

TOURING THE
*Castles and Mountains
of Central Spain*

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We gathered around a table in the hotel lounge, 15 strangers about to spend the next nine days together. We hailed from locations across the country, from Spokane, Wash., to Athens, Ga. Our professions varied as widely as our origins: attorneys, real estate agents, sales people, retired educators and self-employed individuals. We came together that evening for one purpose and with one common tie: we were about to embark on an exploration of Central Spain with IMTBike and the official BMW MOA "Castles and Mountains Tour."

During the evening's introductions I felt as if I was meeting long-lost cousins at a family reunion. Since we were part of the MOA family and we came to Spain with a shared love of motorcycling, it did not take long for us to bond as a group.

During the first of our nightly ride briefings, we met our tour crew and learned about the circuitous route through central Spain that would begin and end in Madrid and would take us over multiple mountain passes and through valleys awash with

vibrant carpets of red and yellow wildflowers in bloom. We would visit ancient cities, stay in luxurious accommodations and dine on world-class cuisine. It was evident that IMTBike had planned every detail of the trip for our ultimate enjoyment.

Martin Cebrian, known as "222," was our head guide for the trip, and it was immediately apparent that he loves his job. Martin is a native Spaniard, and he was thrilled to be sharing his country with all of us. His ever-present infectious smile and boisterous laugh were a constant throughout the tour, and his enthusiasm for his work never waned.

Ryan Brunhaver, our van driver as well as the trip photographer, is from the USA. He speaks fluent Spanish and has been with IMTBike since 2013. Scott Moreno, managing director and founder of IMTBike, also joined us as a special treat. Also originally from the USA, Scott has been living and riding in Spain since 1989, and he has adopted Spain as his home. He was always quick to explain the local customs and often shared stories of Spanish history with the

group.

The next morning we rode in a bus to what Scott affectionately calls "the nerve center," IMTBike's base in Madrid. This is where all the magic happens, and we picked up our motorcycles to start our adventure. As an example of the great care and concern given to each of the riders and their needs, Scott and Martin made a last minute adjustment for one tour member with limited riding experience, changing out his motorcycle to one more suitable and spending additional time on a trial run before the group took off for the day.

We were quickly out of the city and headed toward the Guadarrama Mountains. The next seven days were a feast for the eyes, a feast for the palate and a feast for the soul. Normally a rider myself, I was content most of the time to sit behind my husband with my camera in hand, taking in every moment and every sight to the tune of about 3,000 photos.

Planned stops along the way broke up the riding, including a morning coffee break, usually at a point of interest such as the ski

area at Navacerrada or a roadside café. Lunches, always ordered in communal style, boasted a variety of local dishes. Lunch stops did not always occur at a planned location, but each restaurant greeted our large group graciously and prepared us wonderful meals. It was during lunch that we best experienced Spanish dining customs, with multiple dishes served in what we would call "family style" and meant for all to share, allowing the diner to sample several different dishes in one meal.

The Castles and Mountains Tour planners selected our route and overnight destinations with great care in order to obtain an ideal combination of great riding and wonderful sightseeing. Perfect roads and stops filled with the culture and rich history of Spain filled our days.



Gothic Cathedral, Segovia.

