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APRIL 2017 BMW OWNERS NEWS
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Siena skyline

Broccoletti, Bread and a Beemer

Part I

By Tamela Rich #161425



I've been chasing an Italian man riding a GS Wasserboxer for the last six days through Lazio, Tuscany, and Umbria. Tomorrow we'll be back to Rome, where the entire adventure began. My husband fully approves. We have an understanding.

Rome Traffic and the Social Contract

On the first day of my riding adventure, Wasserboxer Man wants me to learn Italian traffic conventions. I follow his lead through Rome's notorious traffic, shooting through gaps so narrow that I tilt my handlebars to avoid the mirrors of the vehicles on either side of me. Maybe that's unnecessary, but I feel more confident doing it. Eventually I learn not to overthink it.

When we come to a stoplight, we navigate to the front of the line of vehicles. Nobody cares, in fact they have left room for us. Moving to the shoulder, I stand on the pegs to make riding over tree roots beneath the pavement more comfortable. No reaction from the drivers I pass.

I'm having my way with this traffic—splitting to the right **and** left of cars—with impunity. When you split a lane into oncoming traffic, drivers don't rush toward

the center line in a game of "chicken" designed to put you in your place—instead, they edge over to the shoulder a bit so you can make an efficient pass. Mutual respect is a beautiful thing in society.

Astride my rented G650 GS, I learn that traffic in Rome is less governed by laws, lanes and speed limits than by an implicit social contract that values efficiency above all else. Yep, I just used the words "Italian" and "efficiency" in the same sentence with

efficient. Nobody opens a car door to see if they can take you out—that would be highly inefficient and disrespectful. Yes, Rome traffic is hectic, yet manageable. I did it, so you can too.

By the time we reach Rome's beach, Ostia Lido, I'm exhilarated. Heading to the water's edge in my motorcycle pants and boots, I collect seashells from the Tyrrhenian Sea as a trophy of my accomplishment. I'm warmed up now, Wasserboxer Man. Let's go.



Tamela's boots in the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Ladies First

Wasserboxer Man has other concerns right now, namely the other people in his care. He is Enrico Grassi, owner of Hear The Road Motorcycle Tours Italy and host to a group of Americans on his "Ladies First" tour. We're from Pennsylvania, Louisiana, Missouri, California, Texas, and North Carolina (me), and not all women—Dan and Derek accompany their mates.

You can never know how a group ride is going to work; after all, one bad rider or bad

attitude can turn the experience into a living hell. That's one thing back home, but in a foreign country you're not going to peel away from a tour with a breezy "arrivederci" My friend Bill Kniegge of Blue Strada Tours convinced me I should give it a try and put

no implied irony. *Let's all get where we need to go efficiently* seems to be the guiding principle when driving in Italy. Italian motorists respect motorcyclists. They know that allowing scooters and motorcycles to the front of the line at traffic lights is

Tour Group with Tamela's bike . Photo by Enrico Grassi HTR.





Bread and forbidden butter.

me in touch with Enrico.

My concerns are allayed after our warm-up ride to the Tyrrhenian Sea. Riding BMW, Moto Guzzi and Harley-Davidson bikes, we sorted ourselves into a riding order that held naturally for the remainder of the tour. I would know Christin's Moto Guzzi V7 headlight anywhere after watching for it in my mirrors for six days in formation.

Off the bikes, we laugh and tease each other like old friends. The couple from Pennsylvania, Jo and Dan, share stories of her father, Giovanni, whom they agree that Enrico reminds them of. Both Giovanni and Enrico are Roman and hold staunch views that there are certain foods to eat and certain ways to eat them.

Enrico will indoctrinate us in Italian gastronomy with each meal: how the animal is

raised and butchered, when the plant is harvested, how to keep pasta from sticking, and the fact that pork jowl ("guanciale") not only tastes better than "pancetta," which comes from its belly, it is also the only pork allowed in "amatriciana" (a staple pasta dish that also includes pecorino cheese, white wine, tomatoes from San Marzano, pepper and chili).

Bread becomes an ongoing joke among us, especially between Enrico and Dan—the bread lover in our group. "Don't touch the bread!" Enrico says each time it's brought to the table. "Eat first, then use the bread to soak up the sauce." I tell Enrico, "Sometimes we say 'sop up the sauce,'" because I know he loves adding to his lexicon.

