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SPAIN FRANCE ITALY

By Travis Gill of viajarMOTO.com



Not all adventure motorcycle travel is about riding along a twisty mountain road or through remote rocky desert landscapes. Sometimes you have to kick down the side-stand and park the bike to immerse yourself in the tastes, experiences, and cultures of a region. This section of our full-time travels starts with a week-long hike along the Camino de Santiago.

A SHORT BREAK FROM MOTORCYCLING

Chantil and I have always wanted to hike a portion of the "Camino" so we chose a section that started in the Spanish/Portugal border town of Tui. This portion of 74 miles (119 km) is the second most popular hiking route and is known as the Camino Portugués (Portuguese Way). With the two motorcycles securely parked, locked, and covered in Tui, we set out with our backpacks towards the capital city of Santiago de Compostela.

We enjoyed six days of hiking through forested trails, small farms and vineyards, and quaint Spanish towns where locals would see the Camino scallop shells attached to our backpacks, smile, and say "Buen Camino" (Good way). It was nice to enjoy the slower pace of hiking for a short while, but at the end of the day our feet reminded us that they preferred the easier traveling of motorcycles. After reaching the final destination of the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral, and paying our respects to apostle James, the patron saint of Spain, we returned via, a much less picturesque, bus ride to our motorcycles. Happily, they were both still there, patiently waiting for our return.



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BACK ON THE 650CC PACK MULES

With our Camino scallop shells now tied to our mule's tail bags, we continued into northern Spain. We were now on a different kind of pilgrimage – one to continue traveling and experiencing the many countries and cultures of Europe. Northern Spain is vastly different than the southern regions with more agreeable summer temperatures, vibrant green forested biospheres, relaxing fishing villages, and mountains that climb from the Atlantic Ocean. Highlights of our meanderings included Muñíos do Picón e do Folón, Castro de Baroña, Torre de Hércules, Playa de Las Catedrales, and Las Médulas. The spectacular landscape of Las Médulas is the result of a Roman mining technique known as ruina montium (wrecking of the mountains) which involves undermining a mountain with large quantities of water. This region was once the largest open-pit gold mine of the Roman Empire. Now it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site where visitors can take in the incredible views and enjoy some great hiking trails.



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While traveling throughout Spain, you'll undoubtedly come across the Osborne Bulls – huge black billboards in the shape of a bull that reside along the sides of the autovías (highways). These billboards were first placed in the 1950s by Osborne Sherry Company to advertise their brandy. In 1994 a law prohibited roadside advertisement of alcohol so the bulls had to be removed, however public response resulted in keeping them but removing any reference to the original advertisement. Every time we passed by one of these bulls we would attempt to get closer, however they were always on private property. It wasn't until our very last day in Spain that we were able to ride right up to the base of one via a dirt road. It felt like a fitting end to our wonderful memories of Spain.





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VIVE LA FRANCE!

The highlight of our short time in France was the 5.3 mile (8.5 km) military road to the alpine pass of Col de Viraysse. From the small French town of Meyronnes we rode east and cautiously climbed the narrow, rocky road, with unprotected drop-offs, and tight switchbacks. There were some especially steep and rocky sections that we had to overcome, but the reward, upon reaching the 9,094 feet (2,772 meter) summit, was undoubtedly worth the effort. The end of the road delivered us right into the ruins of Fort de Viraysse where we camped on the grassy parade grounds of the military barracks. That evening we shared travel stories with a Belgium couple who were camping in their Land Rover Defender.

The next morning, I remember feeling quite proud of myself for getting our motorcycles to such a beautiful and remote place despite the challenging terrain. However, that feeling of accomplishment quickly faded as I cast my eyes on a group of hikers traversing the steep mountain trail. One of the hikers was in a one-wheeled chair and the other two were guiding him up the rocky trail. As they passed above the fort walls of our campsite, we gave them a friendly wave. The wheeled hiker returned our wave with a tremendously huge smile and the friendliest wave you could imagine.

