountain valley, swept through alpine pastures, past ski lodges and rustic Shepherd huts.

Regardless of the forecast my change of route that day was for the better. I avoided an hour's motorway and instead rode up a steep sided river valley with mountains towering above, on fast sweeping roads dropping down into Italy close to the border with Austria and Switzerland. The original route was probably too ambitious, so I was pleased with the outcome. No rain either.

I was now at the foot of the Stelvio Pass but I chose not to ride it, once is enough and I've ridden it twice. The big Swiss passes of Switzerland lay ahead of me for the next two days and that was something to really savour. There were times because of the incompatibility of the downloaded map on my satnav that I had to resort to good old fashioned map reading. I'm of the opinion that just like reading and writing, along with being able to tell the time on a clock, map reading should be a compulsory life skill. Complete reliance on smart phones or satnav can lead to all kinds of problems.



Descending the Julier Pass, after passing through St Moritz, provides 35 kilometres of continuous descent and 40 minutes of superb riding. It doesn't matter how many passes you climb in a day when there's mile after mile of superb alpine roads ahead, lined with manicured grass fields and overlooked by huge sun drenched mountains.

Towards the end of the second day in Switzerland I was at the top of the Grimsel Pass surveying the distant Bernese Alps. The sun was shining and it was now down to Interlaken and up to Grindelwald. **Read more overleaf...**



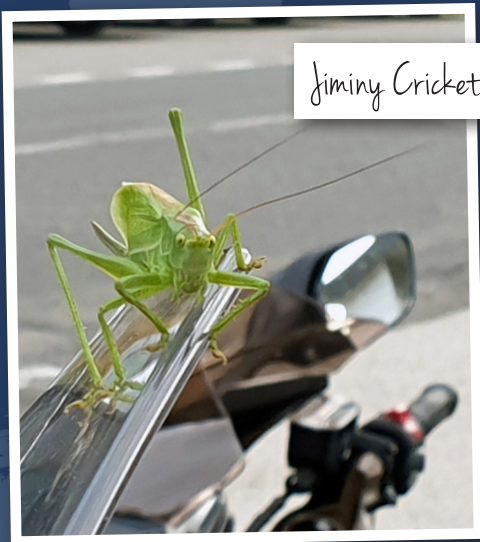
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Grindelwald, home of the Eiger and Jungfrau is a special place that I've visited many times, both as a mountaineer and a motorcyclist. I climbed the Jungfrau in 1998 and in 2019 snowshoed across the Bernese Alps. An earlier Blog records the snow shoeing experience in images. The last two days across Switzerland have been some of the best roads you could wish for. The weather helps of course. Its miserable in the rain and snow. I've experienced that too.



After some glorious motorcycling I headed west, leaving the Tyrol and Swiss Alps behind me but there was still a day of mountain roads ahead, all the way to the Jura and the border with France. The thunderstorm raged outside my hotel window, not surprising as it had been a very hot day in the mountains. Staff scurried around collecting seat cushions from the terrace but it was all over in five minutes.



A morning's ride through the Jura mountains and for once I had a passenger but Jiminy Cricket hopped off after 20 minutes.

It was hot down on the French agricultural plains, so I sought shade under a medieval village shelter for a picnic lunch. Later the hotel receptionist advised that the sauna was free to guests. No need I replied, "I've just been in one waiting for the traffic lights to turn green". It was 34°C in the centre of town. The inconsiderate Frenchman who had ignored the 'Interdiction de fumer' signs looked rather sheepish as he joined the other fire alarm evacuated guests outside of the hotel at a quarter past midnight.

Crossing eastern France, undulating bends swept through forested hilly terrain back to the upper reaches of the Loire, shimmering in the heat. In the evenings I'd been listening to a BBC Radio serial in search of the Yeti. Local Nepalese Sherpas reported that there had been sightings of a hairy mysterious creature on the glacier leading up to Mera Peak, south of Everest. I'd climbed Mera Peak in 1998 and wondered if I should advise the BBC that it wasn't me.

A gaggle of "elderly" British cyclists filled my last night's hotel bar in fancy dress. No chance of me being served my welcome drink, so I wandered across the harbour. The fast cat ferry from Cherbourg to Poole was a new experience for me but it was a swift crossing. It had been a really enjoyable trip, although I now have to pace myself with shorter days. Good weather can make the difference between a really miserable journey and a truly great adventure. Shame about that last hour from the ferry to home, it was wet.



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