

Just popping out dear!

“Just Popping Out Dear”

My
Motorcycle
Tour
Diaries

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Foreword

The intention of this book is not a guide to motorcycle touring, rather it is intended as 'a guide to inspire to tour'. An old adage but an apt one is; every journey begins with a single step. Same with a motorcycle tour – you have to start somewhere, so just ride – you will end up somewhere!

I popped out once for some cigarettes and ended up in Walton-On-The-Naze, about 50 miles away.

Enjoy the ride – wherever you go

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Losing my virginity

“That looks cool”, I said to my neighbour Neil. “Yeah”, he said, I just bought another one”; “Thirty quid and it’s yours” – SOLD. My first motorcycle - a Honda SS50, classier than the FSIE, at least I thought so anyway.

Bike 1 – Honda SS50

“She’s yours for 30 quid”, and that was it, I was a biker – cool. A Honda SS50, beautiful blue, sleek, tender, I was in love. 50p, the new ones with funny edges like a thrupenny piece was the price of freedom and filling the tank.

I had always loved two wheels, my Dad got me a bicycle, I think from the scrap yard, beautiful engraved handlebars, I loved it. I took it to Southend and all over the show. Once I was so in love with just the freedom of riding that I just took my hands off the handlebars and freewheeled AND closed my eyes...There was one hell of a bang

The Courier Days

“Ok – Start Monday” and that was it, I had a job as a biker, courier, and they gave me a brand new super-cool Honda CD175, I was whizzing round London A-Z in one hand (no satnav, or mobiles, or speed cameras, or bike lanes, and a severe lack of policeman. Oh – Those were the days for sure.

I had left behind my Dad’s world of building and was working in the city, ‘Up West’.

So, I met this girl...now you know there’s a story coming! But I did – meet this girl, in a pub in Walthamstow market, I had seen her before and she looked ok, well more than ok, she looked

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lovely. And I had seen her in various pubs with various friends, some mutual and on Christmas Eve (Which by quirky coincidence is the day our first son was born – oh sorry spoiler alert!), my best friend and I contended for the position of boyfriend – and.... I won...

I was so impressed I went round her house on Boxing Day to take her out again. The things that stick in my mind were, her Dad's reluctance, Her Sister asking why she was seeing a lamppost (I am 6' 4", skinny, but it was still rude), and her Sister-in-law giving me a triangle to play. Apparently part of some Christmas family game.

In the January I met my first Swede, close up and had an accident. I was going down the side of traffic in Great Marlborough Street, heading for Regents Street, when a Swedish bloke looking the wrong way shot out from in between the buses and straight into me. Down I went with the heavy CD175 going down on my knee. "My shiny bike", was my first thought and the second was "hold on I am on the wrong side of the road with a van coming"...It stopped. Hospital.

Tour 1 – The Knobbly bit



I thought it would be good to go around the little blue bit on the right of England – that's the North Sea to true explorers. So England, France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and there's a ferry from Norway to Newcastle, excellent – it's a plan.

Preparation is the key; when I became

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the proud owner of my first set of leathers, I was told to make sure that I waterproofed them. Two tins of dubbing later, duly heated in the oven to ensure that it was worked into the creases and joins, I had a waterproof, shiny set of Kawasaki leathers. Whizzing down Tottenham Court Road one day, I hit a wet shiny manhole cover and landed unceremoniously on my ass beside the bike, both of us still travelling at 35 mph! Now a bike has all sorts of things sticking out, which gives it quite a drag factor on its side, I however clad in skin tight oiled leathers had no such resistance and promptly overtook the bike. Sliding down Tottenham Court road – why do these things always happen in slow motion? – I remember my puzzled expression as the bike refused to keep up (probably out of embarrassment) with me. So, too much preparation can ruin the overall intention. Anyway – back to the tour.

My wife and I enjoy birthday's which are adjacent to each other, mine is the 28th April and Jane's is the 29th. It is far too cold before that so I planned to go for the bank holiday week at the beginning of May. In terms of planning I ensured I had the right documents, some breakdown cover and off I went. It all seemed a bit surreal really, just packing up the bike and setting off at 8 o'clock in the morning. It wasn't really until the end of my road that what I was about to do sunk in and I have to say my heart sank a little. I had decided to take the ferry from Harwich to Holland which sailed at 10:00 am and took a little over 7 hours. From my old house to Harwich was about 50 minutes so plenty of time to get used to the bike – an old CBR1000F geared for mileage not top end.