We quickly packed our hiking gear and followed them up the mountain. It turns out that the wheeled chair is a French invention called the Joëlette that allows people with reduced mobility or a disability to go on hiking excursions with the help of two guides. The guides were mostly volunteers from medical school who were spending their summer helping the disabled during a week long hike of the French Alps. It was so inspiring to see the joy of these people experiencing the beauty of a mountain trail because of the selfless love, dedication, and determination of the volunteers. It was incredibly inspiring!



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ITALIAN ALPS

Our travels through Italy stayed mostly in the northern regions where the Alp mountains provide a natural border between the neighboring countries of Switzerland and Austria. Highlights of Italy included the stunning Villa del Balbianello, riding through incredible mountain passes like Croce Domini Pass and Strada della Forra, and hiking along the dizzying trails of the Strada delle 52 Gallerie.

On one evening, while scouting out a dirt road for a potential camping spot. I got myself onto a single track that ran along a dry river bed with 8-foot steep banks. It was time to turn around. While backing the motorcycle and attempting to manhandle it around an impossibly narrow section, I ended up sliding the rear wheel off the steep embankment! The rear of the bike fell down the bank followed by the front end pitching over, and then falling on its side with the sickening sound of metal and plastic crashing against rocks. I was in shock! Fortunately I wasn't hurt. Fortunately we carry a recovery kit consisting of a nylon rope, a pair of pulleys, and some carabiners. Unfortunately, we had never practiced using the recovery kit. I started the task of unloading all the bags off my bike while Chantil went back to her bike to get the recovery kit.



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Within minutes, a strong Italian man showed up who quickly called two more of his friends. We now had three strong Italians who didn't speak English and two Americans who didn't speak Italian. Within another minute, an Italian woman who had once lived in the United States, showed up to translate. Her first translation was "The guys want to know why you have a recovery kit? Do you drop your motorcycle off embankments often?"

Laughingly, I replied, "No. First time for everything." Our improvised, culturally diverse team, managed to upright my motorcycle, guide it down the river bed to a shallower bank, rig the pulley system, and guide it back onto the road where I could determine the extent of damage. I was certain that it would be significant. I carefully looked over the entire bike, started it up, and went for a quick ride. Amazingly everything was fine! The only thing that was damaged was a Rotopax mount that was easily bent back into place.



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QUEEN OF THE ADRIATIC

Finally, no northern Italian trip would be complete without a visit to the Veneto region's capital city of Venice. Although the traffic, noise, congestion, and inflated prices of large cities can be annoying, it's a necessary evil to experience the historic landmarks, museums, and culture these cities provide. Venice takes this even further because you can't experience it on two wheels, or any wheels for that matter. The hundreds of islands are connected via a labyrinth of narrow pedestrian alleys, picturesque bridges, stone stairs, and water taxis. All vehicles must be parked outside the city in crowded and expensive parking lots; we were glad we left our pack mules at an Airbnb and rode a public bus into the outskirts of Venice.

The positive side of Venice is that it's completely void of traffic noise as you meander through the city's lovely 13th and 18th century architecture and quaint little alleys. Even in August, we could find a quiet place to enjoy lunch and take in the beauty of this iconic tourist destination.

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RUNNING OUT OF COUNTRIES AND TIME

The challenge of traveling in Europe can be difficult for full-time overlanders because of how large the Schengen Area is. For those not familiar with the Schengen Area, it is the world's largest visa-free zone and currently consists of 26 European countries. Most visitors to Europe are only allowed to remain in the Schengen Area for 90 days within a 180-day period. By the time we reached Venice, we had some choices to make: We could store the bikes and return to the United States, or ride to Morocco, the UK, or eastern Europe. We chose eastern Europe where we hoped the winter would be more agreeable along the Adriatic Sea of the Mediterranean. More adventure to come...

About viajarMOTO.com Travis and Chantil Gill started full-time motorcycle overlanding in early 2020 and you can follow them on their website www.viajarMOTO.com, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram.