

IBERIAN BOUNTY

THE RIDER SPAIN AND PORTUGAL TOUR WITH IMTBIKE.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG DREVENSTEDT

There is Spartan riding and there is decadent riding. Spartan riding starts dark and early and ends only when fuel or light run out. You eat as little as possible (usually something scavenged from the bottom of your tankbag), forgo creature comforts and treat frugality like a fight to the death. Pain and suffering become legend around the campfire. On my KLR, bring it on. But two-up with my lady? Not so much.

Decadent riding, in contrast, is a five-star vacation on two wheels. Full-service motorcycle tour companies, like IMTBike (formerly Iberian Moto Tours), cover all the bases, from finely honed itineraries to well-maintained motorcycles and one-of-a-kind hotels. For two weeks last October, on the *Rider Spain and Portugal Tour*, six couples, including yours truly and my

girlfriend Carrie, gorged on high-fructose roads, artery-clogging scenery and belly-filling cuisine. My pants are still too tight.

Since 1997, IMTBike has grown from a single office to eight locations throughout Spain and Portugal. The *Rider Tour* started and ended at the company's "nerve center" on the outskirts of Madrid. Five couples rode two-up on BMW R 1200 GS and RT motorcycles, the sixth followed in a rented Mini Cooper. Shepherding our flock was IMTBike's Managing Director Scott Moreno, an American who has lived in Spain for 20 years and is well-versed in local language and culture; and Head Guide Chano Lorenzo, a Spaniard who used to be a royal motorcycle guard for King Juan Carlos I. Scott and Chano traded off leading by bike and sweeping by



Our faithful, nimble 2010 BMW R 1200 GS, which carried us for more than 1,700 miles on this tour, overlooking Toledo, the former capital of Spain. Inhabited for thousands of years, it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1986. Cathedral in the center took 267 years to build, from 1226 to 1493.

van, which transported our luggage and tourist loot. They were our ring leaders, fixers, menu interpreters and, by the end of the tour, our good friends.

Our objective was a 1,700-mile circuit through the heart of the Iberia, a large peninsula that serves as Europe's hood ornament. Separated from Africa by a mere nine miles at the Strait of Gibraltar, the 2,059-mile Iberian coastline is split evenly between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Located so strategically, Iberia's history is a greatest-hits of conquests and occupa-



View from Puerto del Pico, overlooking modern tarmac and the ancient Roman Road that preceded it.

tions by Carthaginians, Greeks, Romans, Germans, Moors and Catholics. Cities and countryside are brimming with ruins, castles, fortresses and cathedrals left behind by those who've hoisted flags on Iberian soil. Several millennia of trading and warfare have left Spain and Portugal with a rich legacy of passages, lanes and byways built long before modern demolition and earth movers made highways safe, flat and boring. Both countries are riddled with mountain ranges, high plateaus, river valleys and majestic



On the Road of Seven Hairpins in Spain's Sierra de Navacerrada.

PHOTO COURTESY/IMTBKE

coastlines, all connected by well-paved roads with minimal traffic. Add in a benevolent climate and you've got motorcycling nirvana. (With similar geography and weather, Carrie and I dubbed Iberia "California with castles.") On our second day, traveling from Ávila to Ciudad Rodrigo, ancient and modern roadways intersected as we twisted and turned our way up



to Puerto del Pico, a 4,435-foot pass in the Sierra de Gredos. A Roman road was built over the same pass 2,000 years ago, and from the overlook you can see the remarkably well-preserved stone thoroughfare with the modern road just beyond.

Our tour included 10 days of riding and three days

Left: The culinary crown jewel of Spain, *jamón ibérico*, in La Alberca.

Below: The Douro River valley in Portugal, famous for its vineyards and the birthplace of port.

