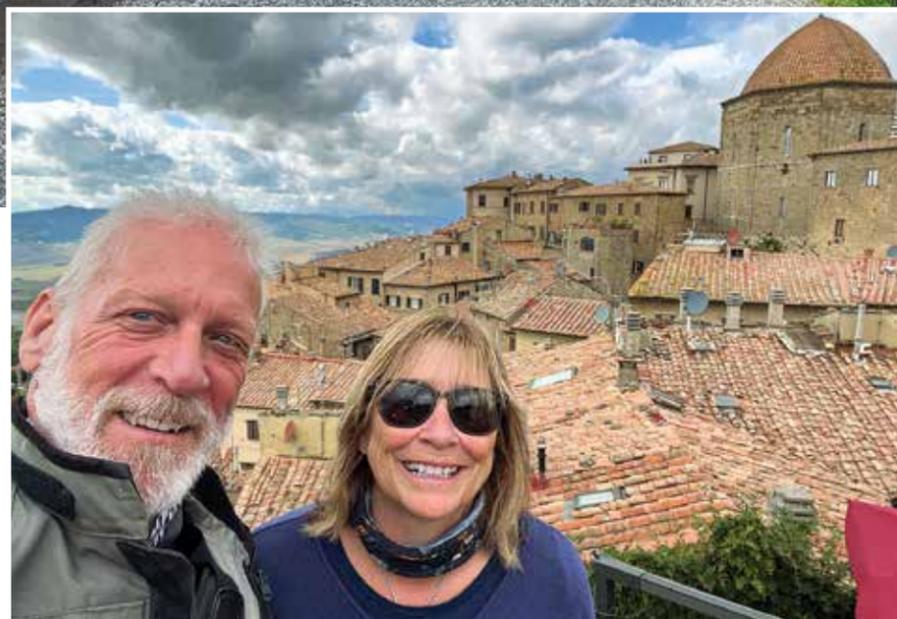
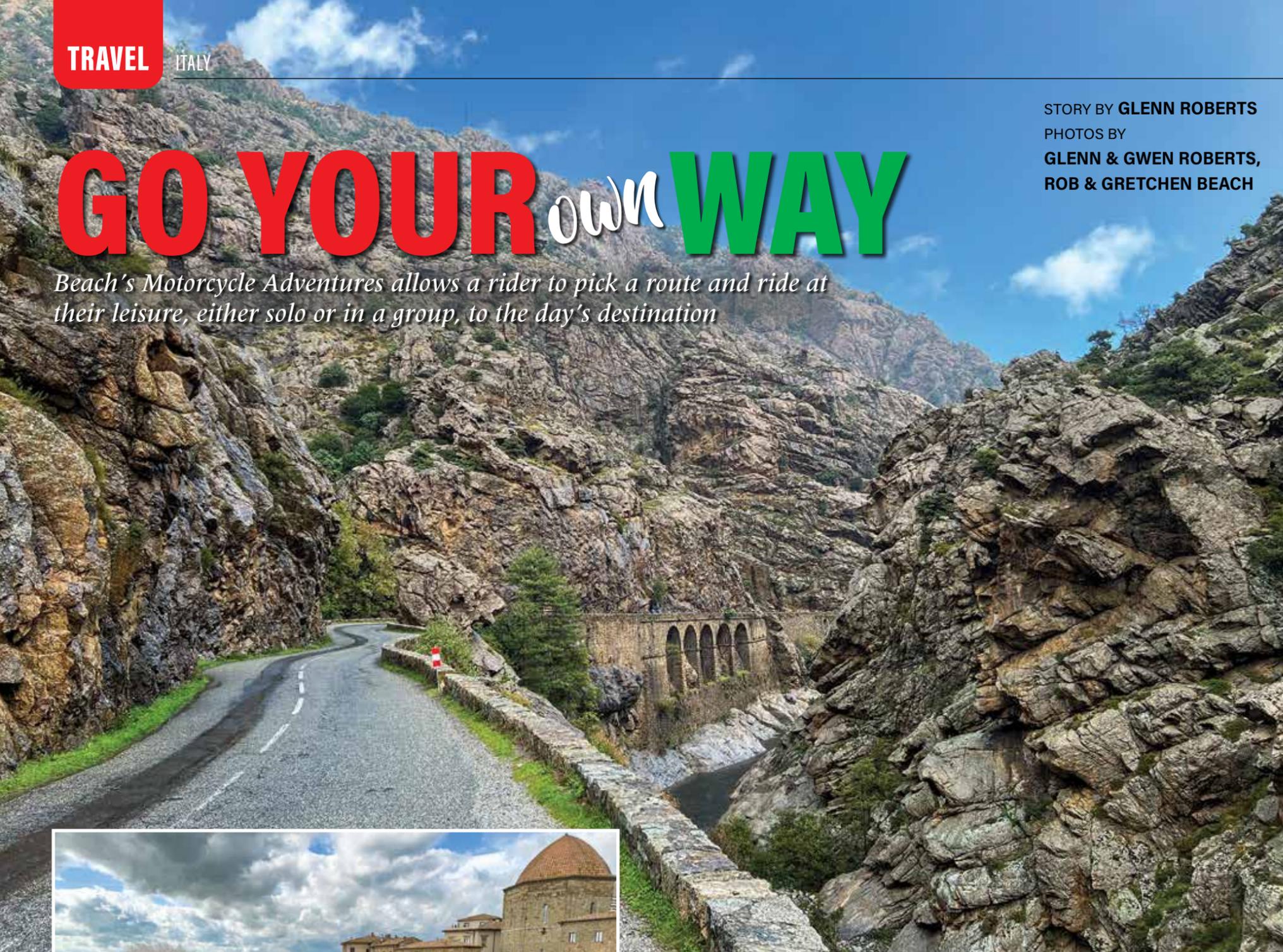


