

FROM BARCELONA TO SAN SEBASTIAN AND BACK WITH IMTBIKE

By Wes Fitzer #170126

Leaving Ordesa Y Monte Perdido National Park – one of, if not the most beautiful places I've ever seen.



Taking advantage of a 200-euro discount IMTBIKE offered at the 2021 MOA Rally in Great Falls, Paula and I booked their Coast-to-Coast tour promising ten days of motorcycle nirvana! There is no way my pictures or prose can do justice to the sheer beauty of the Spanish and French countryside, the quality and choice of the roads traveled, the quaint villages, the accommodations, or the culinary experience we had on this trip. But I'll do the best I can!

Along with us on this trip were several other MOA members, a couple from Guatemala, and another solo rider. For this ride were also two expert and highly entertaining guides Martin and Mikel, or as we called them, M&M.

Paula and I had previously taken an IMTBIKE tour in 2017, thinking it would be a once-in-a-lifetime bucket-list trip. We found that the experience was so much more than just the riding. On both trips, we've made lifetime friends, experienced a part of the world as you can only experience on a motorcycle, stayed in five-star accommodations, and traveled through the country, not as a typical tourist would but, with IMTBIKE's help, as a Spaniard.

Our group was met at the Barcelona airport by our guide Martin, who was patiently waiting for us to pass through customs so he could help us navigate our way to the waiting shuttle to our hotel. Once settled, we took time to relax by the pool before our

first ride meeting and dinner that evening. Ride meetings allowed our guides to outline the following day's route and plan. Our first meeting also outlined safety protocols, discussing traffic signs/laws, rules of the road, rules of riding with the group, etc. Once the meeting concluded, we took a short walk to enjoy our first dinner, where I had the best grilled sea bream of the entire trip.

The following day, we gathered in the hotel lobby, loaded our gear into the IMTBIKE van, then walked a couple of blocks to their Barcelona offices, where we were shown our bikes, provided the opportunity to purchase additional insurance and inspect the bikes before departure. After quickly getting through the administrative part of the tour, we found ourselves riding fantastic two-lane roads in no time. We were quickly outside of Barcelona and soon climbing to Formic Pass with seemingly endless curves. A short time but many curves later, we arrived at Hostalric, a town known for its perfectly preserved castle, which also served as our location to stop for lunch. From there, we began our descent back to the coast and were soon on the "Carretera de l'Any," Highway of the Year. With its 365 curves in 12 miles, the Carretera de l'Any works its way along the cliffs above the Mediterranean Sea, offering spectacular views and an exciting ride. At the end of the day, we arrived at our beautiful hotel near the Mediterranean, where Paula and I donned our swimsuits and went for a refreshing swim. Later that evening, we sat on the terrace overlooking the Sea