Jo and Dan exchange knowing looks,

because Enrico's admonition recalls a memory from when they were dating some 40 years ago and Dan was invited to family meals. He always wanted butter on his bread but Giovanni wouldn't stand for it. Eventually Jo's mother would take pity and bring him some, inviting her husband's scorn. Another transgression of young Dan's was asking for garlic bread with spaghetti, an American tradition, only to learn that this made him a Philistine in Giovanni's eyes. It's a wonder they got permission to marry!

As the tour proceeds and more stories of Giovanni are revealed, we all begin to think of him as the tenth person at the table. This right here is group touring at its best. I count my blessings.

Tuscany

I awake in a 17th-century country house on an olive farm overlooking Siena's skyline. My bedroom walls are plaster, and the ceilings are rough-hewn boards crossed with tree boughs. The fresh coat of yellow paint on the walls is perfect for the weak early morning light. It occurs to me that human beings have been conceived, born, lived, and died in this very room for over 400 years.

I move to my closet door—likely 200 years old, since its boards are held together by handcrafted nails—and pull out a wrap for my shoulders as I head toward the window over my writing desk. I left it open all night to soak up the fresh, cool country air. Poking my head outside I see another guest walking her standard poodle toward a gravel lane between the olive groves. A rooster crows.

At the risk of sounding trite, I want to



Huge motorcycle parking lot Siena.



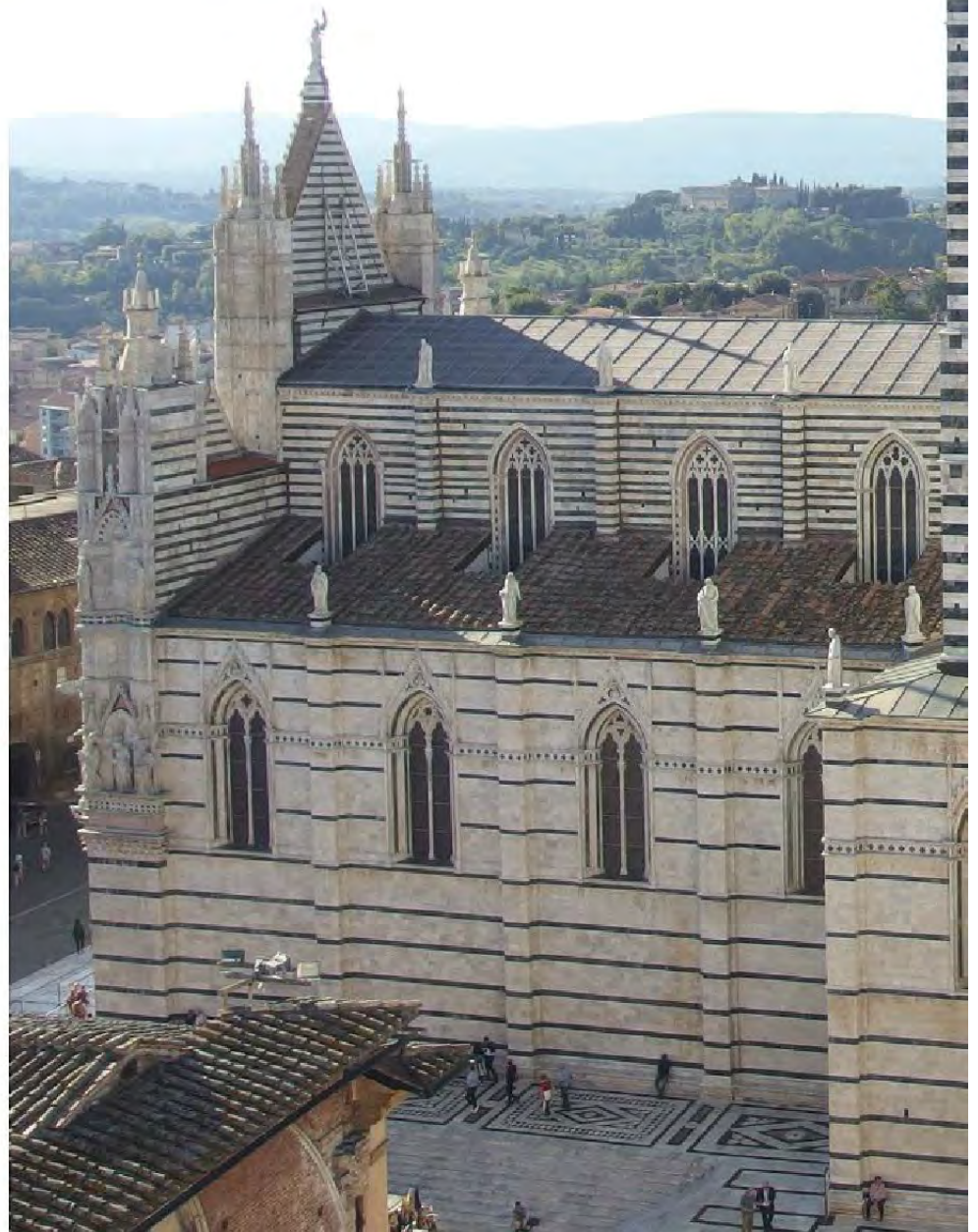
Interior of Cathedral.