It took about an hour to load the bike, tank bag, panniers, large sports bag with tent on top. The art would seem to be in the straps get them right and everything falls into place – as opposed to off the bike. When pulling on bungee straps make

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sure the first end is fixed tight – they're a bit rapid when they spring off! I have a scar above my eye to proof it.

All that weight causes the bike to be heavier than usual and the handling was a bit different. That took a little getting used to, but the bike and I soon had each others measure and the journey to Harwich seemed to go by in the blink of an eye. So onto the boat – sorry ship – it's a bit big for a boat. I know there is a distinction point, but I'm never sure what it is. Ships don't have oars is not correct – but it seems to work if your worried about etiquette.

While discussing the whole trip, my brother in law had decided he wanted to accompany me as far as Amsterdam. We had arranged to meet at the ferry and I would drive him over to Amsterdam – Pillion. He had never really been on a motorbike – first obstacle – he asked if we could limit ourselves to 30 miles an hour down the Netherlands motorways! I just hid the speedometer (easy with a fully laden tank bag) and said that it always seemed faster on a motorbike. He seemed ok – but his grip was very tight.

Getting him on the pillion seat proved a nightmare – it was full up with my luggage and tent and stuff. Still a little rearranging and he was on, though given the luggage situation 'in' was a better description. Still, it probably helped with his insecurity regarding motorbikes.

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We bumped into some other bikers on the ferry who gave us the low-down on the Dutch speed cameras – good advice – thanks lad's – though this left me a little glum as I thought England was the only country with ass holes stupid enough to put these things up.

So a short blast down the motorway and we located a hotel just outside Amsterdam, the place was deserted and cheap. My head was full of the trip ahead, constantly surveying the maps and potential routes; I don't even remember falling asleep.

First morning abroad, what excitement – back to the maps, I'm gonna go here and here and here and here and here. Deep breaths and breakfast in Amsterdam had me calm and setup for the day.

Dropping my Brother-in-law off at the train station and finally I was on my own in charge of my own destiny. I did feel he had kidnapped my adventure, but it was a nice slow, subtle start to the whole escapade.

First stop, Petrol, some cheap cigarettes and a map of Holland, didn't really need one but it was a souvenir and I just followed the coast road. A1, A6 and head for Groningen was the general plan of attack. I had decided to set-off by 10am each day and ride for two to three hours then have lunch and then ride for another two to three hours before settling down somewhere before it got too late in the day. With tea and fag breaks every 40 minutes to an hour, the days were planned to perfection.

Passing bikes every so often with the welcome greeting of either waggling foot or hand or as a last resort a nod of the head if the feet and hands were occupied, made me feel not so alone. When you're fully laden everyone wants to know where you're

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going and I had my reply down to pat; “that way”. Makes for some interesting chats along the way though.

The Netherlands are a little flat, I’m sure it contributes to the flooding, and Wind Machines dominate the horizon. Even so the roads are good and like all new scenery it looked and felt good.

As I passed through a little town, with a river that looked pretty, it felt like lunch time – so it was. A glass of beer and some chips washed down with some chat among the restaurant owners provided an excellent respite from the bike and I felt rested.

Another two hour spurt later and I was on the outskirts of Groningen, the name still sounds medical to me. I decided to go up market for my first full solitary night and sought a hotel with little stars on the board outside, 5 to be precise. This yielded excellent results on the accommodation, bath, food and wine stakes. Playing safe, yet slightly foreign, I opted for beef borgenoine with a half bottle of red. Two pints of Dutch Lager, the meal, the mileage a bath and zonk, who needs sleeping tablets.

Into Germany, much more interesting landscape, but serious people. Though I have to say that whilst I find Germans on the whole boring, the ones in the North East of Germany are upon reflection – better; not perfect, but better.