Spectacular view of the Mediterranean from our Costa Brava Hotel

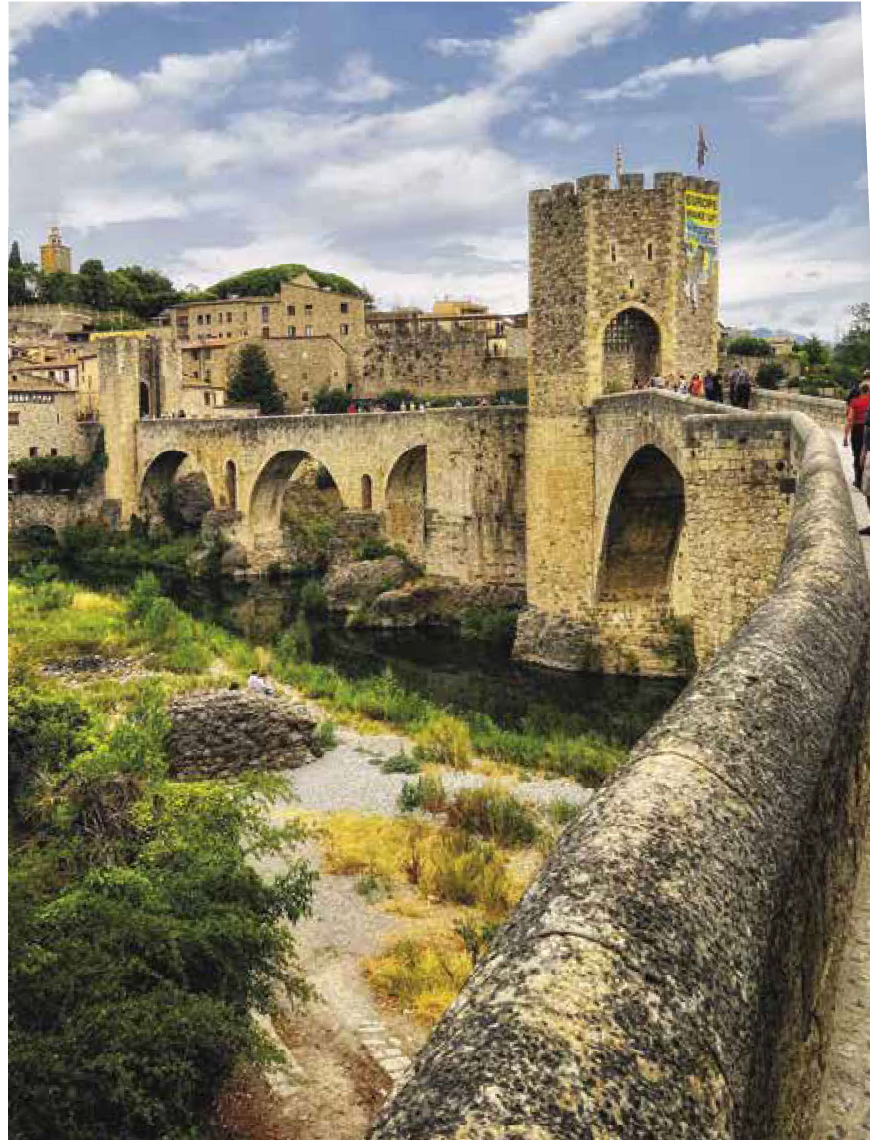
while drinking adult beverages and listening to live music as we celebrated Bob and Sue Aldridge's 42nd wedding anniversary—a dramatic ending to our first day of riding!

After breakfast the following day, we departed from Costa Brava and headed back into the mountains and curvy roads! After a series of spectacular twisty roads, we stopped for coffee and a walk through a historic medieval town with its narrow cobblestone streets, while trying to imagine what life would have been like in medieval times. Once back on the bikes, we continued our winding journey toward Estany de Banyoles, the largest lake in the region, and then continued riding more twisties to a lunch stop at Besalú and another medieval castle. I could have spent an entire day just being a tourist exploring the castle's interior, but twisty roads and the sounds of motorcycles were calling my name, and we were soon back on the bikes in search of the perfect line through the curves. After one final round of twisties that day, we arrived at our first Parador in Seu d'Urgell.

Day 3 took us into France as we traveled over some of the same roads and passes as the prestigious Tour de France. Besides Barcelona, San Sebastián and Pamplona, all other towns and places we stayed were relatively small, making getting out of town each morning easy. Again we continued our quest for curves, curves, and more curves. Bob would often say throughout the tour, "My curve bucket is overflowing!"

We stopped for lunch at Baqueira-Beret, the largest ski area in the Pyrenees, and enjoyed cooler weather and an Iberian ham sandwich. Leaving Baqueira-Beret, we began twisting and climbing to one of the French passes—Col de Peyresourde. Along the route, we could see where Tour de France fans had painted the names of their favorite riders on the asphalt.

We visited a small crepe deli at the top of the pass and met the nicest Frenchman. Though he didn't speak English or Spanish and we didn't speak French, he entertained us with homemade wooden puzzles and his delightful smile and contagious laughter. Riding out of Col de Peyresourde, we traversed picturesque mountain passes and valleys, or so they tell me. It was extremely foggy, and with the narrow roads we shared with bicyclists, animals and oncoming cars, all I could do was focus on the road in front of me, following the winding road which made me feel like a cross-threaded bolt as I made my way up and down the mountain. Eventually, we twisted our way to the Bielsa Tunnel, which brought us back into Spain, with clear skies and the doorstep of Ordesa Y Monte Perdido



Top Right, Bridge over a mote entering the historic castle where I could have spend days wandering around the inside the medieval walls of Besalú



Right, Our first Parador – National de la Seu d'Urgell. Parador's are typically converted monistaries, castles and other historic properties.



