

“Old Gits Tour 2017” – Krakow, Poland

The “Old Gits”



Brian Williamson	Mike Elliot	Eamonn Townsend	Alex Guthrie	Simon Laishley	Mike Irving
Yamaha Dragstar	Suzuki Hayabusa GSX1300R	Honda Varadero XL1000	Harley Davidson Sportster 1200	Triumph Tiger	Honda CBR600

The route:



Main Towns/Cities

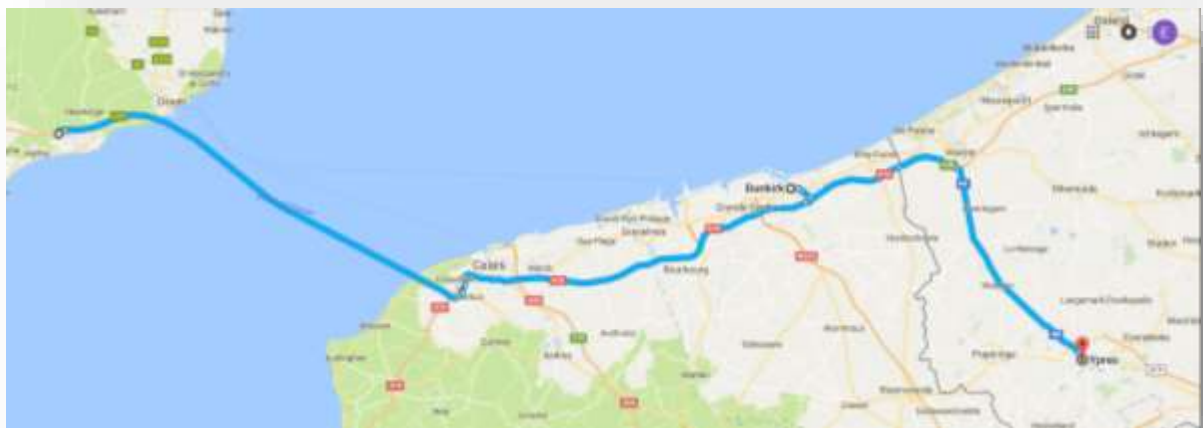
Calais
Ypres
Dusseldorf

Vienna
Zilina
Krakow

Prague
Wurzburg
Luxemburg

Saint-Omer
Calais

Day 1 – 5th July – England to Ypres



Wrong service station to meet Mike I



Eamonn chatting to KTM “friend” – others just watched, no help



In the train:



Lunch at Malo-les-Bains



Arrival in Ypres



Bikes parked up on the street outside the hotel. Free parking overnight, but had to buy 1 hour ticket he next morning!



The evening started with a short walk towards the Menin Gate with a stop off for refreshments in a Belgian beer bar. The day was so hot and we all needed to drink liquid – so orders for cider and water were put to the waitress. You could almost see her confusion as to why you would come to a Belgian beer bar and order ciders....

After suitable refreshments, we continued our walk to the Menin Gate to attend the evening ceremony. The Last Post ceremony has been performed every night at 8pm since November 1929 (with the only exception being during WW2), large crowds gather in attendance to show their respect to those who gave their lives in the First World War.



The list of those who fell during the war extends all around the monument, both inside and out. It is truly staggering the number of names engraved on every flat surface available.

During the evening meal in Ypres centre – we discussed the rebuilding of the cloth hall and cathedral after the Great War.

It took 8 years between 1922 and 1930 to rebuild the centre of town back to how it was before the war.

The type of shell that destroyed Ypres



Day 2 – 6th July – Ypres to Dusseldorf



Since the next stage of the journey was to get the 9pm motorail from Dusseldorf to Vienna, there was no rush to leave Ypres. We had a leisurely breakfast, the highlight of which was trying to get boiled eggs out of the machine on the side of the bar. Many eggs were entered, not so many came out! They could still be circling around in there today....

With the extra time available to us, we took the opportunity to spend more time at the Menin Gate – it was much bigger than originally thought. From the main road you see the central columns and archways, but to each side there are additional rooms and corridors – all with more names engraved in the walls.