Today was a Bank Holiday being the 1st May and everyone who owned a motorbike in Germany was out. I felt like the Queen I was waving so much. The North Eastern coast of Germany is littered with ferries after a 20 minute ride you would be back on another ferry with trips ranging from 5 min’s to 1 hour. Another English biker on one of this ferries tried to save everyone money by doing a mass booking. He took money off forty odd bikers

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and negotiated with the cashier or attendant. 90 cents instead of a whole euro; can't help thinking that the effort far outweighed the reward. But he was a busy little bee and seemed happy in his ministrations so who am I to knock it. 10 cents is 10 cents, "look after the cents and the Euros will look after themselves" as my dad says - after we joined Europe of course. Or should that be "Off Course".

That journey winding through North Germany on that Bank Holiday jumping from ferry to ferry will remain with me forever, not least of which for what happened next.

I was very close to Denmark and started to look for a place to stay, it being the Bank Holiday every where was packed solid. I started my search for shelter at 4:30; by 7:30 I was getting concerned, though not overly worried. The seaside air and views with good weather made for excellent riding conditions and up to 7:30 I was wandering rather than searching. By the umpteenth hotel that all said sorry – we're full, desperation was starting to reign. The place looked like Blackpool, three storey boarding houses abounded and most people were settling down to dinner.

Finally at 8:15 I pulled into a hotel near the coast and although they said "sorry, we are full", they added the words "But you are English on motorbike, we have friend who will help you". There followed directions to the next town and a small bed and breakfast which looked really cosy. Sure enough, the guy did keep one small room free to assist biker's being one himself, and his welcome was very hearty. Excellent I thought, what a spot of luck, and proceeded to check in and survey my new temporary home. Old cracked tiles on the floor were very reminiscent of a good old fashioned English place, as was the yellowed walls and stained glass entrance hall. I was beginning

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to feel right at home. Surveying the other people in the hall, two of whom were being told “sorry – we are full”, albeit in German, but I recognized the look on the faces – having worn it a few times myself.

The other four people were a different story though, all old age pensioners, who were in the middle of a heated debate about how the men were going to sleep on the floor and the manager has given the last but one room to some guy on the telephone about forty minute ago. That’ll be me then!

As I watched the debate with heavy play acting on the part of the men, pretending to lay down and pushing the women together. Shame I had an inkling of German – it looked like a geriatric porno movie – yeah – let the women do a lesbian scene.

In act three of the charade, the men actually sat down – just. Rheumatism and whatever other ailments time had honoured them with had taken their toll. I cracked, “excuse me” I said. “Look I can’t let those men sleep on the floor, I have a motorbike it won’t be hard to find somewhere else” (deep swallow).

A short discussion later and amidst many thanks and a very grateful but sympathetic stare from the owner, and I was back on the streets. My Sir Galahad act fortified me and I began my search again, but now I was searching not wandering. Half past nine and despite three visits to a Euro park in which I dismissed the idea of pitching my tent, I went back for a fourth time and paid my 2 euros for a 10 foot by 4 foot piece of German soil. It was still about 24 degrees and I thought what the hell – it could be worse.

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The modern tents are so easy to assemble two strips of plastic and their up. Ground sheet built in and all.

Having placed the bike on a piece of wood to stop her sinking and stowing all the gear into the tent, I went in search of food. The park was about 400 yards from the sea, so I went for a stroll. Walking along the beach I encountered a café / fish and chip shop. Two pints or Steins of lager and some pleasant conversation and I was once again liking my temporary home. I have no idea what the fish was, but it was huge, it looked like skate, but was shaped like cod and about twice the size of a large cod at that. The chips were the best ever!

German lager being quite strong I wobbled back to my tent about 10:30 feeling good inside and out. Good deeds done, nice riding, excellent company, brilliant ferry rides; today was a good day.

At 10:45 the sun went down and someone switched off the central heating. By midnight I had all my motorcycle gear on, leathers with full waterproofs over the top and a couple of jumpers. By 1:30 with chattering teeth I called a friend to find out the symptoms of hypothermia, this was cold with a vengeance. And when you're cold you want to wee, that is a right performance in a tent with 100 layers of clothes on. Despite best efforts, no sleep came due to the extreme cold, but at 5:30 the sun came up and someone had turned up the radiators, O I slept all right then. I slept the sleep of the just, that feeling of warmth as the sun came up matched my memories of the beaming faces back at the B & B, I hope they enjoyed their stay – in beds!

