

From his sea-level Cays home, John Herman rides high as “King of the Alps”

By Starlin Welsh

It's a long trek to the top of the Alps, a journey few people can say they have made even once, but avid motorcyclist John Herman has traversed the highways, byways and back roads of this European high country more than 60 times.

Herman is now 78, and he's still kick-starting his BMW cycles, three of which reside in his Coronado Cays garage. Herman has lived in Coronado since 1957, purchasing a home here after finishing his military service where he had been previously assigned as a communications officer for the

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Herman on Passo Montrolo, Italy,
famous in Italian bike races.



USS Washburn at the Naval Amphibious Base. Over the years, he worked for Caltrans in Old Town as a right-of-way agent, acquiring property needed for highways. He retired at age 54 and began “playing,” he said. After his first trip to the Alps in the ’70s, Herman was hooked on the region.

This vast mountain range covers more than 85,000 square miles and spans in an arc across the Riviera to the Mediterranean coast, southeastern France and northern Italy, through Switzerland, Austria and Liechtenstein and into southern Germany and Slovenia. The Alps stretch approximately 470 miles along the inner edge of the arc, and 810 along the outer edge, and the width varies between 80 to 150 miles.

Herman’s first trip was by car accompanied by friends. As he examined the vast stretches of road, he thought the roads were really designed for a motorcycle. Shortly after returning from the journey, he decided a motorcycle tour was in order.

“I wanted to see every road in the Alps, each little dead end and knick knack road,” he said.

Riding solo on his first motorcycle trip, Herman experienced some difficulties with the downtown traffic. Poor planning prevented him from traveling outside of Munich and he ended up completing the trip by car. He quickly realized traveling with friends is best, and in 1975 he embarked on his first accompanied motorcycle journey through the Alps. He says he is now prepared for any obstacle.

Herman has put one million miles on his motorcycle—no small feat—and was given a personalized license plate from the local BMW club that reads “ALPKING.” BMW also presented him with a trophy for his mileage, and in 2001 recognized him as a “Friend of the Marque.”

Among his sojourns, Herman has visited the Matterhorn, the Pyrenees, ridden around Mont Blanc (as there are no roads leading to the top) and his favorite, the Austrian city of Tirol. Allured by its beautiful mountains, quaint homes and farms, vast expanse of road and the Tirolians’ holding to authentic costume, Herman appreciates Tirol perhaps the most for its hearty bread and the fact that over half of the people ride motorcycles.

Richard Peerson—one of Herman’s closest friends—who has traveled through Europe, South America and the Caribbean on non-motorcycle trips with Herman said “John loves sharing stories, and whenever we travel he is always looking up places people wouldn’t think to go and these spots end up being the highlights of the trip.”

Peerson recalls a trip when a determined Herman led the group through the winding canals of Venice, Italy in search of a café that served his favorite dessert,



Herman’s BMW bike displays his “ALPKING” license plate.



A signpost of Austria's highest road was given to John Herman by the officials of Heilingenblut.

tiramisu. The group walked for what seemed like hours, said Peerson, but they eventually found the delicious dessert.

Whitehorse Press approached Herman to write a travel guide in 1990; at that time he had never used a computer. He has now written four editions of his book, his most recent "Motorcycle Journeys through the Alps and Beyond," which offers readers



Herman at Staubach Fall in Lauterbrunnen Switzerland.

a thorough guide of the ins and outs of traveling through the Alps, Corsica, the Pyrenees and Picos de Europa. A section entitled "Good Stuff to Know" details specific items to bring and defines the benefits of traveling during spring, summer and fall. Keeping facts accurate and up to date keeps Herman returning to the Alps at least every five years for stays that last two-and-a-half to four weeks.

"John is by far the most knowledgeable person of the Alps, even more so than some Europeans," said fellow motorcyclist Don Picker, who has accompanied Herman on 15 Alps tours.

In the '80s, Herman's friends came up with a nickname that has stuck with him today, "King of the Alps." While visiting Germany in 1982, he was given a plaque with the moniker carved in German. He was also given a signpost from Austria's highest road from the officials of the city of Heilingenblut that now hangs in his garden.

Herman bought his first BMW motorcycle in 1969, and has owned 18 in his career. You might see him riding one of his cycles in Coronado, but he rents European bikes while traveling to save cost and hassle.

Professing to "twiddling his thumbs" when he is not out on the road, Herman manages several rental properties, plays classical piano, takes in countless visitors from around the world and is a devoted member of the First Methodist Church of San Diego. He was on the building committee when the church moved from downtown San Diego to Mission Valley in 1964.

Herman does not limit his mode of travel to motorcycles; he has joined several church group trips. From his many travels, he has collected countless postcards that he often uses as thank-you notes for friends.

Herman loves discovering new places in his travels and adheres to his four rules listed in his book: have a good time, go where places are good, go now and most roads are better shared. 