

On The Level

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The Classic Alpine Adventure

Traveling the Alps with Beach's Motorcycle Adventures

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Photography by Tamela Rich and Beach's

Most motorcyclists dream of riding in the Alps: the roads, the views, the history, the food...but some of us should rethink the dream. If the thought of five hours in the saddle navigating series after series of turns, switchbacks, and off-camber hairpins puts a knot in your stomach, take heed. If you're like me and relish the thrill and challenge of Alpine riding, the 50-year-old Classic Alpine Tour offered by Beach's Motorcycle Adventures can't be beat. Since taking over operations from his parents, Bob and Elizabeth Beach, Rob and Gretchen Beach have modified the itinerary to make the first week of the tour less challenging than the second. That said, the Alps are where you improve your skills, not where you acquire them.

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After two Italian motorcycle tours, I couldn't wait to climb the Alps. My dear friend and fellow RA Trustee Jill Veverka had wanted to visit Austria since seeing *The Sound of Music* as a child. This was her first time in Europe and I was excited for her as well as for myself.

After a long flight from North Carolina we landed in Munich mid-morning. Our rooms weren't ready so we forced ourselves to stay awake by shopping in the charming Munich suburb of Olching near our hotel. The next day we hopped on a train to the city for sightseeing and souvenirs and met some of the other tour guests who'd arrived early.

Day One began with a group dinner and introductions.

We were fourteen guests on twelve bikes; Jill and I were the

only women riding solo.

Several guests had taken the Classic Alpine Adventure before—some even several times before. After all, you can't possibly do the Alps justice in two weeks, as the chain runs for 650 miles and spans about 100 miles across with more nooks and crannies than a package of English muffins.

Rob and Gretchen Beach explained how their tours are organized—guests could choose from at least two itineraries per day. Rob explains, "A group ride is little more than a bus trip with 15 drivers. Big groups require big parking lots and big restaurants, big spaces

on the road, big everything. They stifle individual experience, which is what makes a particular trip magical and special... We don't insulate or smother. We encourage exploration and discovery." This is why Beach's programmed every daily option into each bike's Garmin.

Another difference in this tour from others I've taken is the option to ride on your own or with a group. The only rule is to arrive at the destination in time for dinner—or text ahead the time that you plan to arrive. Since each day held many options, Rob would run through each of them during dessert and coffee.

Our tour would be Rob's 215th and Gretchen's 97th. Rob has been riding in the Alps for most of his adult life

and knows them like his own bearded face. He has held a WERA expert road racing license, was a Canadian amateur speedway champion, and is currently certified with the BMW International Tourguide Academy. Naturally he was in his element when helping guests sharpen their skills, beginning on Day Two when we picked up our motorcycles. On a closed range, he put us through our paces and offered pointers. Then, we were free to take one of several loop rides in preparation for the next morning when we would leave Munich for the Alps.

A GPS? Oh crap!

Back home in the States and Canada I've become adept at using Google Maps to navigate. Alas, phone apps aren't a viable approach to the Alps if you want to take the most interesting roads, aka "Rob Roads." The Beaches gave us a half-day workshop on the Garmin and were always available to help us troubleshoot when we went astray, but learning to use a standalone GPS had a steep learning curve (tracks, routes, detours, skipped waypoints, and missed turns). I eventually got the hang of it. Eventually. After a lot of bad language.

Jill and I climbed the learning curve together, occasionally relying on our phones to get us out of navigational jams as we got the hang of the Garmin. On Day Five, en route to Interlaken, Switzerland, a detour threw us off schedule. A couple of hours later, while waiting for the ferry crossing over Lake Lucerne at Gersau, I had pulled alongside Jill to confer about tightening our route so we wouldn't be riding after dark or miss dinner. After deciding we would need to skip Ächerli Pass and catch the Autobahn to the hotel, I pulled away from Jill's bike, forgetting to leave room between our panniers. BAM! Next thing I knew I was flat on my back in the parking lot. Luckily I wore my helmet and my Level 2 back protector or I might have had a concussion, significant back pain, and bruising. All The Gear All The Time, right?

A retired Swiss couple who were also in line waiting for the ferry watched my (literal) downfall from the comfort of their gleaming white Maserati. Once I stood up and righted the bike they asked if I would be okay. Thomas and Ushi (pronounced like "sushi") were jolly good company as we made our ferry crossing. Five minutes out, they pointed to their home between the opposing mountain "noses" of the Bürgenstock (lower nose) and Rigi (upper nose), then told us about life on Lake Lucerne and the barbecue they would be attending with their dinner club in Beckenried, which is where we all disembarked. Most of the Swiss we encountered during our tour were fairly reserved when interacting with tourists but Thomas and Ushi delighted us with stories from the places they've lived and traveled, including the US, where two of their children are living today.

