

ROUTE DES GRANDE ALPES AND ROUTE DE NAPOLEON

June 2015

It was neither Grand nor Majestic, as the hotel name suggested but more like a broom cupboard. After a bit of a Mexican standoff I changed rooms and made my way to the terrace to take in the view across Lake Geneva and the French mountains beyond, all bathed in wonderful sunshine.

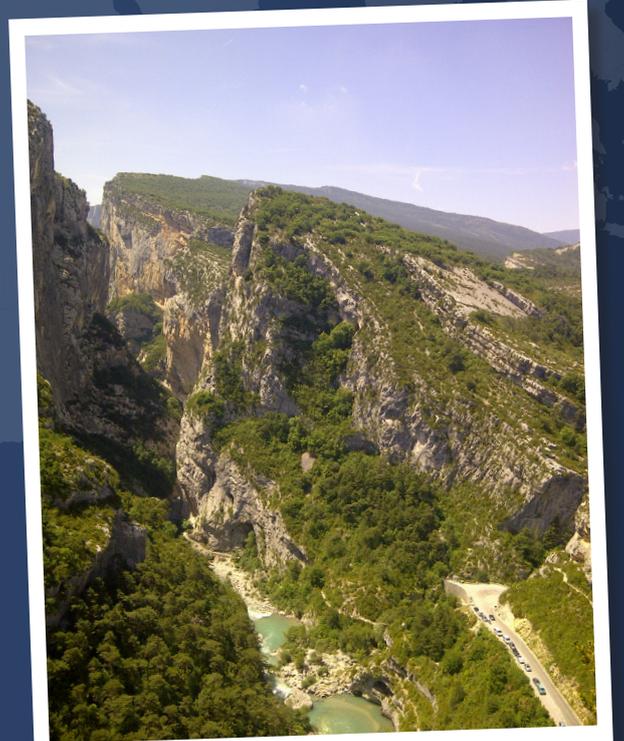
I'd arrived in Montreux on the second day of my trip, after a great afternoon's ride through the Jura mountains. It was quite noticeable, just how the landscape changed from scruffy France to manicured fields and forest clad hills. I'd left Dijon that morning, home of the Ducs du Burgoyne and Colonel Mustard, along sweeping, undulating roads of provincial France, before crossing into Switzerland.

I don't think the Suisse Majestic Night Porter had ever been asked to polish a pair of motorcycle boots before but he took to the task well. Shoe cleaning was a service on offer and I was cheeky enough to ask after my earlier disappointment.

Woken by staff moving furniture on the floor above, I was soon up and heading for the Grand St Bernard Pass all before 8.00 o'clock. Thick mist and zero degree temperatures greeted me at the top but the sun shone as I rode down into Italy's Aosta Valley and up over the Petit St Bernard Pass into France to meet up with the Route des Grande Alpes. The Route actually starts in Evian on the southern shore of Lake Geneva but I prefer to start in Martigny and take in the Grand and Petit St Bernard Passes first, joining the Route in Bourg St Maurice. From here the Route passes the ski resorts of Tignes and Val d'Isere before climbing up over the Col de L'iseran at 2,770 metres.

The Grand St Bernard Pass was originally the highest road in Europe before Napoleon built the road over the Col de L'iseran; that has now been surpassed by the Col de la Bonette at 2,807 metres, although this was only achieved by building a false loop around a summit, above the actual Col itself. Cheating really.

Read more overleaf...



Gorge du Verdon

ROUTE DES GRANDE ALPES AND ROUTE DE NAPOLEON (cont.)

After a night's rest I was over the Col d'Galibier and riding along sweeping roads through the magnificent Haute Alpes, with their towering peaks in glorious sunshine, before tackling the jewel that is the Col de la Bonette.

I was fortunate, despite it being Sunday, that the roads were quiet, apart from a few determined cyclists, looking to tick off Europe's highest road. I stopped on my descent, just below the summit, surprised to find just how quiet it was. Large fluffy marmots scampered around on the hillside below, whistling to each other.

I descended further south into the steep sided Valle de la Tinnee and its cascading torrents.

Today was a classic example of just why we travel to places like this on a motorcycle and shout whoopee at full volume into our helmets. My three passions of mountains, motorcycles and eating and drinking all came together that evening in the Auberge Le Robur. Wonderful, I can highly recommend it.

A short morning's ride through the Alpes Maritime, a place frequented by Princess Grace of Monaco until her fatal accident, brought me down to the Cote d'Azur. The last time I rode along the Gorge du Verdon I took the southerly route that hugs the rim of the canyon, so this time I took the other option which passes through the bottom of the Gorge amongst its high cliffs before climbing out and up to the Pointe Sublime, a pleasant respite from the stifling heat at lower altitude. I was now following the Route de Napoleon via Gap and two passes, both new to me. The second, the Col de Glandon was part of the 2015 Tour de France route.



Col de l'isèran



Col de la Bonette

I should have stayed in the mountains but made the mistake of visiting Annecy, too hot and too busy, far from relaxing. Skirting north of Geneva I had a great morning's ride following the N5 back through limestone gorges and sweeping roads of the Jura mountains, before crossing north eastern France and on to the ferry.

When journeying into the European Alpes there's always the decision to be made of whether to ride west to east and back traversing Italy, Austria and Switzerland or North to South through the High French Alpes. Either way, if you're blessed with the weather both choices take you along some stunning roads and magnificent scenery.



Contact Gordon

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