GO YOUR own WAY

Beach's Motorcycle Adventures allows a rider to pick a route and ride at their leisure, either solo or in a group, to the day's destination

STORY BY **GLENN ROBERTS**
 PHOTOS BY
**GLENN & GWEN ROBERTS,
 ROB & GRETCHEN BEACH**



“Today’s ride will be on a road race course, and we’ll be riding in the opposite direction than the racing cars,” I said to Gwen.

“Wait, what do you mean? We’ll be riding toward the race cars? How does that make sense?” she responded with apprehension.

Gwen’s cause for concern was valid. She has always been a bit averse to racetracks. However, closed-course racetracks are relatively safe for a

number of reasons: the traffic goes in the same direction, there are no driveways or intersections, you can almost always see through the turn, the track is clean of debris, and other reasons. But she knew the road race I spoke of wasn’t on a closed course and didn’t have any of those built-in safety features. It was an automobile rally course on public roads, with extremely sharp, blind corners: rock walls on one side and drop-offs into the abyss below on the other.

FAST FACTS

WINE DOORS OF FLORENCE

You may see small windows on the sides of buildings while walking the streets of downtown Florence. In the past, wine was a staple of healthy living in Florence, as the water was polluted and filled with disease. The wine windows flourished during the early 1600s, when the bubonic plague ran rampant in the city, killing 12 per cent of the population. The windows allowed the exchange of wine and money without personal contact. The few windows that remain made another comeback during the Covid-19 pandemic. Today, they are a convenient way to buy a glass of wine on the street.

EUROPEAN POWERHOUSE

The Medici family, one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in Europe, hailed from Florence. Their wealth and power lasted almost 300 years. If you’ve been to Florence, you have seen the family’s legacy. They were bankers, politicians and merchants, and were tied heavily to the Catholic church. In fact, some members of the Medici family became Popes, and two Medici women became Queens of France. The Medici Bank was once Europe’s most powerful financial institution. The Medici built some of the world’s greatest buildings, and were patrons of the world’s greatest artists including Botticelli, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, among many others.

TUSCAN LANDMARK

Pension Bencistà has a rich history that began in the first half of the 14th century. Tales of allegiance to Pope Clemente VII, and deceit and traitorous actions towards the powerful Medici family resulted in the beheading of the then-owner. The villa was sold in 1542 to one of the Medici family’s most faithful supporters and given the name Bencistà. In 1759, Bencistà belonged to the Sisters of St. Anne of the Fields and served as a convent for the next 150 years. It has been a guest-house since 1925. We were the last people to stay in the villa, as it had been sold and is now under renovations, set to reopen in 2027.

