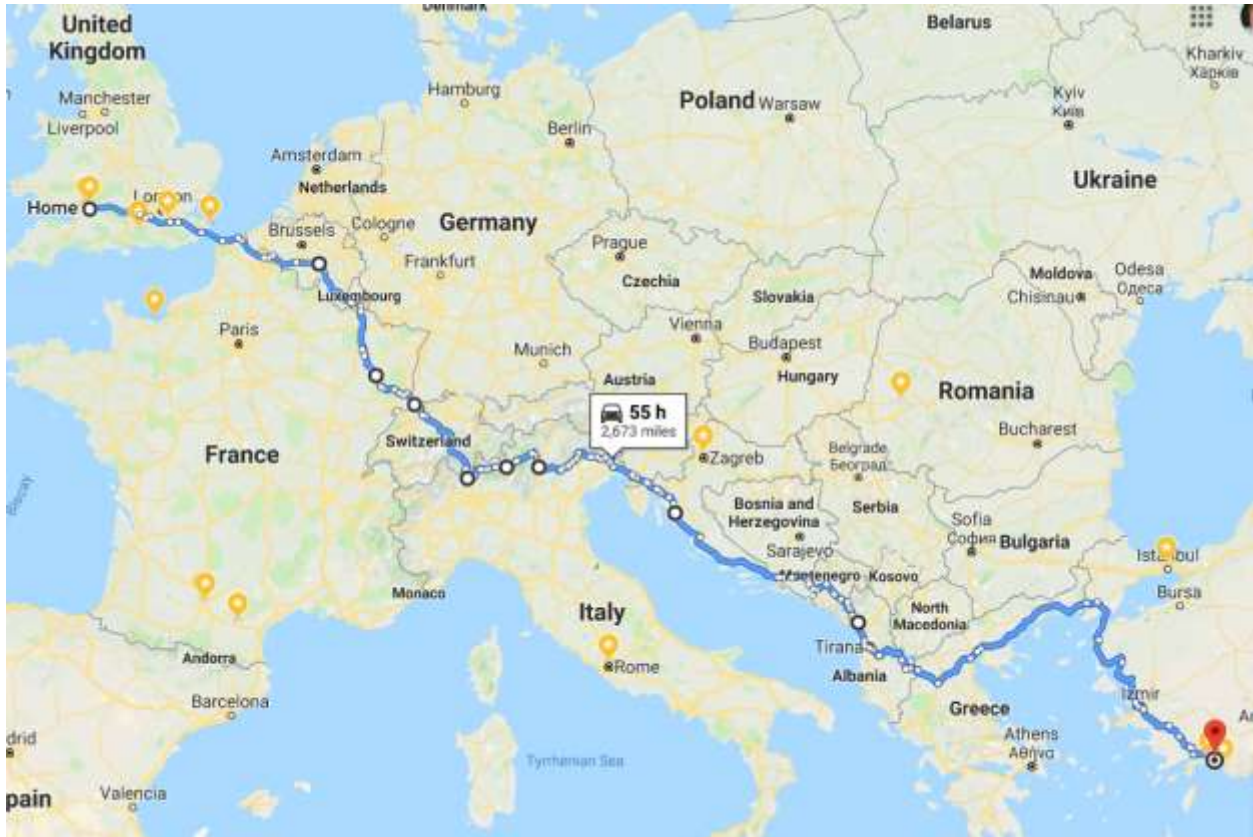


May 2019 Ride to Turkey



The plan was simple, 10 days riding to Göcek on the Mediterranean coast of Turkey, 10 days in and around Göcek and 10 days back. The highlights of the outward trip would be two days in the Southern Alps and three days meandering down the Adriatic coast of Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro and Albania. The weather had other ideas.

This would be my third ride to Göcek where we have had a home since 2003 and where we have spent the spring and autumn every year since we retired in 2008. Pete Michael knew what to expect when he agreed to ride with me having been with me on my second trip in 2014; then we travelled through Germany, Austria, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. It is difficult to maintain IAM riding standards at all times on this length of ride but Pete, an IAM observer, is polite enough not to comment unless I do.



Day 1 went to plan. 8:30 am departure from Bristol, 12:50 Euro Tunnel Shuttle and a pre booked hotel in Southern Belgium. It turned out that this "Jardin du Thé" is a Chinese restaurant with rooms rather than a tea garden so dinner was good. There were a few spots of rain that evening and the ground was definitely damp in the morning but the heavens opened soon after we left.