National Park, our home for the night and the most spectacular view my eyes have ever seen!

Our fourth day of the tour was big with six mountain passes to cross, five of which were in France. Backtracking through the Bielsa Tunnel and back into France and its fog, it was a day full of twisties, turns and incredible vistas overlooking the French countryside and quaint French villages, which, despite proximity to Spain, are very different from their neighbors to the south. This was the only day we stopped in France to eat and were given time in a French village to enjoy an authentic French meal. Très bien!

Riding the Col Aubisque through the dense fog was entertaining. With the mountain on my left and a knee-high rock wall on my right, I could sense a significant drop to the right, but I couldn't see anything past the wall. I was reminded of some silly movie where the victim falls from height through the fog and disappears into the mist. That day we also rode the Col de Tourmalet, the most famous Tour de France mountain pass of the Pyrenees.

Our last pass that day was the Portalet Pass, dotted with sheep, goats, cows and one crazy shepherd dog who didn't like us being that close to his herd! Portalet Pass creates the border between France and Spain, and once again, the skies cleared just as we crossed into Spain.

San Sebastián was our destination the next day, and the ride there again offered twisties intermixed with nice sweepers and a little faster pace. We stopped for lunch at Roncesvalles, an important town in the Pyrenees, as it's the starting point of Puente la Reina de Jaca, an important point of passage for pilgrims following the Camino de Santiago. The Camino de Santiago is known in English as the Way of St. James, a path leading to the shrine of apostle Saint James the Great in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia in



Top to Bottom, The most spectacular view these old eyes have ever seen – the view from our room at Ordesa Y Monte Perdido National Park.

Bay of La Concha near old town San Sebastián where we enjoyed great Pintxos.

A few of the many critters we shared the road with on the Portalet Pass.



northwest Spain.

After lunch, we continued to the Cantabrian Sea, climbing and twisting our way through the Ibeñeta Mountain Pass and again crossed over into France. Shortly after passing through St-Jean-Pied-de-Port, our guides routed us along a tiny local road across the top of a small mountain range and into the next village.

We didn't see any other cars along the way and only encountered a few bicyclists who must have wondered what eight motorcycles and a van were doing on a road barely wide enough to accommodate the van. It was beautiful and serene, and we had it all to ourselves. Once we crossed back into Spain, we continued our westward journey to San Sebastián, but not before riding more mountain passes and a lot of twisties allowing Bob to exclaim again, "My curve bucket is overflowing!"

A day of rest in a hotel offering a breathtaking view of the city and the Bay of La Concha was up next for us. On that day, we rode the funicular from the top of Monte Igueldo to the Sea and walked around the bay to the historic part of San Sebastián, where we enjoyed pintxos, a micro-cuisine. That evening we were treated to a traditional Basque dinner where I had one of the best steaks I've ever eaten. I also fell in love with Padron peppers (Spanish roulette, as most are mild, but occasionally, you'll get a hot one—we never did).

Getting out of San Sebastián was quick and easy, and before we knew it, we were back in the forest following the Urumea River, where kayakers were seen enjoying their sport. We had an excellent stop for lunch, and we found ourselves on a beautiful mountain road through Valle del Batzan, an area with a rich history of "Witchcraft." Like other areas of the world during the Inquisition, Navarran women who lived in this area and practiced natural or holistic medicine were labeled and persecuted as witches. Knowing this history and riding narrow roads through the dark forest made for an eerie experience.

Our arrival in Pamplona was interesting as IMTBIKE had arranged a luxurious hotel in Pamplona's main square where vehicle traffic was prohibited. Luckily, IMTBIKE made arrangements allowing us to ride our bikes through the square and unload in front of the hotel. Riders then rode the bikes a short distance to an underground parking lot for the evening.

Pamplona is another city I'd love to return to and spend a little more time. While there, we had drinks at Café Iruña, one of Earnest Hemingway's favorite places. After another excellent dinner, we took a walking tour of the route used during the Running of the Bulls while listening to a history of the event and the preparation involved each year.

