

PICOS DE EUROPA AND THE PYRENEES

September 2015

“What’s the best way to get to Italy?” the young lad asked. We were just about to board the overnight ferry to St Malo when he held up his smartphone in front of me. Apparently they were originally going to Spain but had a last minute change of plan. “Did you have anywhere particular in mind?” I asked. “Pisa” they ventured, having decided that this was far more interesting than their original destination. Both of their ageing motorcycles were adorned with black rubbish bags containing their wherewithals for their very first European tour. Just how much of the contents would make it to the end, before littering the roadside, was anyone’s guess...

For my part I set off in the morning via the handsome Chateaux of the Loire valley and the cliff lined upper reaches of the Dordogne before reaching my second night’s stay in France, close to the Millau Viaduct. Finally some evening sunshine after a couple of grey days. The iconic Viaduct spans a huge divide that now relieves the surrounding roads that were once clogged with traffic. Norman Foster’s futuristic design had come to the rescue, as did Lindapter Steelwork Fixings I’m proud to advise.



Millau Viaduct

“Do you speak English?” the Irishman asked, in a slow and deliberate manner, as I was preparing to depart. “A little”, I replied in a fake French accent, playing the game. Once again I was being asked for help with directions, only this time they had a map. What they really wanted was advice on a good day’s circular tour and if you ever wanted to ride the Gorge du Tarn, then this was a great place to start.

I forsake the Tarn route for the shorter Gorge de Dargilan that swung south, before taking me out from its steep rocky sides onto the high Cevenne, along fast sweeping roads in bright sunshine. Finally I crested the Montagne Noire and dropped down to the walled Medieval citadel of Carcassonne and the tourist swarms. There were fewer than in high summer, pedestrians only.

Read more overleaf...

PICOS DE EUROPA AND THE PYRENEES (cont.)

“You’re going to ride in that?” questioned the hotel porter. Rain or no rain I couldn’t sit around for two days waiting for it to stop. What I could do however, was modify my plans to two shorter days and position myself for the forecast improvement, ready to ride the Pyrenean Cols in better weather.

Lasts night’s rain helped create thick grey clouds that clung to the mountain sides, obscuring my view but I managed to navigate three Cols before dropping down into French sunshine and a faster, warmer route into Spain and the outskirts of Pamplona.

There were roars of laughter around the bar and wild boar’s trotters on the wall as coat hooks, plus the obligatory boar’s head over the fire place. This was a makeshift hunting lodge. Uniquely, the hunting dogs were transported in kennels, attached to the rear of cars. It was a cracking place to eat, local wine, local cheese and lamb cooked over wood fired embers. True regional hospitality.

At last, a morning of clear skies and welcome sunshine to accompany me, as I made my way across the barren plains of Navarra. Don Quixote’s windmills seem to have been replaced by tall metal poles, each with three aero-blades, littering the skyline. I ventured into the hills of Rioja, on minor roads through small villages unchanged by time, before arriving in the Picos de Europa. The mountains of northern Spain gained their name from the early seafarers returning from the Americas. Their first sighting of home, having crossed the Atlantic Ocean, were the “Peaks of Europe”.

“We saved the best ‘till last” goes the song. Today’s ride, through the Picos Mountains and the narrow La Hermida Gorge, walled by tumultuous cliffs, was a joy but it could have been so different. I still had 50 miles in the tank when I discovered that the petrol station that I’d planned to fill up in had ceased trading and then another and then another!

Things were getting serious when I put a miserly plan into action. My route to the coast took me downhill through the mountains on a smooth road with sweeping curves so I chose to ride in a high gear, almost at tick over, cruising smoothly downhill for over thirty minutes, conserving fuel until I reached salvation. Well, maybe not salvation but a filling station that was open.

Relaxed, I still had time for one more pass in glorious sunshine before dropping down to the coast and on to Bilbao. I’d almost, but not completely, forgotten about the rain.



Contact Gordon

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