That night at our Interlaken dinner Rob previewed the op-



Left: Tamela with her R1250 R

Below left: Crash-course in learning the GPS



Above: The delightful Thomas and Ushi of Switzerland before boarding our ferry ride across Lake Lucerne.

Left: Lake Thun from the private road on high



tions for our free day (Day Six). He is a talented storyteller who weaves history and personal experiences into each itinerary, making it difficult to choose among them. We could take any number of loop rides, enjoy the luxurious facilities at the hotel, or take a bus into the shopping district.

Jill wanted downtime to be a tourist. Other than our extra day in Munich before the tour began and a stop at the Held store in Sonthofen, Germany, we were usually on the move. Jill spent her free day photographing gorgeous flower boxes and artistically stacked wood. She also took a gondola ride up to Niederhorn, which is just under 2,000 meters (more than a mile) above sea level and boasts spectacular views and good food.

My European motorcycle touring philosophy differs from Jill's. I expected to ride a lot, figuring that when I come back to visit with my spouse someday, we'll rent a car and take a more leisurely approach. After an unhurried morning with Jill, I spent my afternoon exploring a private road around Lake Thun (Thunersee) and ate lunch at a motorcycle cafe in Eggwil. Suffice to say that a Swiss "motorcycle cafe" has nothing in common with an American "biker bar" except beer! I did see one big bagger but didn't see any tats, do-rags, or club colors.

The rest of the group rode a number of nearby passes and came back grinning ear to ear.

Rider down

On Day Seven we moved on to Sedrun, Switzerland. Jill and I carved out our own itinerary starting with the Lauterbrunnen Valley, which most of the rest of our group had visited the prior day. Rob had romanticized Lauterbrunnen with the story of God making Yosemite first, in all its perfection, so that he could use it as a model for the larger Lauterbrunnen. Both valleys are glacier-carved but Yosemite is unlayered granite, while Lauterbrunnen's walls sport multiple layers and folds of limestone from the pre-historic Tethys Sea mixed with other minerals from the Earth's crust; the result of the continental collision between Africa and Europe that started over 30 million years ago.

Above: Taken in Munich near the Glockenspiel in Marienplatz, the anthropomorphized boar speaks to the prevalence of pork in the region's diet

Right: Open-air kitchen for pork ribs at Grotto Verbi



Lauterbrunnen Valley sits below three of the most famous and scenic peaks in the Alps. From left to right they are the Eiger (ogre), Munch (monk), and Jungfrau (young woman or virgin). Rob explained that you can remember which is which because the monk stands between the ogre and the virgin.

There are 72 waterfalls located in the valley, including Reichenbach Falls. These are where Sherlock Holmes fell to his "certain death" in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventure of the Final Problem*.

The true test of a touring company's mettle is how they care for a guest in trouble. The Saturday roads were packed with cars, bicycles, motorcycles, and hikers. More than once traffic stopped to make way for emergency services. At one of them we saw the Beach's van coming from the opposite direction and worried that one of our group had been injured or had experienced mechanical difficulty. That night in Sedrun, we learned that, indeed, one of our fellow guests had met with misfortune and had been airlifted to the hospital in Interlaken.

With 50 years of touring experience behind them, the Beach's team was prepared. They sprang into action, shifting roles so that the group still had a ride leader and that the van made it to the hotel on time. Rob had arranged the airlift. Imagine our shock when Rob and the guest both arrived in time for dessert and Rob's standard here's-what's-on-for-tomorrow speech. Rob had ridden the guest from the hospital to Sedrun on the back of his F 850 GS.

After a couple of days in the van, the rider was cleared to continue the tour, shocking one and all with his good fortune. I'd like to know the identity of his guardian angel!

Campfire Polenta!

Day Eight would end in Zerne, Switzerland. Jill decided to go with three other riders on a short route that would give her time on foot in the charming town.

All week long, Rob had been warning us about the upcoming "Italian hairpins," so I rode directly behind him that day, eager to follow his lines and tackle these off-camber tighties—especially on right-turns (anyone else prefer turning left?)