Our eighth day of the tour was set to be one of our longer days mileage-wise, but we

were now near the pre-Pyrenees or foothills, offering more fast sweepers and a selection of technical curvy roads. We rode the narrow roads and canyons of Congosto de Ventamillo Canyons and had been warned of the possibility of meeting a truck in a corner that was taking up the entire roadway. Luckily, we never had that experience, and all of the drivers we experienced throughout Spain and France were accommodating and made room for us to pass when necessary.

In the Congosto de Ventamillo Canyon, I was astounded by the truck drivers' skill as they met each other on the road barely wide enough for one truck, and they'd expertly pass each other like it was nothing.

After lunch, where I enjoyed the first and probably only hamburger I had on this trip which was a tasty Spanish version of what I'd call a hangover burger topped with a fried egg, we continued on our way to Valle de Boi again along a nice mixture of tight technical roads and more long fast sweepers.



Riding the narrow roads of the Congosto de Ventamillo canyon—interesting when we met 18-wheelers.



Night time view of the Bay of La Concha from our hotel.



Upon our arrival at Caldes de Boi, a city known for its natural hot springs, Paula and I were again excited to don our bathing suits and take a soak. Sadly, we must have brought cooler weather and rain with us as the hot pool was closed for cleaning. Paula and I got in the lukewarm pool, but we went back to our room once the rain began falling in full force.

Leaving the beauty of Caldes de Boi en route to Cardona, we were back to tight, technical twisties but were promised a Parador for the special evening.

Riding between the Pyrenees and foothills, there were some areas of fast sweepers. One of my favorite rides that day was riding along the blue waters of Sant Antoni Reservoir with the mountains to your right and a significant drop off to the reservoir on our left. The ride was highlighted by fast(ish) sweepers and superb asphalt.

We enjoyed a light lunch outside a quaint Spanish village and watched the locals go on about their day. After lunch, we continued on our way with the promise of a special evening in Cardona and were back to tight, technical mountain passes with spectacular views around every corner. Entering Cardona, we could see the promise ahead, a 9th-century castle built in Romanesque and Gothic style sitting atop the highest hill and now was converted to a Parador.

During our lunch stop, we were told the fable of a particular room in the castle reportedly haunted by a ghost. After parking the bikes, we were shown our rooms. What a unique atmosphere

we experienced in that castle. We enjoyed a great dinner in one of the halls and afterward took a tour of the castle.

Leaving Cardona the next day, our guides led us to a short but spectacular mountain road and our planned lunch stop. We all agreed that IMTBIKE's ability to find great roads, even on the outskirts of Barcelona, is amazing. Back in the lowlands and the heat of being near the coast, we were all ready to get to the house. In no time, we were back at IMTBIKE's shop, sharing high-fives and exhilarated to have completed a coast-to-coast tour of Spain without a single mishap.

Looking back, I would describe my tours with IMTBIKE as "a five-star vacation on a motorcycle!" Five-star vacations of any type are not cheap, and for this tour, we took advantage of a 200-euro discount offered at the Great Falls National Rally. IMTBIKE plans to offer a similar deal at our upcoming 50th Rally in Virginia. IMTBIKE offers a wide range of tours throughout Europe and North Africa with easy-to-understand pricing and tour descriptions (www.imtbike.com).

As Paul Harvey always said, "And now for the rest of the story." Along with the pictures, my words can convey the ride, the scenery and some other tangible facts about our trip, but I struggle with describing the personal connection I made with Spain, its people, our guides and most of all, my fellow riders. We had a fabulous time with our "team" and hope to ride together again, but I wouldn't be afraid to take an IMTBIKE tour without knowing anyone. I can only guarantee that you won't be disappointed if you have the wherewithal and the desire. **ON**



Riding the narrow road which was barely wide enough for a van coming into Cardona.



A Crepe shop atop one of the six passes in one day where we were entertained by a Frenchman speaking no English but his smile and laughter were contagious. **Below**, Sierra de Montserrat in the distance. Near the top of the peaks is the famous Montserrat Monastery.

