

A LONG WEEKEND IN

Normandy

Take the pain out of riding abroad – just sort out the ferry, arrive in France and let a guided touring company do all the hard work. What could be easier?

Words and pictures **Nathan Milward**

- ✓ Riding in a group
- ✓ Making friends
- ✓ Friendly locals
- ✓ Good roads
- ✓ Great cheeses

Portsmouth, late one Sunday night. I'm at a petrol station putting fuel in the Suzuki's tank while over the road a couple of youths steal a metal fence from a building site and intentionally carry it into the path of an oncoming car.

Fortunately it falls and hits the ground just in time for the Volvo to go over the top of it. The youths run off, laughing. I shake my head and wonder what's become of the world.

The scene is made more stark by the weekend I'd just spent in France, Normandy to be precise. For three days I'd seen nothing but quaint little villages, rolling countryside, and plenty of peace and quiet which surely would have been destroyed by someone this side of the Channel.

I was there as a guest of Bike Normandy, a motorcycle touring company owned and operated by English couple John and Jeanette Eggleton. Seven years ago the pair quit their jobs in England, bought a farmhouse not far from Camembert and began offering tours to English folk who might want a weekend away, in a foreign county, without having to worry about navigating, or where they're going to stay that night, or whether or not they're going to find any good roads to ride. Such things are guaranteed. The couple can accommodate a maximum of ten people, the tours can

be tailored to you – they can even take you off-road.

On the weekend ferry from Portsmouth to Le Havre, I met the other guys booked on

the trip. They were four Welshmen: two were coppers, one was a special, and the other in the forces. There were supposed to be a few more but they'd had to cancel last minute.

That left Steve on a Suzuki GSX1400, Alex on a Bandit 1200, and Luke and Griff each on a GSX650F. Given that I was riding RiDE's GSX1250FA test bike, it was a Suzuki full-house. Though no way intentional, the Suzuki was deemed perfect because of its panniers, comfy seat and because nobody else on Team RiDE needed it for the weekend.

We met John and Jen on the Friday morning at a café in the town of Honfleur, a short ride from the ferry terminal. It was a beautiful spot, down by the harbour, the sun beginning to warm the first round of croissants. To break the ice I'd dropped the 1250 doing a u-turn in a side street, the scuffed paintwork and engine casing nowhere near as badly damaged as my pride. But we laughed. And drank more coffee and went through the safety briefing where we were told to keep an eye out for a red triangle with a black cross in the middle. This sign means slow down – just around the corner you'll find a side lane which has right of way to turn into the main road, no matter how fast the foreign motorcycle is going. Best try to remember that.

With that, we rode. Through Normandy, down tight twisty lanes and along sweeping forest-flanked roads. The pace was good, the weather brilliant, the scenery not quite as spectacular as other parts of France; quite drab in places.

It was the little villages we passed through, with their wooden shutters and hanging baskets and quaint little squares, that enthralled. What I liked about France was the way bikers were generally treated by other road users. Most pulled to one side, giving us room to pass. The driving

Planning checklist

TWO WEEKS BEFORE

Ring Bike Normandy, confirm place. Book ferry as not included in price, check I have European Health Insurance Card (old E111) and take out travel insurance as EHIC doesn't include repatriation costs

DAY BEFORE

Pick up bike and Hein Gericke gear from office, pack panniers, check passport, booking reference, fill tank, check tyre pressure, check weather forecast



Anyone dropped a bike? Any youths with fences? No? Looks like we're safe to board then...

What I took

Debit card, passport, driving licence, ownership documents, ferry booking reference, camera, laptop, pack of sweet, some mints, one pair of knackered trainers, flip flops, shorts, t-shirts, jumper, spare gloves, cap, toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, Hein Gericke textiles, Lid helmet, Stylmartin boots, book (*Jupiter's Travels*), open mind, clean pants

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RIDE OUT



No need to look at the map. Just follow the leader



As confidence rises, so do the speeds

four courses, a cheese plate and as much beer and wine as we could possibly drink. The house had a games room and a gym in the basement, not to mention John's industrial brewing kit, churning out endless bottles of potent cider.

