



THE PERFECT PYRENEES

Our Spanish Dream

By John Meyer #132457

My wife Erica and I have just returned from a tour of northern Spain and France through the Pyrenees mountains. We wanted to share our experience with fellow BMW MOA members, inviting them to experience some of the finest motorcycle roads in the world.

Our tour was organized by Iberian Moto Tours (IMTBike) based in Madrid and Barcelona. We opted for the “self-guided” solo version of their group tour to the Pyrenees. They set up the bike rental, all lodging, and breakfast/dinners, leaving us the flexibility for additional routes. Without the long stops of a group tour, and more riding time, we took additional side routes set up by Martin Cebrian, IMTBike Barcelona office director. We were on our own tab for lunch, gas (about \$8 a gallon), libations, and extras.

A 2011 1200RT was the bike of choice, complete with GPS and top case. This was a

close ride to my K1300GT at home and the best option for us two-up. The GPS was pre-programmed with a route for each of the six days of riding. Our riding gear was our own, carried on the plane in an extra large suitcase. Some people doing international tours have mailed their gear early, but this is much more expensive. My toy on this trip was a GO Pro helmet-mounted camera I use for dirt riding. I was going to capture it all. Make sure to bring along a 50W converter (for low power electronics) to keep all cameras, helmet communications, and cell phones charged.

Spain is one of the most motorcycle friendly countries in the world. Barcelona, according to museomoto.com, has the highest ratio of motorbikes per capita and is the birthplace of Bultaco, Montesa, and Ossa motorcycles. Spaniards respect motorcyclists, as Martin told us that every family has at least one motorcyclist in it and are very aware of them when driving. They are, however, more aggressive than the average American driver and it's important to look carefully when passing and making lane changes.



Above: Two Dorks from the States - John and Erica
Left: Bonaigua Pass at summit

Barcelona to Seu D'Urgell

We headed north from Barcelona toward the Pyrenees and the Collada de Toses, a great stretch of road that is used in the World Rally Car Championships. The great asphalt and beautiful scenery make it a favorite for Spanish motorcyclists, of which we saw plenty. I live in northern California, and let me tell you, our roads aren't even close to the high quality of the Spanish roads we were on. The rural roads are generally narrower but free from the potholes and broken pavement I am used to at home (don't get me going on the California budget crisis).

After six hours in the saddle, we arrived at our first night stay at Seu D'Urgell, just south on the Andorran Border. The accommodations during our trip were at government-owned and privately run *paradores*. These are historic Spanish buildings converted to 3-4-star hotels. Always clean and friendly, they were a great place to rest and relax as well as beautiful.

Seu D'Urgell to Bielsa

Leaving Seu D'Urgell, we crossed into France and rode through the mountains made famous by the Tour de France bicycle race, complete with the markings on the road to encourage the tour riders. These roads are off the beaten path and had very little traffic. This was the start of "twisty heaven." Called *giros* by Spanish riders, we know the tight 180-degree turn as a hairpin, and in the six days of riding I took in more *giros* than I had in a long life of riding.

I was thinking that all the funds that went into keeping the asphalt in tip top shape were available because of the money saved by not painting a white line in the middle of

these more rural roads. This makes for some interesting lane choice for the occasional oncoming cars, so picking a low apex on a blind corner was the best. The other challenging part of riding Spain was the various animals running free in the countryside. Cattle, sheep, goats and wild pigs make the roads their personal hangout, including a place to relieve themselves. A fresh pile of cow dung can be a lit-

tle on the slick side.

We continued to climb to the Bonaigua Pass at 2072m (6800 ft), with more sweepers and *giros*. At the top we stopped to chat with a group of riders from Germany. Actually the "chat" was a series of hand and face gestures until we found one in the group who spoke broken English. They had ridden quite a distance from southern Germany on two GSeS, an R1150R and a Honda VFR. They were happy to share their exploits and we ours.

On the road again, more beautiful

high mountain scenery and twisties led us to the Bielsa tunnel. This was a three kilometer tunnel crossing from France back to Spain. Our stay for the night was at another *parador* called Monte Perdido, located in an incredible mountain valley with snow and waterfalls on all sides. Like it was planned, the rain started just as we parked. Apparently the rain in Spain does not fall mainly on the plain, as it poured in the mountains. As usual, the inn keepers went out of their way to make sure our bike was under cover even when the allotted parking was not. I was really starting to think they liked people on two wheels.



Meeting with some German riders and a well traveled GS



Bonaigua Pass climbing from the Valley floor



The Bielsa tunnel 3 Kilometers under the mountain



Views from the Hotel Monte Perdido



Bielsa to Sallent de Gallego

We woke to cloudy skies and no rain, but had the rain suits ready as we departed north to France. This led us to more Tour de France bicycle roads, boasted as the toughest on the tour. We crossed five cols or mountain passes in France, most with ski resorts on the top of them. It was about halfway into our day when the wrath of the French rain descended on us. I've ridden rain before, so no biggie, but the pea soup fog over the Tourmalet pass slowed us down a bit. We had a great lunch in the town of Lutz St-Sauver and yes, it included French fries; go figure. The rain had stopped as we finished lunch and climbed two more cols, greeted by sunny and clearing skies. I thought I was in a scene from *The Sound of Music*, with goats blocking the road and the incredible, rolling green high mountain landscape. Back into Spain, we ended up in the small ski village of Sallent de Gallego. This would be our home for the next two nights, staying with the very friendly husband and wife team of Elena and Manelo at the Hotel Bocale. Out front of the hotel the sign reads "Bikes Welcome," with a metal sculpture of a bike and rider. It turns out Manuelo rides a 2009 GS and Elena a Spanish-made Honda Vadereo XL1000V when not running a hotel.

Spain is one of the most motorcycle friendly countries in the world.

Free Day

This day was set up to do as we wished, whether to chill in Sallent or pick a loop to ride. Erica wanted a break from the saddle and I wanted to ride and explore. Our compromise was a payoff, you know, the kind where she lets you do what you want but you have to leave a boat load of cash for shopping to make it "easier" to let you go. I kept reminding her who is in charge—her! Hey, how does a guy have seven motorcycles in the garage and still stay married? Can you say compromise? Anyway, I took off for a 425km spirited romp east of Sallent to the summit of Col de la Pierre St Martin at the French border and down through the Isaba Valley. This was my day. I wanted to see what the new RT would do. I could see why this bike is so popular; take off those



Sallent De Gallego climbing the summit.



John and Erica in Sallent, a small ski town.



Rough English Translation - Hey Pal, watch the signs for some nasty curves!
At Col de la Pierre St Martin France.



Above: Leaving Sallent on Day 5 - Awesome Mountains!

Left: Some friends who wonder what I am doing on their road.

From the 1914 “Fabrique National” Type 700 with wicker sidecar (the first four-cylinder motorcycle), to the fully restored 1935 BMW R-12, it was like finding the moto’s version of the Holy Grail.



1914 Fabrique National Type 700, First four-cylinder motorcycle made at the Bassella Motorcycle Museum.



1935 BMW R-12 with sidecar at the Bassella Motorcycle Museum.



Taking on the sweepers in Isaba Valley, a lighter RT on a solo ride

bags and a pillion and you can really carve a corner. My route took me through the Salazar Valley, a fast and wide stretch of road with a perfect rhythm of sweepers. I was in heaven. My biggest thrill was coming around a blind corner to find a herd of cattle. The cows were polite enough to get off the road, but the one with horns and no udders made me nervous, just staring at me from eight feet away. He eventually snorted at me in disgust and walked by slowly. Upon my return, I was elated to see I still had money in the bank and a rested partner for the next day. Free days are good; plan one in your itinerary if you go.

Sallent de Gallego to Cardona

We said goodbye to Sallent and headed to the Broto Valley. More beautiful sweepers and two more passes to climb, the Fadas and Espina. We encountered many groups

of riders. I noticed that not too many local riders are tourers with bags and top cases, but mostly canyon carving Ducatis and Cagivas with the girlfriends hanging on for dear life. Ah, what it is to be young!

Our descent from the mountains led us to the town of Tremp. It was warmer here but not bad as we passed fields of wheat and winding rivers. It's there I found a real treat in the town of Bassella, the Bassella Motorcycle Museum.

Now I have to admit, my wife didn't show as much zeal as I to see over 200 fully restored vintage bikes from 1900 to present, but she put up with my childlike squealing and giddiness as we toured the 1000 square meter facility. From the 1914 "Fabrique National" Type 700 with wicker sidecar (the first four-cylinder motorcycle), to the fully restored 1935 BMW R-12, it was like finding the moto's version of the Holy

Grail. We were the only visitors in the place and I methodically snapped a photo of every bike. See www.museumoto.com/en/bassella for more info.

Back on the road, we headed to the town of Solsana, where the curves were best described by our IMTbike tour book as racetrack quality.

Next was Cardona, one of the best *parador* hotels in Spain, a medieval fortress perched high on a hilltop. Initially built in 886 AD, this castle was used throughout the following centuries by Spanish kings fending off invaders, and is now used as a high end resort. We were told by Martin of IMT at our original orientation not to stay in room 712, as it was haunted. We ended up in room 706, but slept well with no apparitions bothering us.

See <http://www.paradores-spain.com/spain/pcardona.html> for more info.

Cardona to Barcelona

This was a short day, taking us to Sierra de Montserrat. These unusual mountains look like liquefied sand dropped on top of each other, forming very high peaks. At the top sits the Montserrat Monastery, an active Benedictine retreat. The basilica is a must see and if you get to hear the L'Escolania choir, a boys' choir of sopranos and altos, it would be a plus. See [http://wikitravel.org/en/Montserrat_\(Spain\)](http://wikitravel.org/en/Montserrat_(Spain)) for more info.

Heading back to Barcelona, traffic was heavier and exit signs become a bit cryptic; this is where the GPS became a good friend. Don't rent a bike in another country without one.

After dropping off the RT and settling into our hotel, reflections of our week long adventure surfaced. This was a "bucket list" thing for us and a positive wave of emotion came over me knowing we had done it, without problems and exceeding our expectations. Experiencing another country and culture from the perspective of two wheels was something I would hope any rider could share.

I could check this one off the list, but knew that the experience added more to it. What was next—the Alps, South America, New Zealand? We knew there would be another. ☺



Above: The Montserrat Monastery Basilica.

Left: The Cardona Castle Day 5 - Those bricks are from 886 AD - Check out the narrow window for shooting a bow at the enemy.

Right Top to Bottom: View from the Cardona Castle - looking on the town below.

The Sierra de Montserrat approaching the summit.