TOUR DE CORSE

The first Tour de Corse was held in 1956 on the French island of Corsica. This five-day rally is open to qualified historic vehicles from 1947 to 1990 in various classes. The 2024 rally saw 383 entrants. The race is 1,000 km long, which includes 380 km divided into 17 special stages on closed roads and 620 km of untimed transport stages. The rally is known as the “Ten Thousand Turns Rally” because of the twisty mountain roads it runs on.

This breakfast conversation happened on Day 12 on the French island of Corsica during a tour organized by Beach’s Motorcycle Adventures. Operating since 1972, Beach’s is the oldest motorcycle touring company in the world. It was started by Rob Beach’s parents and today is operated by Rob and his wife, Gretchen.

THE ISLAND INTERLUDE

The 16-day tour, dubbed The Island Interlude, began in the Tuscan city of

“IT’S QUITE REMARKABLE FOR A TOUR OPERATOR TO JUST LET GO OF ITS FLEET AND TRUST THAT EVERYONE WILL CONGREGATE AT THE MEETING POINT LATER ON”



Just north of Piana. A typical coastline on the beautiful island of Corsica. (above) Our accommodation on the riverside of the Temo River in the medieval town of Bosa, Sardinia. (left)

Fiésole, Italy, a suburb of Florence, at the end of September and ran until the middle of October. Over the course of the next couple weeks, the tour group — which included Canadians Gary and Sandra, Randy and Donna, Rob and Dianna, Sam, Matt, Bonnie and Mike and, of course, me and Gwen, along with Jim and Rebecca, Janet and Glenn, Don and Jo, James and guides extraordinaire Rob and Gretchen from south of the border, while Lefty and Nicoleta, both from Greece, manned the support van — would make our way west through Italy to the port city of Livorno to catch an overnight ferry across the Tyrrhenian Sea to the Italian island of Sardinia.

After circumnavigating much of Sardinia we rode to the north end of the Island to catch the short one hour ferry to the south end of the French island of Corsica. After a few days on Corsica, we set sail once again back to the mainland of Italy and back to Fiésole.

A TOUR COMPANY LIKE NO OTHER

The tour began in the centuries-old Pension Bencistà high above the city of Florence. Pension Bencistà dates to



Rob and Gretchen Beach

the first half of the 14th century. It's a beautiful old multi-room guest house that — obviously, because of its age — has a colourful history, including a 150-year run of being a convent. After a quick introduction of tour guests we took a trip into the heart of Florence (Firenze in Italian) for a city walking tour — it's a fascinating old-world city — and then back to the Pension for its amazing Italian meals. The Italians take their food, and their wine, very seriously.

After dinner, Rob and Gretchen hosted a briefing of what we could expect during the tour — Rob being the route-planning guru and Gretchen the logistics maven. The biggest part of the briefing was describing the GPS routes — there is a GPS mounted on each bike. It's this GPS aspect of a Beach's Motorcycle Adventures tour that is unique from any other tour



A mix of old and new in a typical fortified coast town on Sardinia.



The castle has been overlooking the colourful medieval town of Bosa since 1112.

company, and I can honestly say I've never been on an organized tour quite like a Beach's tour.

Rob has been planning and routing tours in various parts of the world for several decades, and from personal exploration and experience he knows the best motorcycle roads in each tour destination, many of which are called "Rob" roads in the tour booklet for obvious reasons. A tourism office or rental company isn't going to direct you to these roads; I doubt that many locals even know of such routes.

Each bike's GPS is loaded with

various routes and tracks for each tour day, allowing the rider to leave the hotel when they wish, choose which route or combination of routes, or simply choose a route that looks the most entertaining. Routes vary in length and time and there is generally an average of three to choose from each day.

All the routes are described in enormous detail in the 195-page Beach's tour booklet. The booklet also describes the area's history and includes riding tips, either in general or specific to the area.