For the next few days there was more riding, covering around 200 miles a day, in no rush, stopping for

"For three days I'd seen nothing but quaint little villages and rolling countryside"

photographs at chateaux or war graves. If we found a road we liked, we'd lap it twice. At times the group stretched out, riding at its own pace, but it was like a concertina, soon reforming, nobody desperate to get to the front. I've always been a solo rider, preferring to set my own pace and drift along in my own little world. I also like going from somewhere, to somewhere. It gives me purpose and pace,

rather than riding around in a circle, which is what affectively we were doing. But I liked this, it was different – a motorcycle trip that felt like a holiday and not so much of a challenge. Having said that it was the conversation in the evening that I enjoyed most, hearing about life as a copper, and about life as a foreigner living in France.

Then on the last day, Sunday, Alex caught some mud and ended up in the bottom of a hedge. Luckily the only damage was a broken indicator, but it meant we were looking unlikely to make our 5pm ferry from Le Havre.

We hit the highway, a trail of bikes arcing over the Pont de Normandie, a cable-stayed bridge with too few guard rails either side for my liking, especially not in the cross-wind, praying we would make the boat in time. We did of course, darting aboard the with a few minutes to spare. We arrived in Portsmouth late on Sunday night. I was at a petrol station putting fuel in the tank while over the road...

How we did it – and how you can too

MAY-SEPT WHEN TO GO?

Tours run from May to the end of September. The price of £259 per person includes three days' guided riding, two nights en-suite accommodation, breakfasts, four course dinners and all evening drinks. Off-roading courses cost £269 and run at either end of the season with experienced local guides. Tours don't include ferry crossings. The French weather seems a touch warmer than England, mid-September being hot enough for T-shirt and shorts. The anniversary of the Normandy Landings is June 6 and the area gets extremely busy at this time. It's also worth checking school holidays as they fall differently in Upper Normandy and Lower Normandy.

CROSSINGS

I sailed out of Portsmouth to Le Havre with LD Lines. The cost was £88.74 return. The

ferry left Portsmouth at 2300, arriving in France at 0800 local time (it took half that on the way back: schedule varies). Sleeper seats and cabins are available if booked in advance, but they are in short supply and costly. It might be cheaper and quicker, to go via Dover-Calais and ride down. Or use Brittany Ferries, also from Portsmouth, but to Caen just along the coast. See www.ldlines.co.uk or www.brittanyferries.com for more details.

ACCOMMODATION

All included in the price. The only issue was the arrival in Portsmouth, late Sunday night. The Welsh guys were checked into a pub near the dock but when we arrived there was no secure parking and the youths who stole the metal fence were still milling about. It didn't look good. One of the others asked the youths what they were doing and the lad asked him if his bike was

insured as he liked the look of it. We all agreed it wasn't worth the risk of staying and rode home instead, then to Wales, me to Peterborough, getting back at 3am. I've since discovered there's a Travelodge on the outskirts of the city...

DIY

Of course, you can travel around Normandy under your own steam – it wouldn't be too difficult and it would be cheaper. Book your accommodation and ferry, let food take care of itself when you get there. France is an easy, safe and convenient place to ride and basic language skills will take you a long way. The advantage of using guided tours is their knowledge of the local area and the absence of time wasted on decision making and arguments. You'll also get to meet some good people and it's a gentle introduction to Continental travel.

RIDE OUT

Q+A

Q I've just bought the bike of my dreams – and found I can't pack anything onto it for the trip of my dreams. It's a Ducati 1098S and I was going to ride to the south of France, via the Nürburgring. How can I get there with more than my leathers?

Frank P

A The underseat exhausts on your 1098 may make it tricky to get soft throw-over panniers on the back, but there is luggage that will let you tote a weeks' clothing to the Continent.

Start by looking at a Ventura system. This involves fitting some tubing and a rack to the bike, to carry a large pack on the pillion seat. The rack system with the 5-litre Aero-Spada IV bag will set you back upwards of £250. See www.ventura-bike.co.uk for details.

Alternatively, consider the Kriega US-40 tailpack solution. This is a US-20 tailpack with a pair of smaller US-10 bags attached. It will fit securely on the pillion seat, we've found it perfectly dry and it costs a relatively modest £119. See www.kriega.com

You can supplement a tailpack with a tankbag. The Oxford X30 (£84.99, www.oxprod.com) with the strap base would be the best fit on your bike, though we wouldn't expand it all the way on a sportsbike with low clip-on handlebars. All of the fixing straps for this luggage would be best removed and left in the hotel with the bags while you do your laps of the Nürburgring. We'd avoid a rucksack for long-distance touring, as they can become tiring.

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RIDE OUT



This should be easy, mine's the Suzuki



Every village oozes charm and character

was predictable and safe, apart from the lunatics in battered old Renaults who tried their best to keep up. Other bikers were also very friendly, dropping a hand off the handlebars or jutting out a leg to wave as you pass – even the bike mounted policeman turned a blind eye when he caught us in a pedestrian zone trying to get to the crêperie.

These stops for lunch and for coffee were useful things. Talk was of brave overtaking manoeuvres and corners over-shot. It wasn't an ordinary rider training school but just

"For the next few days it's more riding, covering around 200 miles a day, in no rush"

people following you, pointing out that your arms are too stiff or how a big bike like the Suzuki, you will have to countersteer – useful stuff. All of us quickly improved, especially Griff on the GSX650 who was having difficulty finding a tight line through corners and was really nervous. Gradually he found more speed and more confidence, as did I on the 1250 – though this wasn't ideal for the tight back roads and it's a heavy lump to turn in and adjust. But you adapt as it, slowly, I felt myself quite smitten with the big girl. I even started to like its dull looks, which mean you can

ride it with no expectation and nothing to prove. And that's a good thing on unfamiliar roads.

To make sure all of us stuck together, Bike Normandy used the 'back-marker system'. It worked like this; when John, at the front, made a turn in the road – at a junction, or roundabout – he pointed at an appropriate spot and the person behind him pulled up. That 'marker' waited for everyone to pass, indicating the way as they did so. When Jen brought up the rear the marker joined the back of the group and carried on. I was sceptical at first, thinking this system would interfere with the riding, but it worked really well, especially the way it mixed up the order so the slowest rider wasn't always at the back playing catch up. It's worth mentioning that the groups are graded, with this being a moderate weekend. But there are fast groups too – Jen's back tyre and knee slider are evidence of that. Even John, poor sod, had to concede that she's faster than him.

Then we got to the couple's farmhouse: a huge, imposing building perched high on a hill, overlooking an expansive green valley. This is the life – beers on the patio, a small group of bikers, strangers yesterday, mates today (never thought I'd say that about a pair of policemen). Then dinner was served, home-cooked by John and Jen, with

Who are you?



Who are you?
Chris Keogh from Sandhurst in Middlesex

What are you riding?
Suzuki GSX-R750

What's your favourite bit of kit?
My Daytona Evo Security boots. The security is amazing – but as well as the safety, they give amazing feel and comfort. You can wear these all day, on or off the bike. I've never been tired in these boots.

What's the best road you've ridden on this trip to France?
Without a doubt it's the N85 – the Route Napoleon. The best bit's the stretch south of Dignes les Bains. It's fast and swooping. I don't like heights, so for me it's even better than the Alps.

Trip facts

- Total mileage 834
- Total cost of fuel £111
- Cost of toll roads – zilch
- Fuel stops 7
- Average mpg 38.5mpg
- Best mpg 45.7
- Worst mpg 37.2



Our route

Pretty dull in England – just transit on major roads to get the journey started. From Peterborough I took the A1 down to the M25, then rode anti-clockwise to join the M3, then down and finally across on the M27 to Portsmouth. The riding was better in France, but as John was leading the way I didn't log the precise details (that's the point of the guided tour: you don't have to worry so much about the route). On the first day we visited the St Desir war cemetery near Lisieux. Day Two involved riding the Alpes Mancelles, just south of Alençon, only 20 minutes from Le Mans. Day three saw us visit Suisse Normande and riding a road used for hill racing. We had lunch in Thury-Harcourt before returning to Le Havre to catch the ferry.

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