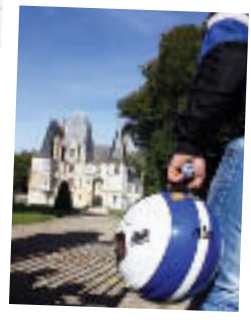




No need to look at the map. Just follow the leader



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 if 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 on arrival back 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.



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 51-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 soft 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.