Rob used to also be involved with a riding school, which adds valuable teaching experience to his vast riding knowledge and throughout the tour, if someone struggled with riding techniques or the tight European corners, Rob was there to help and give insight to how to fix the problem with one-on-one riding lessons.

A FULLY SUPPORTED, SELF-MANAGED TOUR

Riders can ride solo or with friends old and new. Beach's tour is not a follow-the-leader affair if you don't want it to be. The idea is you ride your own ride, and everyone finishes the day at the same destination hotel to rave about the extraordinary sights and experiences they stumbled upon during the day's ride.

Just one example of the incredible roads that weaved through sedimentary rock formations carved from thousands of years of rainfall, wind and erosion.





There is no shortage of medieval towns with narrow streets. Some are a bit wider, many are narrower.

For lack of a better term, you could say it's a fully supported but self-managed tour. The accommodations with breakfast and dinner are already looked after — you just arrive at the destination after your ride and everything will be ready for you. One of the best things about an organized tour is the legwork like researching hotels, unique locations, points of interest, and so on has already been done for you — you just need to show up with your riding gear.

If help is needed on the road, it's only a text or call away, although the support truck might be on another route so you might have to wait for it. Not to worry: Small, quaint Italian villages always seem to have an abundance of cafés and restaurants to while away the time.

It's quite remarkable for a tour operator to just let go of its fleet and trust that everyone will congregate at the meeting point later on. It's really a very cool way to go on a tour and it explains why so many on this Italian excursion were repeat Beach customers. In fact, by the end of this tour, many had already booked another trip with Beach's for the following riding season.

ON THE ROAD

Our first day riding saw me and Gwen riding alone. It takes a bit of getting used to a new bike, and to riding two up on roads with constant twists and turns over mountain passes. The temperature on the first riding day varied from a perfect 21 C to 14 C in the mountains.

To get an idea of the above-mentioned GPS routes available, we had a choice of four routes on the first day that ranged from 77 km and 2.25 hours to 152 km and an estimated four hours. Those times for that distance might seem off for North America travel but when you take into account the twisting European mountain roads, the time needed for many routes was at times doubled. And there is time required for sightseeing and great Italian coffee.

FERRY RIDE TO SARDINIA

After leaving in the rain that eventually cleared up, I guesstimated the curves for the day's ride numbered in the several hundreds, give or take. We decided to ride with others which, just by its nature, created a fairly quick and fun pace.

I possess an innate interest in ancient architecture, which is one reason why I like riding in Europe so much. The route we took included passing through the ancient, medieval city of Volterra, which has a 3,000-year-old recorded history and while there are still some Roman influences, the protective walls of the city date back to the 12th century. The narrow streets and medieval atmosphere were outstanding. Like all

ancient cities, it is unfortunately a bit of a tourist trap but a city or town with a castle and walking-only "old town" inside a walled city never gets old — no pun intended.

Experiencing ancient walled cities would become a norm on this trip as they are very prevalent in medieval cities and towns of Europe.

We eventually made our way to the ferry terminal but our navigation was a bit convoluted — our instructions for getting there were a bit off as the roads had apparently changed since Beach's were there last year — but everyone arrived at the Livorno ferry dock on time.

After a full day of technical riding and learning new traffic patterns, sleep came fast for this rider and as far as I know the voyage was smooth as glass all night across the Tyrrhenian Sea to Golfo Aranci on Sardinia's northeast coast.

DIFFERENT DRIVING SKILLS NEEDED

Riding is different here than anywhere in North America in that it can be hectic and vehicles can be very close together. Motorcycles — and especially scooters — are everywhere and very well-respected. It seems that no matter what happens, drivers don't get upset, even when someone gets cut off.

Speed signs in the country are merely a suggestion, unless there is a speed camera. Some are well-marked; however, some of the camera boxes don't appear to have cameras in them.

After disembarking the ferry, we congregated at a restaurant for a head count and breakfast, after which we

went our separate ways, with the day's destination being the medieval city of Bosa. About two-thirds up the western coast of Sardinia.