The plan for day 2 was to push on using toll free autoroutes through Luxemburg to Nancy in France, the N57 (fast dual carriageway) and N66 (some nice bends) to Mulhouse and Basel, and finally Swiss motorways to Lake Lugarno in Switzerland on the Italian border. That should have been around 460 miles on mostly motorways or dual carriageways, quite doable in a day and it would set us up for a couple of days playing in the Southern Alps. We made it to the junction of the N57 and N66 in France, very cold and very wet. Pete's Ruka suit fared a lot better than my gear. I chose a layered approach to cope with a range of temperatures. This included an over-suit for the worst conditions and a jacket with an air flow outer and two removable linings. The over-suit did not cope with the way motorcycle fuel tanks funnel heavy rain towards the front of the seat; the result was cold, wet and shrivelled private parts. My summer boots are Gore Tex but they are short so the over-suit rides up above the tops and allows rain to run down the legs into the top of my boots. Sealskin socks made life bearable but that evening water poured out of one boot when I turned it upside down.

Day 3 started with some delightful bends and attractive villages on the N66 to Mulhouse, then motorway into and through Switzerland. Swiss motorway vignettes cost 40 Swiss Francs (£31 in May 2019). Compared with Austria where a 10 day motorcycle vignette costs €5.30 it is expensive but compared with the Mont Blanc tunnel toll (€31 one way) it is not. Google estimates the non-motorway option would take 7 hours against 3 hours using the motorways. Most of this route through Switzerland has spectacular scenery even if the air was cold on this occasion. Our time playing in the southern Alps started after a late lunch in an Italian restaurant in Lugarno with the twisting road along the north side of Lake Lugarno then up the west side of Lake Como. Eventually we dropped south out of the mountains on to the industrial flat plain around Udine and Trieste. With hindsight we should have continued further east into Slovenia before turning south but long rides are always a compromise between finding the most enjoyable biking roads and making progress. Once clear of Trieste we were onto fast sweeping bends through the south west corner of Slovenia then the beautiful coastal highway of Croatia. That was when the weather turned really nasty.

Late in the morning of our fifth day, on the elevated coastal highway south of Rijeka, the wind picked up to the point we were fighting to control the bikes. Eventually we turned off the highway into a coastal resort town and some lunch. Our response to the usual questions about "where are you from?", "where are you going?" produced the reply "You can't, the road is closed". One of the restaurant staff called up the Croatian highways web site showing the coastal highway to the south closed to high sided vehicles and motorcycles. Later they closed it to all vehicles.

We were advised to head inland to the motorway, using the old roads rather than going back the way we came. I put the first of a list of village names into my satnav and set off. Approaching the first village, I put in the last name we were given and asked the satnav to show alternative routes. Two of the three appeared to head back to the coast so we agreed on the third without looking at it carefully. By now it had started to rain. We should have stopped when the road started to narrow and head towards a near vertical cliff. We didn't and the road got narrower and steeper, eventually becoming single track with hairpin bends, vertical drops on one side, no margins and no safety barriers. At least it was surfaced on the steep part but that changed at the top where it became an un-surfaced track through forest. Then it started snowing. The snow soon turned to rain again but the track went on for about 10km although it

seemed longer. Three times we stopped to clear fallen tree branches; my greatest fear was that the next obstacle would be too big to move and we would be forced to ride back down the very scary cliff road. Up was bad but the thought of down was frightening. Eventually we made it onto rural lanes, in heavy rain, and then the village of Fužine, fuel and a welcome early hotel. The hotel was expecting a group of Harley riders who didn't make it!

Time was running out because Pete's partner, Shirley was flying out to meet us in Göcek and we needed to be there first. We could have used the branch of the motorway which returns to the coast near Split but the weather was still foul so we turned towards Zagreb, Belgrade, Bulgaria and the Turkish border near Edirne. With the exception of a beautiful gorge south of Niš in Serbia, and the Bulgarian section north of Sofia, this route is all motorways from Austria to Istanbul. The surprising discovery was the city of Plovdiv in central Bulgaria. Its smart pedestrian centre, pavement cafes and well dressed young people with 'coffee to go' would not look out of place in prosperous northern Europe. A different picture emerges when you look closer at the workmen, and their old trucks belching black fumes, laying the new pavements. Both satnavs kept guiding us the wrong way down a one-way-street so we asked two policemen how to get there. They told us to go the same route and when we queried this, they laughed and said "This is Bulgaria".



Once into Turkey we turned south west towards Gelibolu (Gallipoli) and the ferry across the Dardanelles, then down the west coast of Turkey to Göcek in the south west. Being Turkey, the fare for the ferry crossing was 13TL (£1.70). The 500 miles from the Bulgarian border to Göcek is nearly all dual carriageway, some of it is fairly straight except where the central reserve widens to form a roundabout for turning traffic. Other sections have long sweeping curves through mountainous regions. Most is very

lightly trafficked but in places the new road follows the old through moderately large towns with heavy traffic, pedestrians and numerous traffic lights. One of the nicest hotels, and certainly the cheapest hotel (100TL = £13 per family room) was in Akçay on the coast in north west Turkey opposite the Greek island of Lesbos.

