

MONTE CARLO OR BUST...

Catt Darby

As background, I have been riding my Honda CBF600 for just over two years. I spent three months of that riding alone through Italy. I've also spent the last eight years or so doing organized tours worldwide, but this was my first experience of an organized bike tour. I was apprehensive on a number of levels. What if the people in the group were horrible? What, with my inexperience, if I fell off the mountainside going round the twisties? And how was the marker system going to work across the whole of France?



As it was, it was probably the best introduction to motorbike touring I could have had. After my experiences in Italy, I had already planned a trip to France, encompassing all the best roads I'd read and heard about. At the NEC in 2013 I met John and Jeannette Eggleton of Bike Normandy (www.bikenormandy.com/motorbike-holiday-information/european-tours/), whose Monte Carlo or Bust tour covered all the roads I had already planned. John and Jen give such a personal service: I met them, I booked with them, they were available to answer all the questions I had before the trip, they met us off the ferry in Le Havre, and they were with us every step of the way until they put us back on the ferry on the last day.

The roads they led us on were fantastic. The tour is billed as their 'twistiest tour ever'. Growing up in Hertfordshire, I wasn't really aware what a twisty was. On day two when it rained quite heavily for three hours, we went down a steep hill (with twisties) to a dam, then back up the other side. I really didn't enjoy it at all, and was scared that if I hated this, I would hate the rest of the tour. However, that was the last we saw of the rain and after that day (though I say so myself) I excelled at the corners! I wasn't the slowest going round the gorges of the Ardeche, Lot or Verdon, nor on the gorgeous Route Napoleon, and I was leaning the bike as far over as she would go. The Millau Bridge was fun to see and it would have been better to ride the roads once for the joy of riding fast, and then again slowly to watch the scenery. We only had time for one pass over the bridge, so I chose fast and had such a huge smile on my face all the way along! My riding improved measurably over the nine days of solid riding, with one day off in Monte Carlo.

The hotels we stayed in were all good quality and some of them were exceptional. The meals we had

were either included in the tour price, in which case we ate with the group, or John and Jen gave us top tips to find a large choice of restaurants.

We had a van that followed us everywhere, carrying the luggage between hotels, available for us to put our helmets and jackets in during lunch and tea stops, of which there were enough. We stopped every one and a half hours for fuel, lunch or morning/afternoon refreshments. Most of the time these stops were well timed, but a couple of days the mileages were just on the high side for me, and I was struggling with tiredness. Of course, not everything went perfectly:

a couple of people got lost, three bikes were dropped, I had a puncture – but the way these minor mishaps were dealt with just showed the brilliance the organization of John and Jen.

The people on the tour were all brilliant fun. There were 14 bikes on the tour which was a good number. Nearly everyone there was a repeat visitor, with one person on his tenth tour. I didn't fall off the side of a mountain (or even drop my bike). And the marker system was amazing. It has the same basis as the HBAM system, but it is much better, clearer and works nearly perfectly. I will be booking again next year, but cannot decide which of their tours to do next.