Denmark awaited and a mere two hours saw the back of it. Cant help comparing Denmark to Belgium; it's there but there's no

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real proof. Flat and split up into islands like the Scottish isles, it is pretty and the craggy coastline helps. Slartibartfast deserves some recognition and more awards.

According to the map, there is a ferry that goes from Denmark to Sweden and I duly followed the signs, only to find – no ferry. I went up and down the coastline searching jetty after jetty – no ferry. Every time I asked someone they pointed the opposite way to the last person I had asked. How can you hide a ferry?

During the last 10 minutes, I noticed a one man audience had assembled to witness my drag strip efforts up and down the Denmark coast. It was a full blown Hell's Angel, I'll ask him then. His reply was "follow me".

30 miles later, during which I had visions of man rape, mugging and worse, we stopped at a remote little place next to the sea. He got off and came over, here we go. So I did my Butch Cassidy bit and got off and strode over. "Get off your horse and drink your milk" went through my head, it was like a western and the midday showdown was underway.

"They closed the ferry two years ago when they built that", he said pointing out to sea.

"Built what"

"Built that"

If you peered into the skyline and up into the distant Swedish mountains, you could just make out the middle of a bridge. The other end disappeared into clouds and there was no beginning – it disappeared into the sea!

"Couldn't they afford to finish it?"

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“It’s finished, but it started as a tunnel”

“Oh”

We then got some tea and coffee from a little vendor and he explained that the bridge was a Denmark / Sweden venture that was on a par with the Channel tunnel. The bridge being cheaper than the ferry, the ferries had stopped operating and as everyone knew, they didn’t bother with signposts. Despite outward appearances this was a nice guy and we had a long chat about touring and bikes and stuff. He belonged to the Denmark chapter of the Hells Angels and worked on the docks, he’d figured out what I was looking for and was waiting for me to sit still before he approached; my frantic efforts to find the ferry had made it hard for him to keep up or even try and stop me.

Bidding my new found friend and guide farewell, I started round the long winding road that led into the tunnel. Bit like a motorway when you are turning right at a motorway junction, but far, far worse.



The Øresund tunnel is 4km-long, and was a tiny bit claustrophobic, but not too bad. The newness added to your confidence in the structure. I was finally ejected from the tunnel into broad daylight onto an uninhabited island about 400 yards long. There in front of me was a 12 lane stairway to heaven, slowly evaporating into the clouds. It was magnificent, awesome and mind boggling. I remembered the early plans for the Channel Tunnel with a section in the middle



where you came out before diving in again. This was weird, funny and a breathtaking sight. This was a balmy

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sunny day, quite warm and pleasant, so I mounted the bike and set off for Sweden.

The Øresund Bridge is composed of a high bridge and two approach bridges. The high bridge has the longest cable-stayed main span in the world for both road and rail traffic.

The bridge two-level superstructure is fabricated from steel and concrete. The steel girder supports the upper deck, which accommodates the motorway, and the lower deck where the railway is located. The tracks are placed in a concrete trough along the approach bridges, which changes to a steel deck on the high bridge.



Flying on a motorbike at an altitude of 1 mile is surreal, and very, very windy. There followed about 12 miles of starting off in the inside lane and being blown across all 6 lanes before tilting the bike back over 45 degrees and making the inside lane again. This process was

repeated ad nauseam, and I do mean ad nauseam. The struggle to enter Sweden was almost impossible; I really wanted to stop and look over the edge, but fear prevented me from that pleasure, that and the fact the bike was tilted over so far fighting the wind.

Reaching the other end in a state of complete exhaustion and relief, I pulled up at customs. Now, Sweden is not in the EU, so I was about to leave it, which make the customs borders far more diligent, these guys however were about to cause an international incident.

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We've all been through customs, it only takes one pack of cigarettes over the limit and you feel like a Columbian drug runner staring over the 'to declare' lane and knowing you should be in there, but hoping to get away with it. The other lane always looks barren, like a police state and the opening prelude to prison.

On this occasion though, I was clean, and promptly and virtuously entered the nothing to declare lane for EU citizens. My EU citizenship certainly stopped there.