We took Route 1 in the available GPS files, which took us to the coast north of Bosa. This section, and I expect all of Sardinia, has a beautifully rugged and very scenic coastline with towering cliffs dropping to the stunningly blue Mediterranean Sea. If you've never seen the Mediterranean, the colour of the water is mesmerizing and unlike any body of water I've ever seen.

INCREDIBLE HISTORIES

Like many ancient cities in Europe, Bosa has a rich history dating back a few millennia — well before Roman times. Rolling into town, you see the colourful buildings at the riverside, where we were staying, and behind those is a hillside of buildings that lead up to the castle high above the town. It's worth a walk in the medieval downtown core, which includes centuries-old walking bridges across the Temo River, cobblestone streets,



crooked buildings and storefronts, and on some of the old streets you can spread your arms out and touch the building walls on each side of the street. Speed cameras were few and far between. The roads seemed twistier and the small mountain villages were more plentiful. Sometimes

Our first day in the mountains around Florence. Note the KTM rider dragging a knee. (above) Part of the gang enjoying drinks on the seaside patio. (below inset) A small mountain village seemingly in the middle of nowhere. (below left)



Looking forward to dinner in Oliena, Sardinia. Our Chef was preparing the meat by slowly roasting it all day, turning it every half hour or so in this outdoor fire.





Living on the edge. Our first view of Bonifacio, Corsica, from the ferry as we approached the sheltered channel and ferry dock.

in the mountains we would see a tiny, picture-perfect village perched on a mountainside seemingly in the middle of nowhere across a vast valley. But, sure enough, the road we were on would eventually lead us to it.

The roads through these small villages have been there for centuries and in many cases are just wide enough for a horse and cart. Some houses' front doors open right onto the road. In these small, quaint villages, there isn't enough room for even a motorcycle and a small car to pass. One small village was only about 150 metres between town signs.

In addition to these postcard-perfect villages, some of the remote roads were a standout in my memory. A few times we came across paved forest roads that were only about two metres wide with a centreline painted on them making each lane only a metre wide. Quite often on one side of the road, the pavement would drop off abruptly with no shoulder of any kind, rather just a ridiculously steep hillside that seemed to drop forever. I remember thinking that if you happened to meet a vehicle and made one wrong move and went off the pavement, you may never be found — or, if you're lucky, the trees below would stop you.

THE MOUNTAIN IN THE SEA

After six days riding the incredible and exhausting roads of Sardinia, we were

excited for our next day's agenda to the ferry terminal and then to Corsica. Ferry reservations wait for no one and even though we had a choice of three routes to get to the ferry dock at the northern tip of Sardinia, most of us took the most direct route to ensure we'd be there in plenty of time.

Pulling into Corsica's long, sheltered harbour was almost magical for this landlubber. Bonifacio's 1,000-year-old citadel and fortress walls are built along the edge of the sheer 60-metre high cliffs that drop down to the ocean. It was a beautiful sight with the sun reflecting on the massive escarpment.

This island, which is only 215 km long and 81 km wide, has been occupied for many millennia by a number of civilizations but its rich and more recent history is one of pirates and plundering adventurers. And let's not forget: Corsica is the birthplace of Napoleon Bonaparte. Most of the island's population occupies two main towns — Ajaccio and Bastia — leaving the rest of the island less populated with mainly empty roads.

Even though it is only a short ferry ride away, Corsica just seemed different than Sardinia. The ancient Greeks called it Kallisto, which translates to "the most beautiful," and beautiful it is. It even smells different — Gwen commented on the distinct herbal/floral scent of the island before we even got off the ferry.

FIRST TASTE OF CORSICA

During our ride, we once again got on one of the uber-skinny, two-metre-wide roads, and this time we did meet up with a couple small trucks. I thought it best to just stop at the edge and let them navigate around us.

The accommodation for our first night on Corsica was right at the sea's edge, and the greenish-blue water crashing on the massive rocks created a peaceful soundtrack for a couple of drinks with the others at the oceanside patio. This hotel, like all of the accommodations on this trip, was top-notch, and being comfortable on a Beach's tour is just one of the things we could always count on.