Centre of Ypres – cloth hall and cathedral (and car park!)





In a chocolatier shop window there was a display of items made from pure chocolate:



With rain clouds coming in, we packed our bags and left for Dusseldorf about 11am. Thunderstorms were seen on the horizon as we left Ypres. As we progressed on the motorways, you could see the dark clouds following behind us, we managed to stay just ahead of the rain.

Mostly motorway journey, with stop at Esso services for water and snack. We found that if buying petrol with cash, you had to pay up front and say how many litres you were going to purchase – Brian had a frank discussion with the attendant each in their own native language explaining that until the tank was filled he didn't know how many litres were going to be used. During the discussions, others had found out how to pay by card, this was a far simpler process!

Arrived in Dusseldorf about 4pm, found a hotel that would serve drinks, but their restaurant was closed. They offered their tables for us to get take-away food from the railway station and eat in the bar, exceptionally nice people, not sure if we'd get that type of offer in the UK!

After a few beers sitting outside, we decided to go down to the station to investigate what food options there were. Eamonn and Simon walked to the station whilst the others stayed with the helmets and bags (and had another beer). Just as Eamonn and Simon were getting to the station it started to rain, however the food hall was found and the options checked. Basically it was a lot of sandwich bars with a few restaurants and hot food take-aways. Varying styles of pizza were bought for Eamonn, Mike I and Simon to eat back in the bar whilst the others took their turn in the station.

On the walk back from the station, the rain was heavier – it wasn't looking very good! The barstaff made us welcome by serving more beer and Alex, Brian and Mike E headed for the station.

Sitting outside the hotel with our refreshments:





After everyone had eaten it was time to get to the station – just a short walk from the bar. The train arrived, and we prepared the bikes for loading. The bikes had to be ridden onto the transporter, but the headroom was very limited so crash hats had to be worn and you had to lie almost flat on the tank to avoid hitting your head on the metalwork of the carriage. After parking up, the attendants strapped the bikes down and we headed off to find our carriage for the overnight journey.

Initially we couldn't find the sleeper carriage, we walked up and down the whole train looking for the relevant numbered carriages – nothing could be found... It turned out there were two tickets – one was for the bikes and one for us, we were looking at the wrong tickets!

A helpful gentleman in a red t-shirt helped us out, he appeared to be the only official on the platform to ask any assistance and many people were asking him. As it turned out, he was just another passenger, there were no train officials about at all.

The overnight cabins looked extremely small –this was going to be interesting to see how we could both luggage and people into the limited space! Being bikers, we're used to packing stuff and so it didn't take long to get everything put into safe storage areas and then get to know our surroundings for the next few hours.

A courtesy pack was on each bench consisting of a small bottle of wine, towel, slippers and ear plugs. The wine didn't last long and then our own bottles were opened. By 2am it was thought best to get some sleep as it wouldn't be long before we were on the road again. Sleep came easily that night!



After a few minutes we realised that by folding the middle bed up, we could sit comfortably on the lower bed and enjoy our evening snacks of a packet of pretzels, a complimentary small bottle of sparkling white wine and the two bottles of wine we had purchased earlier.

By 2am the wine had been consumed and we thought it best to get some sleep before breakfast...

Breakfast arrived at about 7am, it was preselected from a list of standard items provided on a sheet the night before. Of course no-one could really remember what they had asked for so a bit of swapping around and we had ourselves sorted.

The bread rolls were like trying to eat cream-crackers – hard and dry. The coffee had a strange flavour, but the orange juice and yoghurt went a long way to helping overcome the heavy heads resulting from the evening's wine.

We had booked cabins with showers, it was pointless! If you were over 12 years old, the shower space was just too small

Day 3 – 7th July – Vienna to Zilina



After disembarking from the overnight train, we had to wait for the bikes to be unloaded. It was probably about an hour after arriving at the station before we were ready to get back on the road.

A small shower to start with, but it soon cleared up.

Strap dropped off Mike I bike, Alex and Brian stopped to pick up –remaining four missed seeing this and became separated.

