



# OUT OF THE SADDLE

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## Meet Perchta

My new motorcycling goddess

*“What good is the warmth of summer, without the cold of winter to give it sweetness.”*

John Steinbeck

Perhaps one of the reasons we love our sport is that the number of months we can safely (or comfortably) ride is limited. The year alternates between a sweet memory and a delicious anticipation.

On a trip down Memory Lane 2022, my motorcycle tour of the Alps looms large (read my report in November-December 2021, “*Traveling the Alps with Beach’s Motorcycle Adventures*”). Flipping through my pictures of Salzburg, I lingered over a strange picture I’d taken at the Mirabell Palace. On a bench in the palace courtyard, where a constant stream of couples dressed in dirndls and lederhosen waited to enter the palace and tie the knot in civil ceremonies, someone had left a couple of frightening demon masks. They looked to my American eyes like a mask for Krampus or a video game monster.

What bride would want these demons hanging around on her wedding day? And why in the middle of summer, when Krampus is a winter demon?

I had lot to learn. First, Krampus is a

very specific character who accompanies and is supervised by St. Nicholas. Our Salzburg tour guide explained that the masks were not of Krampus but Perchten, who roamed the streets, villages, and countryside during the winter solstice—the darkest nights—to scare away evil spirits. Over time they have taken on a similar role at Salzburg weddings—to scare away evil spirits and thus insure a happy union. There are even membership groups of men in Perchten dress (hey, why not?).

I later learned that Krampus is the only demon who’s supposed to have a tongue, but the large Perchten masks have become commercialized of late, and their distinctions have blurred in the modern era. With this, I found myself down a Perchten research rabbit hole, where I learned that masks with an open mouth are called *screaming* masks, and the others are *expression* masks.

Perchten masks are usually carved from soft pine and can weigh over 25 pounds if real animal horns are attached; setting the correct center of gravity is obviously an important part of the craftsmanship.

The Alpine goddess Perchta, or Frau Perchta as the Brothers Grimm called her—is the mythical root of these Perchten groups. She is a goddess of duality believed to be half man, half woman, but usually portrayed as female. Because she personifies the in-between of man-woman, and the in-between time of the winter solstice, Perchta also



reminds us of the line between safety and danger, and life and death. The perfect motorcycling goddess.

Another aspect of Frau Perchta’s duality is her pretty side, called “Schönperchta” or “Pretty Perchta,” who awakens spring and delivers happiness and luck for the new year. In contrast to the wintry Perchten groups, these figures wear “pretty masks” and go from house to house to deliver blessings and luck. Their seasonal dances often involve stomping on the ground to



awaken spring and the seeds in the soil.

So taking a lesson from both aspects of Perchta, a motorcyclist should keep the evil spirits from bringing you down in winter when you can’t ride. My favorite way to do that is by planning the riding year ahead. In 2023 I will be back on the Ohio River researching my book and feeding my 981 Project (announced in Nov-Dec 2022 *OTL*). Since I haven’t been out west since 2017, I’ve applied for an artist residency in Wyoming, to where I will of course ride from my home in North Carolina. Then I hope to see you in Davis, West Virginia for our national rally in September!

### Coming up in the 981 Project:

- › West Virginia’s Palace of Gold
- › Queen Marie Antoinette’s Ohio River Legacy
- › Where Pigs Fly
- › Lincoln Slept Here?
- › So Many Mounds

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**981**  
THE 981 PROJECT

Top: The Hohensalzburg Fortress from the Salzburg’s Mirabell Gardens. It is said that Perchta roams the Hohensalzburg Castle within the fortress walls.

Middle: This member of a Salzburg wedding party brought a suitcase for the rest of his ensemble. Perchten usually wear hairy clothes and carry a large bell at their waist and a horse- or cow-tailed whip in their hands.

Bottom: A Salzburg wedding party arrives at Mirabell Palace wearing dirndls and lederhosen.