Behind me rode the three "Silver Foxes" from the West Coast. A fellow guest gave them this nickname and while you might think it refers to their hair color, it also describes their riding—they take hairpins as smoothly and swiftly as poured quicksilver. Before putting the kickstand down for good we would traverse four major passes: Lukmanier (6,283 ft), San Bernardino (6,774 ft), Splügen (6,949 ft), and Maloja (5,954 ft) on roads that required our full attention.

Rob led four of us through Swiss villages paved in granite sett stones, and narrow roads surrounded by alpine meadows. Since I didn't have to think about my GPS on that day, I tuned into the

ideal riding weather, with a nip in the air and bright sunshine overhead. I had packed with the expectation of some rain or even snow, but only one of the fifteen days held any gloom.

After watching me ride for an hour or so Rob pulled me over for coaching. The Silver Foxes glided by as he demonstrated delayed-apex cornering and reminded me to use trail braking to tame the rear wheel. When we got back underway he watched me in his mirrors and gave me a thumbs-up or a finger wag to reinforce the lessons. I may never be as graceful as Rob and the Silver Foxes, but I'm proud of my progress since that day. I've always loved a series of twisties and switchbacks, and while I still don't pine for Italian hairpins, I'm better at them and everything else thanks to Rob's personalized instruction.

After a few hours of riding on "Rob Roads", our stomachs started rumbling. Two years of Covid-level tourism had shuttered several hoteliers and restaurateurs that the Beaches had frequented in years past, but all was not lost. As we rounded a corner on a stretch of road near Soazza, Switzerland we saw a pole sign for Grotto Verbi planted in a small gravel parking strip. Below the sign, a tented blackboard sign advertised *polenta e costine* along with a delightful mixture of smells.

We dismounted and walked down stone steps to find an open-air kitchen and dining area overlooking an alpine meadow. To the right of the steps a stout man used a long paddle to stir something in an enamel pot, the width of a basketball hoop, that was suspended over a stack of logs. Polenta! Campfire polenta!

When the matron came for our beverage orders it was clear that she understood "Coca-Cola" but couldn't figure out who wanted water with and without effervescence. I pointed to myself and two of the Silver Foxes while saying *acqua frizzante*. The matron nodded with relief that someone at the table could speak *bellissimo Italiano*, then waited for each of us to point to our selections on the menu. We succeeded thanks to Google Translate and the simplicity of the menu. We each picked two from the four items: pork ribs, polenta, cheese, and salad.

Potatoes and Schnitzel, No Ice

One thing you need to know about eating in the Alps is to make peace with potatoes. When the menu says "vegetables" it most certainly means potatoes, and might include others. When Grotto Verbi's menu offered "salad" it was what we would have called "potato salad" with nary a shred of lettuce, carrots, cucumbers, or other ingredients we Americans associate with "salad". A lot of our Alpine salads included corn kernels, even the Caesar salads. I make no judgment on this curiosity.

If you enjoy pork, the Alps are hog heaven, with a schnitzel on every menu. Well, every menu with the exception of

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breakfast. I haven't traveled the entire world, but one thing I can vouch for is European breakfast buffets. Sure, you can have cereal or granola, but there are always cured meats, vegetables, egg dishes, and yogurt selections, plus breads and pastries. I could eat a European breakfast spread for every meal.

Finally, let's talk about ice. The Europeans are onto us with our ice obsession. One afternoon we pulled into one of Rob's favorite watering holes for refreshment. The waiter sized us up as Americans and offered, "Would anyone like a Coke with ice and lemon?" This offer excited the Silver Foxes and me, to the point that we grinned and rubbed our hands together in anticipation of a cool refreshment and maybe a crunch of cold between our molars. Normally you must ask for ice and settle for a single cube (which doesn't go far to change the temperature of the unchilled beverage within which it floats). When our orders arrived we looked at each other and burst into laughter—we each had five small pieces. But hey, we didn't have to ask for it!

By the time we got to the end of our journey in Austria I got the idea to ask for "Big American Ice" (a phrase I coined) and tipped the bartender €5 when he filled a tall glass with it. The rest of the staff clearly got the message. At dinner, they brought each table a bucket of ice! Money: the universal language.

Gasp! The Dolomites!

When we encountered the Italian Dolomites on Day Ten we had to force ourselves to operate our bikes responsibly amidst the mountains' jaw-dropping majesty. Other mountain ranges contain dolomitic limestone, but this stretch in the Alps is the only place in the world where pale dolomite and dark volcanic rocks are found together. The contrast between the green meadows and sheer vertical peaks is other-worldly.