Mike E, Eamonn, Simon and Mike I travelled in one group, Alex and Brian in the other. Alex and Brian negotiated some mountain roads whilst the others travelled via Nitra where they stopped for lunch. A three course lunch menu of the day came to less than 5 Euros each! Soup was a bit strange, but main course and puddings were all excellent for the price.



On arrival in Zilina there seemed to be a wedding ceremony (or perhaps rehearsal) taking place:



The singing was interspersed with what can only be described as wailing, it was very different to the weddings in the UK!

Having been separated, Brian and Alex decided to head for Zilina rather than Nisa due to the time lost waiting and the slower bikes.

Rather than motorways we went by the A roads. However these became very frustrating, just when you left a town or village and you wanted to open up and enjoy the open road. You were soon entering another town or village.

We decided to stop for some lunch in a village called Madunice and pulled up. We went into the cafe and through some pigeon English ordered 2 pints and a menu. Luckily there was a local man who could speak English and helped up choose a very good chicken meal.



He also told us to be very careful about drinking as there was a zero tolerance in Slovakia. We decided to just have the one!!

We rode on and entered Zilina before the others, but struggled to find the hotel due to a one way system. After a few words with the local law, they directed us to our hotel which was very nice.

Time for a beer before the others turned up!

Of course after wash and brush up, change of clothes, you need a beer to relax....



We headed into a large square for an evening meal in Zilina. Much of the menu was translated into English, but a few dishes didn't make any sense at all. To play safe, orders were primarily burgers, fish or steaks. Simon and Alex choose cheese burgers – something you could feel safe with...

The waitress brought the food to the table and the cheese burgers didn't appear to have been cooked properly. The burger was still a very pale colour – Simon questioned the waitress saying that he didn't want a chicken burger he wanted cheese burger. She insisted this was a cheese burger, exactly as he ordered.

It was a whole round of camembert style cheese, warmed and placed between two buns! A genuine cheese burger with no meat!



As we finished our meal and were drinking coffee/beer etc., storm clouds appeared on the horizon with occasional flashes of lightning. "Don't worry guys, I think the storm will pass us by" says Eamonn



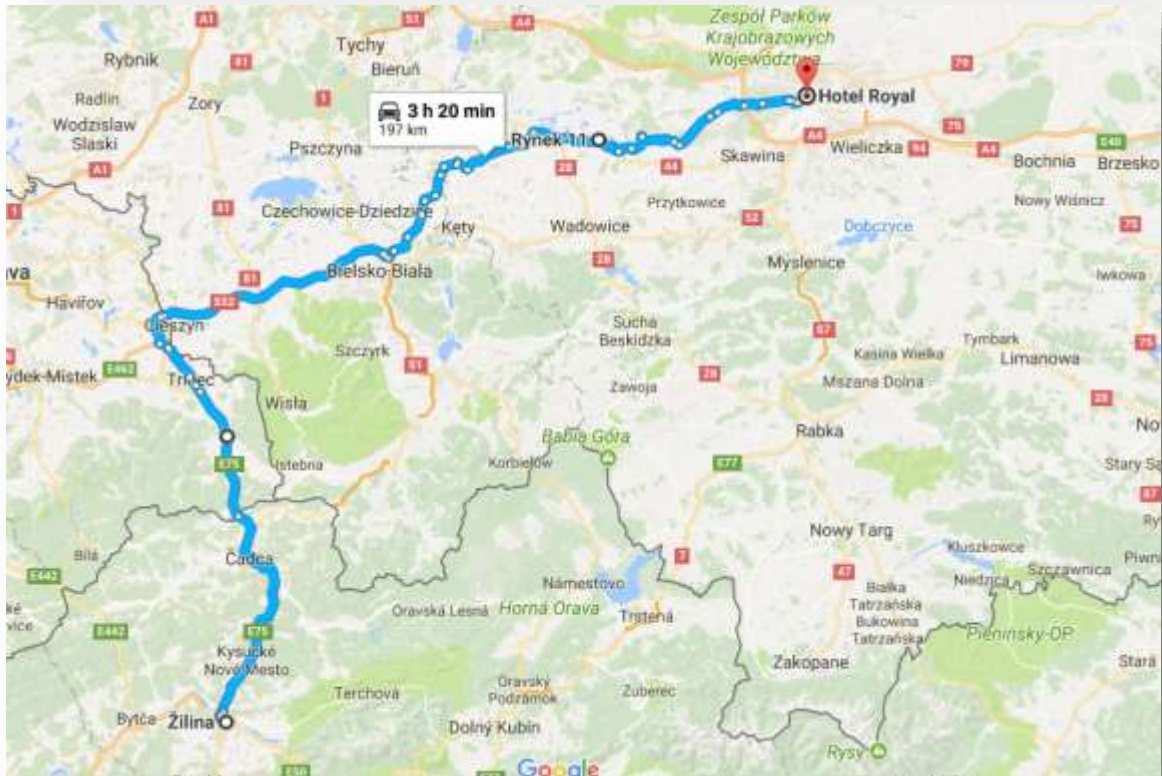
Immediately followed by a strong gust of wind and a large quantity of water held in the parasol above the table being dumped onto Eamonn! Oh, how we all laughed.....!