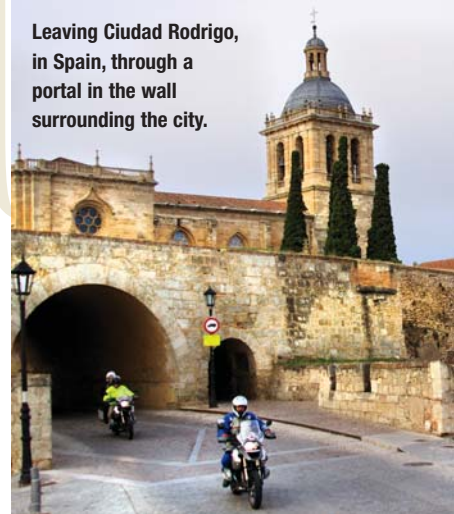


of rest. Ride two or three days, take a day off, repeat. Rest days were spent in cities where you're better off leaving the motorcycle parked and sightseeing by double-decker bus (Porto), cable car (Lisbon) or on foot (Toledo). A typical riding day began with a hearty buffet breakfast at the hotel. Bellies distended, we'd gear up, lift our kickstands around 9 a.m. or so, ride for about an hour at a comfortable pace and then stop for *café con leche*. We'd ride a while longer then stop for a laidback lunch. The Spanish and Portuguese are rarely rushed (except when they drive); like many Europeans, leisure is in their cultural DNA. After dessert and coffee, we'd waddle out to the bikes, fire them up and press on. We'd stop again midafternoon for yet another coffee, perhaps a

chicharrónes (fried pork rind), bacon, chorizo, grilled pork, braised pig cheeks, salted pig knuckles and, believe it or not, *jamón*-flavored Ruffles potato chips. Everything but the squeal!

Accommodations were first-rate. We stayed primarily in Spanish *paradors* and Portuguese *pousadas*, state-run luxury hotels in historic

Leaving Ciudad Rodrigo, in Spain, through a portal in the wall surrounding the city.



“Traveling in foreign countries is always a horizon-expanding experience, more so when done on a motorcycle.”

photo op, and arrive at our hotel around 5 p.m. After a few hours of rest or sightseeing, we'd have drinks in the hotel bar and discuss the route for the following day. Finally we'd adjourn to the dining room for a multicourse meal with regional dishes and lots of red wine. Dinners were festive, with storytelling, ride commentary and laughter at creative translation on the English menus.

Perhaps as a repudiation of nearly 800 years of Moorish occupation, which ended in 1492, the Spanish and Portuguese love pork. There is a chain of stores in Madrid called *Museo del Jamón* (Museum of Ham), a name which hardly does justice to the Iberian obsession with swine. Grocery stores and markets, cafés

buildings. We stayed in castles in Ávila, Ciudad Rodrigo and Jarandilla de la Vera; monasteries and convents in Óbidos, Mérida and Cuenca; palaces in Porto and Lisbon; and the home of a cardinal in Toledo. Sleeping our way through history was booked with overnights in a modern, stylish hotel in Madrid. And weather was agreeable. During our first two days, rain in Spain fell on the plain, and in the mountains, but not much. We mostly enjoyed sunny blue skies, chilly in the morning but warm by midday. The only other hitch in the weather was thick, bone-chilling fog as we followed Don Quixote's route through La Mancha. Murphy's Law was upheld. After snapping photos one-by-one of hilltop, centuries-old windmills shrouded in mist, we descended carefully to the town of Consuegra. While filling our bikes with gas, the fog cleared to reveal, in the distance, wind-

mills lined up proudly beneath an azure sky, the quintessential postcard moment missed by no more than 15 minutes.

Traveling in foreign countries is always a horizon-expanding experience, more so when done on a motorcycle. Leaving one's comfort zone is

Mike, Carol and Carrie with one of the ancient windmills of La Mancha, made famous by Miguel de Cervantes in his early 17th-century novel, *Don Quixote*.



