

ILLYRIA

Off-Road Through the Balkans

RAID



When you think of "Europe" what is the first thing that pops in your head? Perhaps France, Spain, Germany, Norway, the United Kingdom, or some other western country? Chances are you don't think of the Balkan region of southeastern Europe; countries that became independent from the former communist country of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Countries like Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. Or perhaps the country of Albania, that was known as the "North Korea of Europe" because it was so isolated from the rest of Europe for much of the 20th century.

So when I was approached by Adam, a friend from work, to join him for a week-long, off-road event called the Illyria Raid, I was easily persuaded. Especially considering that we would be riding through many countries that I hadn't previously heard of and that I was eager to explore and experience.

WHAT IS THE ILLYRIA RAID?

For those that are unfamiliar with the Illyria Raid, it's a non-competitive overland event where participants ride dirt bikes, quads, or side-by-side vehicles (SSVs) through multiple countries in the Balkan region of Eastern Europe. Each day you can expect to ride 150-215 miles, with 75 percent of it being off-road, and ending the day in a three-star hotel. The 7-day event typically crosses 6-7 countries with each day being a unique and different experience. During our 7 days we experienced all types of terrain from gravel and rocky trails, river crossings, mud puddles, forest roads, grass valleys, and jagged mountain passes.







LOGISTICS

The best part of an organized event like the Illyria Raid is that everything is taken care of, short of paying the entrance fee and getting to the starting point with your motorcycle. Since the start of the Raid was in Greece and we didn't have much vacation time, we opted to ride our motorcycles two-hours from our home in western Germany to Belgium, and ship them to the start point under the expertise and care of Enduro Adventure Organization (EAO) – a club that specializes in organizing raid, rally, and training events all over Europe and northern Africa. For a very reasonable price they delivered Adam's Yamaha XT250 and my BMW G650GS Sertão, along with some duffle bags full of our personalized gear, to the start of the raid. At the end of the raid, they even packed everything up for delivery back to Belgium. Easy.

The hotels, lunches, GPS files, road-books, support mechanics, medical staff, and a van that loads your personal belongings, are all included in the entrance fee. They even track every rider with a GPS receiver that can be activated in the event of a crash, accident, or breakdown. The entire event, from the registration process to the final awards presentation, was extremely well organized.

Adam and I flew to Greece and rode a cab to the hotel that was to be the start of the event. Speaking of hotels – the organizers chose some of the nicest hotels I've ever stayed in. Unfortunately we didn't have much time to enjoy them because we were riding all day, devouring dinner, and then crashing on our pillows for the next day of riding. It turns out that riding off-road for 200+ miles, day after day, can be quite exhausting! Hats off to the professional riders, like Mason Klein (UPSHIFT Issue 64), who ride over 500 offroad miles in a single day.





GREECE – MORE THAN MEDITERRANEAN ISLANDS

Chances are when you think of Greece you envision the beautiful blue Mediterranean sea, the picturesque seaside town of Santorini, or the ancient temple Parthenon. However, I'm here to report that there is so much more to Greece. Our route through the northern part of the country included riding dirt roads into the Pindus Mountain Range, that winds through the spine of Greece. I was grateful that we were not in a race, because there were plenty of opportunities to stop and take in the wonderful views of mountain peaks and valleys blanketed in early morning fog. An adventure motorcycle or dual-sport seemed like the perfect way to explore this region of Greece since even the nicest paved roads had their share of pot-holes and washed out shoulders.





FLYRIA RAID

Albania – Country of Contrasts

After passing through the border from Greece to Albania, there was an immediate different feeling. The contrasts were obvious. Although the beautiful mountain terrain was similar to Greece, we noticed a significant increase in trash along the sides of the roads and in rivers, especially near villages. We also noticed that people here, despite the significantly lower income, seemed much happier and friendlier. Farmers would stop, smile, and wave as we rode by. Children would run from their simple homes, and excitedly put out their hands so we could “high-five” them as we rode on by. It was not uncommon to see blacked-out luxury SUVs and sedans sharing the road with farmers, riding in rickety wooden carts being pulled by a tired donkey or horse. The contrasts in this country were invigorating to experience first hand more of Albania in [ISSUE 61](#).





After the first day, it was obvious that we were the slow ones in the group. Our focus was more about having fun, experiencing the countries, and getting to the hotel at the end of the day before sunset. On the third day's ride, which included a portion through North Macedonia, the route was over 200 miles. With our slower pace, it was recommended by the route coordinator that we bypass North Macedonia for the more picturesque off-road portion of the Albania high mountain plains. Although I was disappointed to miss out on visiting North Macedonia, I promised myself that I would return to experience this beautiful country in the future [ISSUE 63](#).

MOUNTAINOUS MONTENEGRO

Adam and I were really impressed with the mountain passes of Montenegro. It was easily some of the most enjoyable and beautiful pavement riding of the entire raid. Highlights included canyon carving along the E65 with steep mountains on both sides of the road, and the mountain plateaus of the northern region, where the golden grass of the fall season would stretch for miles onwards to the next horizon. The combination of our short time in this country, and the natural beauty of the mountains, created a yearning to return someday. Fortunately, my wife and I returned the next year to spend more time enjoying this small but magnificent country [ISSUE 59](#).





CRASHING IN BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

It was during the raid's 6th stage that I suffered one of my worst off-road crashes. As I rounded a corner on a gravel trail, I blipped the throttle too much before the bike was upright. The rear wheel skidded right, and down I went to the left, falling to the ground and landing hard on my chest. I quickly got up, but gasped for air since the wind had been knocked out of my lungs during the fall. I turned away from my bike to "walk it off" a bit before helping Adam lift it back onto its tires. After the adrenaline wore off, I felt a dull pain in my lower ribs, especially when I took a deep breath. I hopped back on the proverbial horse and continued to finish out the day – albeit with a lot less throttle on the gravel corners.

Fortunately, the rally's mobile medical team was only a phone call away. After reaching the hotel, I went looking for the doc who was happily enjoying himself with a drink. He felt around my ribs and then gave me the thumbs up – "You'll be fine! Probably just a couple of bruised ribs." That night I slept restlessly since every time I turned on my left side the pain was strong enough to wake me up.

The next morning, I woke with bags under my eyes. Fortunately, Adam was sympathetic and agreed to take the next day's ride a bit easier and skip some of the longer sections of the trail. Even though we missed a long off-road section, it wasn't a disappointment – there are plenty of paved curvy roads to enjoy throughout Bosnia & Herzegovina (UPSHIFT Issue 68).

CROATIA – THE JEWEL OF THE ADRIATIC

The final day of the raid had us crossing into the country of Croatia. I'd heard a lot about this incredible country and was really looking forward to experiencing it first hand. Unfortunately, the raid only covered a very small two-hour portion from the inland border of Bosnia & Herzegovina to the coastal city of Zadar. Again, I vowed to return and experience the diversity of this country at a future date [ISSUE 57](#).





I L L Y R I A R A I D

WAS IT WORTH IT?

Absolutely! This was my first organized motorcycle event and there is a lot of positives about these kinds of events – especially for those on a limited time frame. You can literally leave work almost anywhere in Europe on a Friday night, fly to the beginning of the route on a Saturday, ride hard all week, experiencing some of the best backcountry roads that Europe has to offer, and then return home on Sunday in time for work on Monday. The Illyria Raid was the perfect opportunity to experience a taste of these countries, in an exciting event where you don't have to worry about anything other than safely riding to each day's final checkpoint. To learn more about the Illyria Raid check out their website: www.illyriaraid.com