pinch myself. The tranquility and beauty surrounding me are unlike anything I've experienced elsewhere. Architects, designers, and Disney Imagineers spend their careers attempting to replicate the simple and timeless elegance that proprietor Letizia Nuti achieved here. Named "Podere La Strega" ("farm of the witch" because it's a bewitching place), the modernized house, infinity pool, gardens and views are perfect in minute detail.

I pull on my riding pants and boots, then head down for breakfast. Our group's official early risers, Dan and Jo, are on their second cup of coffee, laughing with Enrico about last night's meal, which would have met with Giovanni's approval.

The temperate late-September weather means we eat all of our meals outside, either under a portico off the side of the house or across the lawn at a long table in a summer dining room with adjoining kitchen. For our arrival the night before, we feasted under the portico on fried squash blossoms, sage, and porcini mushrooms covered in a tempura-like batter—Letizia's own recipe—as we watched the city lights of Siena intensify against a darkening horizon. We later moved to the dining room for regional pasta, pork, and vegetable dishes, also prepared by Letizia. And bread. There's always bread. Bread, no butter. The Italian way.

We won't go into Siena proper until the next day. Today we ride "The Chianti Loop" that will take us to Castellina in



Siena Cathedral.



Chianti then San Gimignano in the morning, and Greve in Chianti in the afternoon.

Greve in Chianti

At dinner the previous night, Enrico previewed the day ahead, asking who knew Giovanni da Verrazzano. Our group's Italian-American Jo is the only one who answered the quiz question correctly: he charted the Atlantic coast of North America between the Carolinas and Newfoundland, including New York Harbor, in 1524. New York's Verrazano-Narrows Bridge was named for him. Giovanni would have been proud of his girl. Greve in Chianti is Verrazzano's birthplace.

After parking the bikes we head toward the piazza. I spy a yarn shop and tell the others not to wait. Inside are all manner of knitted and crocheted hats, scarves, shawls and ponchos. I've been waiting for this moment for some months, not knowing when it would arrive. I want yarn that I can take home to knit into my own souvenir. The bespectacled shopkeeper smiles broadly and says, "Buongiorno," in

greeting. I see some bulk yarn in blue, black and tan wrapped around spools and tucked under a bench. I quickly realize that both my language skills and hers are inadequate to this transaction. Whipping out my phone, I hold up a finger to this woman in the universal gesture of "hold on just a minute" as I fire up the Google Translate app. We are able to communicate fairly well by typing phrases into the app, making exaggerated hand gestures and smiling a lot. We DO have one language in common: wool. After coming to terms we shoot a selfie together, and I am on my way, feeling pretty resourceful.

Siena

Awake once more in my 400-year-old room, I'm eager to get into Siena. The shimmering city on three hills that has been enticing us from the infinity pool at



Siena shop.

Podere la Strega is now on our agenda. Enrico will lead an optional ride in the afternoon, but we are free to skip it and

*Hear the Road Motorcycle Tours Italy <http://motorcycletoursitaly.com/>
Blue Strada Tours <http://www.bluestradatours.com/>
Podere la Strega <http://www.poderelastrega.it/>*

Outdoor dining in Siena.



spend the day as we please.

The cathedral is my must-see of the day. Its white marble facade and the grey and white-striped bell tower ("cannale") contrast with every other "sienna-colored" structure in the city. I'll leave the architectural and art critiques to those qualified to opine; to my unschooled eye it is both breathtaking and overwhelming. By the end of the day I can't look at another Madonna, crucifix or nativity scene, even those fashioned by Donatello and Michelangelo.

After another sumptuous al fresco meal cooked in the outdoor kitchen, our merry band of motorcyclists feels bitter-sweet about moving on to Orvieto in the morning. But move we must. Funny factoid about the phrase "al fresco:" While it originated in Italian, they prefer to say "fuori" or "all'aperto" when describing an outdoor meal. The expression "al fresco" usually refers to spending time in jail. Who knew? 🤔

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