Left: Our swashbuckling crew in front of a statue of Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro in Trujillo, his birthplace.

and restaurants all have cured hams—some bearing the prized black hoof of free-range, acorn-fed *pata negra*—hanging from the ceiling, with tiny paper cups to catch dripping fat that renders at room temperature. On our second day we visited La Alberca, an historic landmark that is rarely on the tourists' radar. The tiny village has cramped cobblestone streets and stone-and-wood architecture dating to the 13th century. Renowned for the quality of its *jamón*, La Alberca is chock-a-block with artisanal purveyors and hosts an annual festival honoring its regal pigs. Throughout the two-week tour, pork was on my fork at nearly every meal: *jamón serrano* and *ibérico*, *morcilla* (blood sausage), *lechón* (roast suckling pig),

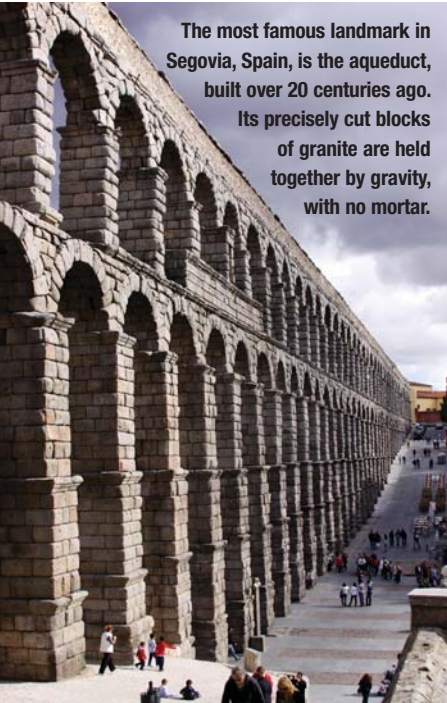
The Dom Luis Bridge over the Douro River in Porto, Portugal, a rest day city.



exciting but also unsettling. That's why we call other countries *foreign*—they're different. Language is different. Food, currency and customs are different. In Spain and Portugal, they drive on the right side of the road but use the metric system for speed and distance; drivers are well-trained but they all seem to be auditioning for Formula One. After a week or two of eating cold cuts and cheese for breakfast and sleeping in a different bed every night, you get homesick. About halfway through the tour, Carrie and I made an emergency visit to the Hard Rock Café in Lisbon for nachos and burgers.

Therein lays the paradox, and the reward. By trying new things in new places, our appreciation for what we love about

The most famous landmark in Segovia, Spain, is the aqueduct, built over 20 centuries ago. Its precisely cut blocks of granite are held together by gravity, with no mortar.



home deepened. Upon our return, sleeping in our own bed and eating a homecooked meal never felt or tasted so good. Traveling overseas for two weeks involved a lot of air travel, effort and expense. But had we stayed home, we wouldn't have stood in awe beneath Segovia's 2,000-year-old aqueduct, its 88 arches built of granite blocks without mortar. We wouldn't have walked like sentries atop walls surrounding the medieval cities of Ciudad Rodrigo and Óbidos. Nor would we have explored the Alacazaba in Mérida, a city with more Roman ruins than any place out-



Left: The Temple of Diana, among the many Roman ruins in Mérida, Spain.

Below: Enjoying the stunning cliff-top view from Cabo da Roca, Portugal, continental Europe's westernmost point.

side of Rome. No walks on the narrow, cobbled streets of Ávila, Porto, Évora, Sintra, Cuenca and Toledo, cities so rich with architectural and cultural treasures they are recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites (we visited 11 such sites on the tour). Above all, our lives would not have been enriched by riding world-class roads we'd never heard of, like the one that follows the contours of the Douro River through a valley filled with vineyards and storybook villages. Or the exquisite roads that wind through Monfragüe and Alto Tajo, national parks in the heart of Spain. We'll always remember riding a narrow lane to Portugal's Cabo da Roca, the westernmost point in Europe, and standing atop a cliff as we watched the sun sink into the Atlantic. It doesn't get more decadent than that.



PHOTO BY SCOTT MORENO

IMTBike rents BMW motorcycles and runs tours in Spain, Portugal, Italy, France and Morocco, with Corsica and Sardinia coming soon. For more information, visit www.imtbike.com. 

PHOTO BY CARRIE STAFSTROM



"Here, where the land ends and the sea begins..."
—Luís Vaz de Camões, considered the greatest Portuguese poet. Sunset at Cabo da Roca.