They asked me to park my bike in the middle of this big hanger and then three guys and a girl promptly took her apart. Tent - stripped and examined. Tank bag emptied and closely inspected, it was like there's drugs here somewhere I know it. Their perseverance was to be admired. Both panniers came off and were emptied.

My rucksack was emptied. The seat was off and the tool box emptied. My top box was emptied. My holdall was emptied and searched for secret compartments, didn't know it had any, but it was beginning to look like they may well find one. Was that Hell's angel to be trusted?

My bike and luggage now occupied about 10 square metres and had been duly itemized. They turned their gaze on me. A conversation then ensued as to why they had not entered the EU, like I cared!

"Take your helmet off, please". "OK, said I".

"Take the jacket off please", like the 'please' really mattered.

"Take the boots off please", again the 'please' was purely for appearance.

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“Take the leathers off please”. Whoa people, we’re getting a bit close to the bone here – literally.

I am now in long johns and tee shirt, and thinking; one more step and this will be an international incident.

“Welcome to Sweden, you may enter”.

“And all my gear”, my voice was slightly high pitched but still a little subservient.

“Oh, you can put it all back now – Thanks”

“Thanks!!!”

Sweden (with the exception of its border control) is absolutely stunning.

The Swedish roads are excellent, the first impression everywhere is clean, tidy & crisp like it’s all new. You can also swim in the lakes at the side of the roads, now I know you can do that here, but the Hollow Ponds is not quite as inviting! The weather there was 40 degrees but not scorching as it happened. I had read that if there is excellent weather in the South of Sweden, then the North is probably impassable. I wanted to head further north but it looked unlikely. I had thought of turning right at Sweden and head into the archipelago and come back through Austria, but the credit card had taken a hammering so I continued along the south coast of Sweden and headed for Norway. During some of the stops I discovered that Sweden is the one place abroad that you can actually buy English beer (Bitter, not Lager) so that improved matters, you know where you are with Bitter.

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I remember riding through Sweden on the way to the ferry home feeling very contented. The weather was beautiful, the roads clean and tidy, and I had had an adventure! Parking up next to the ferry offices the bike suffered the first breakdown, but the MCI insurance I took out meant that the breakdown company was only 40 minutes away and they managed to kick start the tired old battery into life and since that was my one and only technical hiccup – I thought I could live with that.

The 26 hour ferry crossing was b-o-r-i-n-g, I had just seen Titanic and there was no way I was going in the cheap bedrooms about 10 floors below sea level. If you try to sleep on those long distance ferries they keep waking you up to send you to your cabin! A quick visit when we landed to see family in Newcastle and then onward to home and riding though the only rain of the trip from Sunderland to Nottingham. Tried to make it home in one ride, but the long ferry crossing, the rain the relief – So I sought sanctuary at Nottingham in a B & B, then potted home in the morning.

The Courier Days - Continued



I don't really know when biking 'bit' me, but my time as a courier on the West One circuit in London was colourful. With no one to answer to; start when you want; stop when you want, these were heady days indeed; the CX500 just kept going and going and going. I used to earn about 80-100 per day account work and about 10-15 per day cash work. The cash paid for petrol and lunch. We used to use a little family Italian in Mortimer

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Street, A frequent fellow diner was David Jason! The lady who ran the place used to do me Pizzas not quite cooked but 10mins in the oven and dinner was ready. My call sign on the circuit was Sugar 41, the Apple circuits Apple 41 was Damon Hill, a sure claim to fame.

I have included a few 'incidents' during the courier days as they are funny.



The year Damon Hill joined us was the year they dressed us all as Father Christmas. We kicked off the season with the London Standard photo shoot and a planned wheelie by Damon with Sam Fox on the back. His resultant wheelie placed his head, when tipped back, firmly into an extremely cushioned part of Sam's anatomy. He did look comfortable.



The Evening standard 20th December 1979
"20 Santa's nicked for speeding"



Going round Cambridge circus outside the theatre for Jesus Christ Superstar, dressed as Santa. A coach load of kids pulls up and they all spot Santa! I thought I would play along so waved, continuing round the roundabout with one hand. The bike slipped away from me and under the coach, the look of absolute horror on one kids face as he said "look there's s-a-n-t-a – IS Santa dead miss!"