The nearby Schlern-Rosengarten National Park is an open-air research laboratory where scientists study the lagoons, barrier reefs, escarpments, and sediments deposited on the seabed before it was pushed atop the European continent by the African. And yes, dinosaurs definitely roamed the Dolomites.

Our Dolomitic home base was Arabba, located in the Fondon valley that's criss-crossed with gondola wires. From there the Silver Foxes and other mileage-motivated guests spent Day Eleven, a free day, to ride as many passes and gorges as possible. After I took a loop ride of the area with two other guests, Jill and I took one of the gondolas to Portavescovo, which is located on the ancient Bread Road (Viale del Pane) that flour merchants from Belluno (south of the Dolomites) used when trading with those in the mountainous areas. There, we gawped at the Marmolada glacier, the Gran Vernel and Fedaia Lake before heading back to the Hotel Evaldo for spa treatments. A massage, pedicure, swim, hot tub, and sauna were definitely in

order during the second week of our tour.

Refreshed by the spa, we dressed for dinner then stepped onto our top-floor balcony to give Mother Nature her due. The Dolomites react to changes in the light, going from orange, red, and purple at sunrise and sunset, to pale at midday, to cold and unearthly in moonlight, in a natural phenomenon known as Enrosadira. Next time I'm in Arabba I'll spend a day in each of the nearby national parks and soak in this Enrosadira from all possible angles.

Headed to Bavaria

None of us wanted to leave the Alps, but alas, our tour was coming to an end with two more days in Austria, the most mountainous country in Europe. There, I was able to rendezvous with a college friend, Lora, whom I hadn't seen in thirty years. Lora had moved to Germany soon after graduation, then married, started a family, and decided to stay. When she heard I would be traveling through Zell am See, en route to Salzburg, she asked if I had time to meet. With Rob's help, we lunched at a renovated mountain station with a lovely view from 3,978 ft. Jill and two other riders joined us on the sun terrace with its view of the Kitzsteinhorn and Schmittenhöhe mountains ahead, and the lake below. A beautiful memory for which I'm eternally grateful to Rob and Gretchen.

On the last morning of our tour Rob and Gretchen arranged for a walking tour of Salzburg. In addition to the standard tourist attractions, including Mozart's birthplace, we spent time at the Mirabell Palace, where a constant stream of couples dressed in dirndls and lederhosen tied the knot in civil ceremonies. The adjoining Mirabell Gardens was their next stop for gorgeous wedding portraits. It is also one of the most important filming locations for *The Sound of Music*. There, Maria and the children danced around the Pegasus Fountain in front of the palace, singing the song "Do Re Mi".

We were surprised to learn that Austrians are generally cold toward the movie, with its many misrepresentations of Austrian history and culture. The city even denied a petition to name a trail for Maria based on some unfortunate aspects of her biography. Austrians and Germans prefer the 1956 German language film *Die Trapp-Familie*, which was the original inspiration for the Broadway musical.

We spent the last hours on our BMWs in the Austrian and Bavarian countryside among fields of hops, wheat, barley, and corn. Today, over 16% of Austria's farmers and almost 20% of the farmland are managed under the high environmental standards of organic farming. The Bavarian State Parliament is striving for a 30% organic market share in 2030. Jill and I remarked more than once how much slimmer and healthier most Europeans seemed compared to Americans.



Above left: Rob and Gretchen Beach looking like tourists in Mirabell Gardens, Salzburg

Above: Woodpiles are everywhere in the alps!

Left: Held's showroom had every size in every piece of motorcycle gear and a knowledgeable sales staff. I bought jeans, gloves, and a new comm system; Jill bought a helmet.

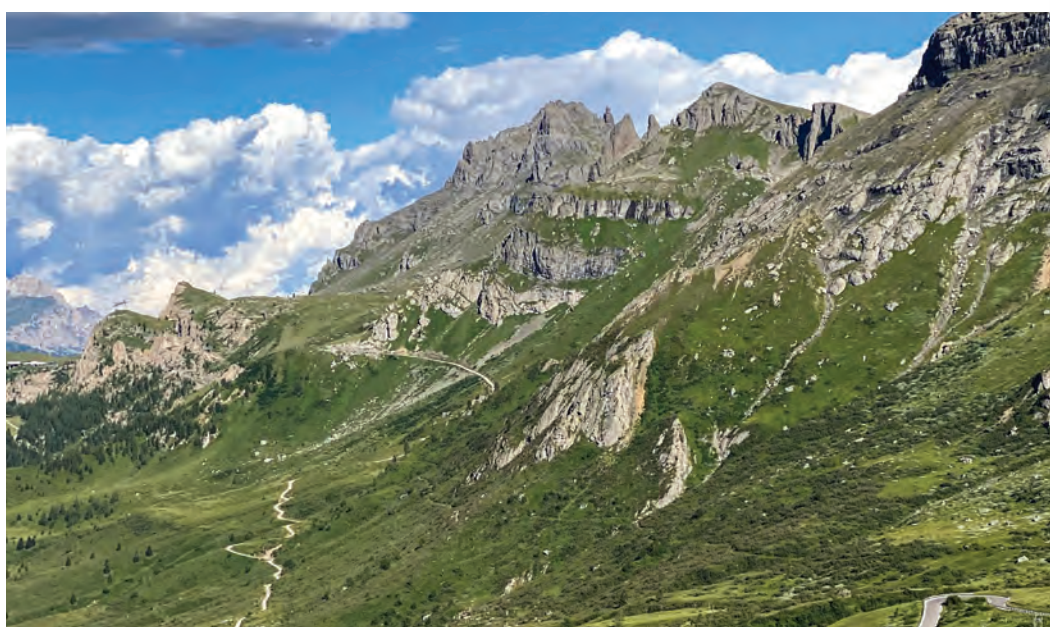
About the Alps

- › The entire Alpine range would easily fit into a combined Virginia and West Virginia.
- › The Alpine chain is 650 miles long and about 100 miles wide. In comparison, the Rockies extend 3,000 miles and are three times as wide.
- › Austria is the most mountainous country in Europe.
- › Top of San Bernardino Pass represents the Italian-German language frontier and the watershed that flows to either the Adriatic Sea or the North Sea.
- › The name Italy or Italia comes from the Latin word “vituli” meaning “bull-calves” or sons of the bull god.
- › During the past 50+ years, the Italians have changed governments at the rate of more than once per year.
- › Austria controlled the Dolomites until 1919



Top right: Taking one of the many curves in the Alps.

Right: Pordoi is a pass in the Dolomites in the Alps, located between the Sella group in the north and the Marmolada group in the south. The road crossing the pass connects Arabba with Canazei and is the second highest surfaced road traversing a pass in the Dolomites, after the Sella Pass.



Leonardo DaVinci became fascinated with the Alps at a time when most of his contemporaries thought that Earth was flat. He visited Mount Säntis (Switzerland) in 1510 and found fossilized sea creatures at 7,000 feet. The Catholic Church decreed that the fossils must have been washed 100 miles inland from the sea by Noah’s flood in 2300 BC.

DaVinci wasn’t having it. He’d seen identical halves of fossils embedded in the rock, and theorized they couldn’t have come through a torrent of flood waters intact. He knew something else was at work; something had raised them to great heights after the fossils had formed under the ocean.

Had this genius lived another 400 years he would have seen his theory vindicated. Mount Säntis is made almost entirely of limestone that was pushed up from the Tethys Sea’s floor when Africa collided with Europe 30 million years ago. Today, the Tethys’ ancient limestone is sandwiched between the European continent below and the African continent above.

Next time I take the tour (and there definitely will be a next time) I might carve out time to visit what I will always think of as DaVinci’s mountain.

As the Bavarian sun slipped behind the rooftop at our Olching hotel, we said goodbye to our motorcycles and our fellow guests as the fleet manager took inventory of the damage we’d done to our bikes and the mileage we had accumulated. Neither Jill nor I won high-mileage honors, but we came away with the feeling of accomplishment and love for Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy.

Happy 50th anniversary, Beach’s Motorcycle Adventures. Here’s to many more!

Editor’s note: Tamela was the embedded journalist on the 2022 Classic Alpine Tour.

Jill Weighs In:

I’m an Ohio girl born and bred. I have to travel to West Virginia or Kentucky to get any real exposure to mountain riding, and still, the Appalachian Mountains are a much different experience from the Alps.

While I’m glad I took the Classic Alpine Tour, I wish I had done more homework on the number of days we would be riding and the difficulty of the itinerary. I finished in one piece after two weeks of low-grade anxiety over curves and hairpins. I’m proud of myself for that.

After Tam left for home I extended my stay in Germany for a week and loved every minute of it. Next time I visit Europe on a motorcycle, I will look for a gentler itinerary.