Ten days R&R, a couple of local trips and a few historical sites and it was time to head back to the UK.



Our return route crossed from Turkey into Greece and the 'Egnatia Odos', named after the ancient Roman Via Egnatia, which crosses the full width of northern Greece. The section west of Thessaloniki is both spectacular and quite new; it was near completion when I rode it in 2010. Passing through the Pindos Mountains there are some 1650 bridges and 76 tunnels, steep gradients, sweeping bends and signs warning of bears! I am pleased that we didn't meet any bears. We turned north on the even newer A26 to the Albanian border. Like in Turkey, Bosnia and Montenegro, our European motorcycle insurance is not valid in Albania. In each case we bought basic third party insurance at the border. For Turkey it cost 150TL (£20) while in Albania it cost 13€.

My TomTom satnav said the distance to the capital Tirana was 20km less than Pete's Garmin said. The difference became apparent when mine directed us off the main E86 past a quarry and through villages with people using horses and carts to carry farm produce, as well as the inevitable numerous holes in the road. Nevertheless, the whole area is beautiful, the people friendly and the hilly landscape provided good riding. Central Tirana has wide boulevards and attractive buildings. Our hotel in central Tirana was top international standard and would have been outside our budget in most other places.

Heading north from Tirana on Sunday morning, through industrial and suburban areas with significantly more traffic, was less enjoyable. In southern Montenegro we were stuck in slow moving Sunday traffic until we got clear of the capital, Podgorica. Our plan was to head inland towards Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Three lane roads in the UK are generally being changed to two lanes or double white lines used to discourage drivers playing chicken in the middle lane. Clearly Montenegro takes a different approach because we rode an extensive stretch of new three lane road. Then we came to a long stretch where

excavation was in progress both sides of the old road and finally to a long section where the road base was being totally re-constructed. Many times on this trip we rode on gravel through road works but nowhere else was the ground so uneven with such big holes. By now it was raining heavily and newly constructed kerbs on both sides prevented the water escaping. In places the water was deep making it impossible to see holes in the road, in other places the water was flowing moderately quickly. Eventually we got back onto paved roads and found a road-side bar where we could escape the rain for a while and drink tea. It was still raining and cold when we reached the Bosnian border so we changed plan and dropped down to the Croatian coast at Dubrovnik. This short but steep decent through Bosnia was one of the most picturesque parts of the whole trip despite the weather.



Bosnia in the rain

From Dubrovnik we headed up the coast, crossing the narrow coastal part of Bosnia then back into Croatia, along with countless campervans. Croatia is beautiful but, as a biker, I enjoyed the roads of rural Slovenia more. And so back into the Alps; first in Slovenia and then in Austria, Italy and Austria again.



Slovenian Alps



Austrian Alps

We chose the use the Brenner Pass, which was fine until we approached the highest section and found the road closed.



Brenner Pass road closure

A Syrian, wearing the hi-vis vest of a road worker explained, in perfect English, that we had a choice between joining the Autobahn or riding back 7km and turning east to follow the road up the other side of the valley through Patsch. We has chosen to avoid the autobahn in Austria so we did not have a vignette, couldn't get one easily here and didn't want risk a fine. Finding "Patsch" in the satnav was a problem until we saw it written; I thought he said "Batch". Although a more minor road, this proved enjoyable and would not have been much longer had we turned off at the appropriate junction and not has to retrace part of our route.



Panoramic view from Patsch.

From Patsch we were soon in Innsbruck then climbed out of the Inn valley and descended in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. A little north of Garmish we joined the German Autobahn system and headed for home via Luxemburg. That night we stopped in Günzburg in Bavaria and the following morning, Thursday, we had 500 miles to go to the Channel Tunnel near Calais. The weather was fine but heavy rain and thunder storms were forecast for Friday so we chose to push on and sleep in our own beds that night. We got into Bristol at 2am on Friday morning having ridden 700 miles since 8:30 am on Thursday.

In some ways this trip was a quest to see if I still had the energy for such a long ride as I approached my 70th birthday. The decision to ride 700 miles on the last day of a 5600 mile trip was predicated on the weather forecast. However, a need to prove I could still do what I did when younger was a significant motivational force to continue when it might have been sensible to stop.

Weather conditions made this trip harder than it anticipated but there were some excellent motorcycle roads, great scenery and places neither of us had visited before. Route planning on long rides is always a compromise between finding the technically challenging twisty roads and making progress. Weather and other external factors caused us to use more motorways than we planned but, apart from the UK and northern Europe, most were lightly trafficked and many passed through delightful scenery. Poor route planning in Croatia on the way south and road works elsewhere forced us onto unpaved surfaces, which we coped with but did not choose. Who knows whether either of us will do a similar length trip in the future.



One of several off-road detours around roadworks