I was going though Soho square or the road leading up to it and someone 'cut' me right up. I was absolutely furious; ending up behind him, I was ramming the back of his car with my CX500 constantly. He then got out, said look "I was an idiot, I am sorry – You are being an idiot – This is my warrant card – shall we

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stop it right here and now". Seemed like a plan and the nice gentleman went on his way and we said no more on the matter – idiot!



On the way home one day, I was travelling down the Eastway, the road that goes through Hackney marshes and winding my way through the traffic, when another idiot traps me under an artic between the two sets of back wheels, I had to ride like this for over ½ mile! I finally pulled out from the lorry, overtake the b****d and by strategically putting my helmet through his windscreen got his attention. You see me now!



One of the couriers was the son of the man flying the helicopter on the Barrett homes adverts. He had been bought a katana 650. He called in to work one day saying that the lift was broken and could not get in. When quizzed why he couldn't walk down the stairs he said he had taken the bike up to his bedroom to work on it and so was stuck!



I now teach CBT and often tell people that women are a serious road hazard, nothing to do with their driving ability, but in the summer when scantily clad, they do demand your attention when the road should get it. One young courier ended up in road works that way!



I spent a little time delivering blood for hospitals, the resultant episodes were spectacular.



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I was going round the square by the London University when someone reversing round the Square (Tavistock – I think) hit me full on as I entered the square. I had 12 pints of blood on board and called the controller for advice as the front end of the bike was a wreck. He said to flag over a mercury guy (another popular circuit) and state that this would be on account and he would clear it with their control. I stopped the next guy that came round, told him the story and opened the top box to transfer the load; the guy fainted immediately.



I picked up a bucket from one hospital and was told to 'not look in the bucket' well, that's up there with "don't push the button". What was contained within should have occupied someone's C cup bra, or at least one half of it!



Blood can only be out of refrigeration for so long, hence time constraints exist for delivery. I had been particularly held up one day and was shooting across Westminster Bridge towards St Thomas' when a police car pulls me over. "You'll end in hospital if you drive like that" "Funny you should say that" says I.



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Tour 2 France – Sideways

We had heard a lot about La Rochelle, a region in the west of France where a lot of brits live. We (my wife and I) decided to check it out. We were planning to go via Southampton, but went across at Dover planning to drive across France sideways. I have no idea how these married conversations start off as planning one thing and you end doing what you didn't want to in order to keep the peace, but... We landed at Calais and set off in High spirits across country planning as straight a route as possible between Calais and La Rochelle. Now this day was 40 degree heat and we were dressed up in full bike gear against all weathers. Stopping at a motorway service station, we had to strip off or faint. We both felt that it was easier to keep going. Now riding from St Malo, we could have been in La Rochelle in 4-5 hours, trying to achieve that whilst crossing France was not really plausible, but we tried. It was also bank holiday and approaching the Bordeaux region we began searching for somewhere to stay. By the time we found somewhere we had been riding for over 10 hours, but we had found the most brilliant châteaux in which to stay in a mountainous area with superb views. I remember my wife stomping through reception of this grandiose place in full gear, getting into the room, laying on the bed and saying "g - e - t m - e o - u - t o - f t - h - i - s f - ***** motorcycle gear". She was rather relieved to shed all the clothing that was by now sticking to every pore of her body. Bathed, changed and in a much better mood, the view over the Châteaux's valley was magnificent and well worth the trip, the meal in an outside restaurant was simple, but of the utmost quality and we also sampled the regions wine fairly liberally. When in Rome...

The next day saw us looking for La Rochelle, not that far away really, having broken the back of the journey (and my wife's) the day before. We entered into La Roche-Sur-Yon, looked around

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and found a tourist information centre who recommended a small Gite just outside Avrille.

We reported to the Ex Sergeant Major who owned the Gite and we were duly housed in number 4. The Gite was part of a farmhouse, where the main house formed the major part of the complex and the gites were run as a set of outhouses within the garden.