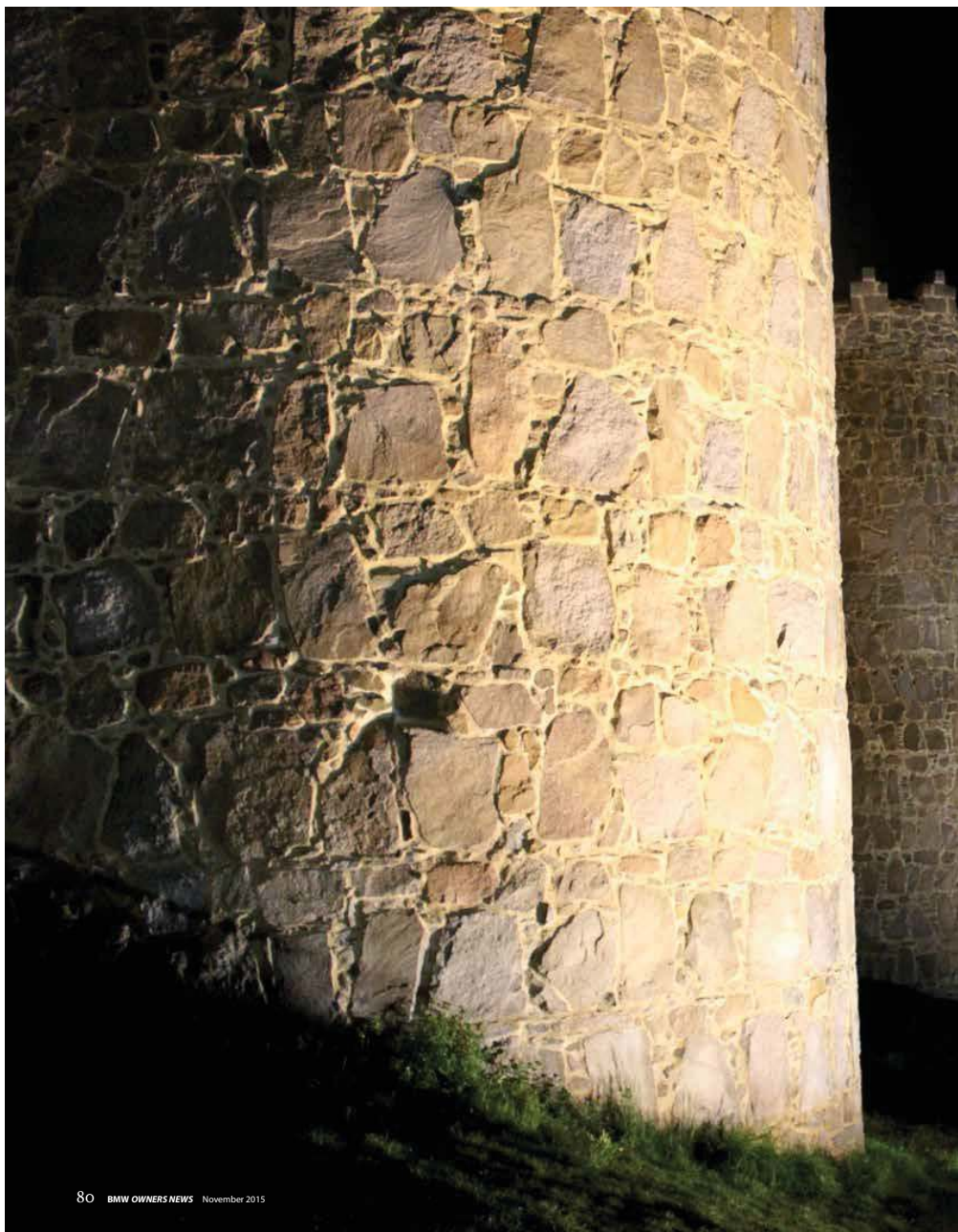


In Segovia we saw the famous aqueduct, one of the most impressive feats of Roman engineering. Its 166 stone arches—amazingly built without mortar or cement—tower over the city's Azoguejo Square. It has stood for over 2,000 years and is a true marvel to see. We spent several hours exploring the gothic cathedral and Alcazar Castle, built in the 11th century. Here is where we tasted our first Serrano ham, which comes from the black pigs we saw in fields along our route. It is carved directly from the cured leg, and if the hoof is not black, it is not authentic.

Windmills at Consuegra.



My view from the back seat.



A stop in La Alberca, a medieval village, garnered me my first souvenir of the trip, a pair of beautiful handmade leather boots. During a visit to the village of Guadalupe and the monastery built in 1340 we viewed a vast collection of religious artifacts. Since the tour was only offered in Spanish, I was lost in the translation so really had no idea what I was seeing. Along the way, the group paused at Monfrague National Park to do a little bird watching. This area is a natural habitat for vultures, and we were lucky enough to be entertained by dozens of vultures soaring effortlessly on the winds.

Riding in Spain is not much different than riding in the States. Riding is on the right side of the road, and many of the traffic laws seem to be similar. Spanish road planners commonly use traffic circles,

which seem to be safer, especially for turning left. Over the days of the tour the riding varied from tight twisties over mountain passes to sweepers through the valley of La Mancha, where we followed Don Quixote's legendary path and visited the 12 windmills at Consuegra made famous in his battle to defend the honor of the women he loved. While it is acceptable to split off from the group to do a little riding on your own and the tour handbook includes these options, no one from our group chose to do that.

We even stayed together on the rest day in Toledo when we were all on our own and met for dinner as a group. In keeping with Spanish custom, we dined each evening later than the time most Americans are used to. The Paradores, working with IMT-Bike, created special menus of culinary delights. The selections, which varied each night, featured regional dishes and included some exotic items such as baby eels. While everyone is extolling the virtues of the

Mediterranean diet, I still managed to gain five pounds during the tour. Perhaps this is because bread (which I swore off for over a year) and dessert are served at every meal. After all, it is difficult to enjoy the wonderful olive oils of Spain without bread for dipping! And what is a Spanish meal without Spanish wines? It was during ones of our meals that Eileen from Arizona exclaimed, "I ate so much even my shoes don't fit any more."

Overnight stays were in the ancient walled cities of Avila, Ciudad Rodrigo, Trujillo, Toledo and Cuenca. Each night found us at one of Spain's famous Paradores, which are restored castles, palaces, convents, and government and cultural buildings converted into hotels as part of the Royal Tourism Commission's efforts to create a hotel infrastructure that was non-existent prior to 1911. These incredible buildings took us back in time and allowed us a glimpse into an ancient realm that most of us don't see every day. Each Paradore is unique and has something special to offer the visitor.

Toledo was the perfect location for our rest day and provided us time to explore a complex, rich and vibrant city. Shopping is abundant, and you can purchase anything from swords to marzipan delicacies. While in this multicultural city you can also visit a mosque, a synagogue and the must-see cathedral. This massive, opulent building was started in 1226 and took nearly 300 years to complete. My husband and I took the self-guided audio tour and spent several hours wandering through this impressive architectural display. We also visited the remains of the Roman baths and Plaza de Zocodover and got lost in the winding streets of the city, walking in circles for about an hour.

Before we knew it, our group was heading back to Madrid, and our adventure into

Spain's past was over. Over the course of the trip, we rode over 1,600 kilometers, ate 14 meals together, and celebrated a birthday with Cy from New Hampshire and a 35th wedding anniversary for Daryl and Emily from South Carolina. We spent our last evening together in the historic center of Madrid, toasting our host Scott's 50th birthday. As we dined for the last time, we raised our glasses numerous times in toast to an amazing trip, beautiful places, great roads and great new



friends. We thanked our guides, hugged each other, extended invitations to visit and made promises to keep in touch.

The IMTBike crew (Martin, Ryan and

The cliffs of Cuenca.



Scott) was truly outstanding. The attention to detail was evident in every aspect of the trip. They went out of their way to make us feel welcome, at ease and comfortable during our journey, but I think it just is their way. Their motto, "Passion for Motorcycling," sums it all up. They definitely shared their passions for both motorcycling and their country with us. This was my first trip to Spain and my first motorcycle tour, but it won't be my last. While Scott did teach me a very important phrase, I really need to know more Spanish than how to order a glass of red wine! ☺



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