

KING OF THE ALPS

PHOTOS & TEXT BY JOHN HERMANN

We loved Spain. Wonderful roads. Wonderful, friendly people. Green fields and forests. Paradors are government sponsored hotels, usually in unique places and / or in unique buildings, like ancient castles. They have very nice facilities. We stayed in seven of them.

But. Why don't the Spanish have ice cream?

So a bunch of San Diego folk decided to check out northern Spain, all the way to Santiago de Compostela in the northwest corner. Santiago's famous as a pilgrimage site. For a thousand years pilgrims have been walking from all across Europe to visit what are claimed to

10 be the bones of St. James. How did the bones get from the Holy Land to the northwest corner of Spain? A miracle. The roads are still full of pilgrims walking, pilgrim staffs in hand.



But first, the San Diegans had to get bikes at Munich. Blair Balsam and Don Walker and Ira Grossman got almost brand new ones. Blair, a Rockster; Don, a red 1100 S, and Ira a 650 GS. Don Picker got out his trusty K100, and Herm got an almost new silver R1150 R.

It's a long way from Munich to Spain. So, it was the train from Munich to Narbonne in France, almost on the Spanish border.



Ira and Don's bikes were the first on the train. The crew handed out soft tie-downs, and then used metal blocks on the wheels. The train left Munich about 4 P.M., and got to Narbonne about 9 A.M. the next day. Don Picker had arranged sleeping accommodations on the train.



But daylight hours were spent enjoying the diner and its beverages. Food was good, too.



It was raining when we unloaded the bikes in Narbonne; Bruce Redding was there to meet us, and his offer of coffee in the station was enjoyed by Blair and Don Picker, Ira Grossman, Don Walker, Bruce and his French friend, Lionel. Bruce and Lionel had spent the night at a hotel near the Narbonne station so they could meet us, and Bruce had awakened to noises near his bike outside. Getting up, he cracked his head. Needed stitches. Thieves did break open the saddle bags on his Varadero.



Crossing into Spain on a high pass, the sun came out. Then the very high pass into the little principality of Andorra between France and Spain (2407 meters) had high snow banks and white fog. Andorra is tax free, and is a bustling place. Even motorcycles and equipment are cheaper. This shop specialized in motorcycle helmets.



An overnight at the Spanish Parador at Vielha was great. Lovely rooms. Lovely baths. Lovely hot tubs. Lovely dinner. All with snowy peaks around. Then it was back into France. The high pass was marked *Ferme*, closed. But a German rider on a Goldwing came down off of it, and said "You can do the Tourmalet." So we did the Col du Tourmalet, 2114 meters high. This scene is at the top.



The French had a nice lunch shop open on the west side of Tourmalet enjoyed by Bruce and Ira.



Then it was a tiny French pass, the Col de Houralate. Here's Blair on it, with Herm's R1150 R.



That evening was in San Sebastian, Spain, called Donastia in the Basque language. Never mind. It had a topless beach.



Out along the north coast of Spain, facing the Atlantic are the Picos de Europa, high mountains with fun roads. Here's Blair topping the Porta San Gloria. The north coast of Spain proved to be lush green. Lots of forests and mountain meadows.



Finally, Santiago, and the two Dons and Ira stopped in front of the Cathedral.

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Accommodations in Santiago were this Parador originally started by Ferdinand and Isabella to house pilgrims. Very nice now. Parking underneath and lots of hot water.

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From Santiago, heading east, Blair lead a spirited ride across miles and miles of swooping back roads with mostly perfect asphalt and no traffic to Leon. The road to Leon was listed in British *Bike* magazine as one of the best motorcycle roads, and it was. Again we sought refuge in a Parador, this one called San Marco, originally designed to house pilgrims heading to or from Santiago. Still does. But only affluent ones.



The next day on a fun back road in Spain, Don Picker lost a nut from his windscreen. Blair accomplished a roadside repair, with Ira looking on.



Heading east, Blair and Don Walker cross back into France on a back road.



The medieval French city of Carcassonne was where we met up with Tom Mooney. Only service vehicles and San Diego motorcycles ride right over the drawbridge and into the town.



Other bikers had to park and walk in.



And there, safe inside the walls, the high outer walls and the higher inner walls, right next to the keep, we found Tom and had a drink and some ice cream. At last, some ice cream. Part of the walls behind the group were built by the Romans.