At 4pm we were invited to 'aperitif', which for some unknown reason was "Sergeant Major" scotch, a bottle at a time. We were then invited to join the famille for dinner for a grand but simple dish of Moules and Frites. I went to bed about an hour later with no knowledge of the world at all. By the third day we had been forced to consume the best part of three bottles of scotch, so I thought I would contribute. We went into town and purchased a bottle of Jameson. Taking this back thinking it was an upgrade to the Sergeant Major's, Sergeant Major, we proffered one of Ireland's favourites. A small glass was poured, tried, savoured and rejected as too strong! We were thanked, and our gift returned and fresh glasses of Sergeant's best poured. We gave up!

On the fourth day we were invited to a dinner 'en famille'; over 15 people, none of whom spoke English and with our classroom French as our only ally. We have never had a more enjoyable meal in the company of better people. Our French improved quite considerably as a result, in at the deep end....

Also staying at the Gite was a family from Paris, Mum, Dad and two daughters. A 16 year old stunner accompanied by her slightly older much plumper sister. The elder sister asked if she could go on the bike over dinner and I stated that it was up to the parents – who duly consented! We kitted her out the best we could and off we popped into town. I asked what sort of speeds she would like and the reply was – go for it!

She had never been on a bike so was quite relaxed about it all. As we approached the local town someone stepped out onto the

Just popping out dear!

pedestrian crossing and I duly braked and 16 stone of female came pressing into the back of me, pushing me into the tank more and more and more. The pain was excruciating but I gritted my teeth as I could not admit the cause to the damsel on the rear.

We left La Rochelle after 6 days of excellent food, wine and company and fully laden. We had purchased several bottles of local plonk which were stashed all over the bike in every orifice. The Sergeant Major then gave us two bottles of rose as a going away present, where to put them!

Just popping out dear!

Tour 3 Italy – Bon Journo!

I love Italy, the food, the people, the country, the whole works. So the next tour was planned we would try to go around Italy on my Blackbird. One of them married conversations then took place and we set off two up with my youngest son, Ben, on a Pan European (safer than a Blackbird apparently! doesn't go as fast...)

We set off on a blustery wet and miserable Saturday fully toggled up but still quite excited none the less. I was being ultra cautious until my son reminded me that it was better to outride the wind than fight against it at 55 mph.

We made for the ferry and it was our goal to be in sight of the Swiss Alps before nightfall. We spent the first night just outside Besancon on the Swiss/French border. Ben was as happy as Larry, I was just knackered. We then spent the next day crossing the Alps working our way down towards Geneva. As we approached the area the bikers were coming down the mountain making symbols like get down but with their hands down by their knees while riding. We did not understand until we saw the hidden police cars – International symbol for slow down confirmed and acknowledged. How I longed for the Blackbird and not this docile lump of metal doing its best impersonation of an armchair. The locals obviously knew the mountain like the back of their hand and it showed at every corner, bump and bend.

We were above Geneva in the mountains and had stopped for a break overlooking the whole Geneva valley which was topped by cloud. We could then see planes coming out of this bowl of soup, weird to see but good though.

As we approached Chamonix and the Mont Blanc Tunnel, we could see the remains of the last ski season. Setting off in May has financial and social advantages.

Just popping out dear!

Appendix I Planning

Don't. The more you plan, the harder it gets the more obstacles crop up. I have found that the best things happen by chance, stumbling on a nice place to stay, meeting new friends, finding a ferry that takes you somewhere. Experience has shown that the preparation and the problems are multiplied the more people there are, if you plan to tour with more than 4 bikes it can get very complicated. If you are two-up then that's 4 bed rooms to find, or eight, dependant upon the passengers. If you are in a busy location then chances are all the rooms will have gone.

I tend to break down the trip into the following components:

- a) Organize the bike
- b) Belongings
- c) Rough journey plan
- d) Emergencies

Organize the bike

An R6 doesn't take too well to full Givi Panniers; A Pan-European doesn't like its owner to 'get their knee down'. Both different bikes with different rides and varied storage space making for different experiences.

In some way, shape or form the following is possible on any bike.

- Rucksack
- Tank Bag – mines converts to a rucksack
- Panniers – either soft or hard
- Top Box or rear seat pack

Belongings

Rough Journey plan

Just popping out dear!

Emergencies