EXTREME RIDING

Our first full riding day on Corsica was a day of extremes — from some of the worst broken tarmac I've ever ridden on to brand new ultra-smooth pavement. Then, in the afternoon, we were on the craziest road I think I've ever been on. If it hasn't aired on *World's Most Dangerous Roads*, it should.

It was a seriously steep broken pavement and gravel road, if you could call it that, with extremely tight switchbacks and no protection for going off the edge, which was straight down. While I found it very exciting and challenging, I was glad we weren't riding up it, and I just hoped that another vehicle wasn't coming toward us because there was nowhere for either vehicle to pass. Luckily for us, no one else was on the path.

Once at the bottom we were in the most amazing deep canyon of red and orange rock formations. The road followed the river tightly, and seemed to always be slowly descending in the canyon. It could have been an optical illusion because the high canyon walls were so steep. There wasn't a straight stretch anywhere during the ride along the river and it demanded my full attention to stay on the serpentine road, but every once in a while, I was able to sneak quick peeks at the astounding fiery orange rock walls and rock formations that legend says had been created by the Devil himself.

Free range animals are plentiful in parts of these islands. At times it wasn't unusual to see goats, cows,



Best to just stay out of their way. Immediately after this white Porsche is a tight right hand curve and then an immediate tight, blind left. Not one car made that corner in its own lane while we were stopped.

sheep, and especially pigs running or grazing freely at the roadsides. Almost all of the animals stayed put when we rode by, but the youngsters were skittish and would sometimes dart out in front of us.

TOUR DE CORSE

Rally day was upon us. The Tour de Corse ran on public roads, but part of one of our routes had to be discarded due to some road sections that were temporarily closed to rally-only cars. We rode with extra caution for most of the day while we were on the "track" but soon realized that while the cars would cut corners — many of them blind with sheer rock walls on one side and jagged cliffs to the ocean on the other — it was the support vans following the rally that were the biggest danger.

We had some indication when to expect cars were coming around blind corner as spectators would have cameras ready on the opposing shoulder. We could slow to a snail's pace and hug the outside edges of the road to be safe. The public wasn't interested in the support vans so we had no warning of them, and they were all over the road with no concern of oncoming traffic.

The van drivers also considered

themselves race car drivers, but I can tell you that sprinter vans don't handle like rally cars. More than once we found ourselves looking directly at the grill of a Mercedes Sprinter that was listing to one side as it swerved back into its own lane to avoid us. I was expecting one van in particular to tip over in front of us, giving us the option of either hitting it sliding down the road, or us veering off into a wall of rock.

While the day was exciting and it was cool seeing the rally cars, it put a damper on the day's ride and it was an experience I don't need to repeat anytime soon.

Our last two days on Corsica would be in Bastia on the northeastern coast. A free day meant you could do anything you like: go shopping or hang around the pool for instance. We chose the Cap Corse route which circumnavigates the northern peninsula of the island.

GOODBYE CORSICA

We had heavy hearts when it was time to leave this amazing island. We had to be at the ferry dock for 7:00 a.m. for our voyage back to Livorno on the Italian mainland. It was a common consensus that we all felt a bit sad watching this riding paradise of

sinewy roads, amazing scenery, great food, and comfortable accommodation fade into the horizon from the back of the ferry. Everything you could want and more in a riding holiday was on Corsica.

Making our way back to Fiésole and the Pension Bencistà marked the end of our 16-day round trip Island Interlude tour. While we only experienced a small part of the Tuscany area, the islands of Sardinia, and especially Corsica, this tour will always hold a special place in our hearts and memories. I seriously hope to get back to this corner of the world again to experience the remarkable country of Italy, and "the most beautiful" island of Corsica.

We experienced so much over two weeks that it's impossible to put it all into words, especially in the space allotted here. I think I can speak for everyone on the tour: Thank you to Beach's Motorcycle Adventures for hosting such a unique motorcycle travel experience like no other, and allowing us to go our own way. **MM** To learn more about Beach's Motorcycle Adventures and its other tours go to bmca.com

ADDITIONAL PHOTOS OF ITALY
VISIT: MOTORCYCLEMOJO.COM