That night Alex felt seriously ill, we were very close to calling in a doctor as the volume of cheese didn't agree with him. Although still feeling rough in the morning, we got by....

Centre of Zilina with large open area just right for concerts and military parades!



Day 4 – 8th July – Zilina to Krakow



We left Zilina together, but somehow ended up in two groups again with Alex and Brian together and Eamonn, two Mike's and Simon forming the second group.

With Mike E navigating, we decided to go across country and avoid the motorways. A refuel was necessary and we pulled into a petrol station, two men stood leaning against the fuel pumps talking to someone in a car, clearly in no hurry to either serve or move on. On seeing us, one of the men makes a throat-cut signal... Mike wisely decides there's something wrong here and we leave the petrol station without asking any questions.

A few miles down the road we find another petrol station and pull in, this time it's clearly self-service and no-one else about. However, we found the pumps didn't work! The shop attendant came running over and said something very comprehensive in her native language.. it became apparent that the whole area was in the middle of a power cut and nothing was working. We moved on...

Further along we found a third petrol station, but this time people were filling up so there was power here! We refuelled and had a quick coffee as there had been a rain shower and by staying a short time the shower would be out of our way.

The ride through the forestry area was excellent, lots of swooping bends and rises and falls in the road. Some hairpins caught us out now and then, but mostly you could see some way ahead. With road conditions like this, the two Mikes led out front to enjoy the bends whilst Simon and I tagged on the back as best we could with the taller adventure-bike styled machines. A couple of sandy strips in the middle of a corner caused the front to drift, but generally it was a good ride for all.

Not sure why we got separated again on consecutive days! But we did!

This time Alex and Brian went through the country taking some very small roads. Signs saying snow tyres beyond this point didn't deter us and we saw some amazing scenery. Gravel on the roads with potholes was a concern but we weaved our way through.



We passed the border control from Slovakia to Poland which was abandoned and to be honest looked more like a drug run route!

We eventually came down out the mountains to the main road and stopped for fuel and food, where the others suddenly came along from a different direction!

We were all together for the rainy trip into Krakow

In the old centre of Krakow:



Evening in Krakow centre. Restaurant was plagued with horse and carriage trips going by every few minutes, but good food even though we managed to accidentally switch the meals between ourselves!
In the background (above) is St Mary's church where the trumpet calls out every hour.



Fireman ceremony

After the evening meal we walked back to the main square to view the activities in progress. There appeared to be large numbers of firemen standing around waiting for something. Within an arena in the centre, a performance was taking place with a group of dancers – these were then joined by the firemen marching through and around the arena. It appears that it was a celebration recognising the support of the fire services.

A similar event was to be seen in Saint-Omer later in the trip.



Late night beers in Krakow Centre:





Hotel Royal in Krakow.
Just a short walk from the hotel
into the old town centre.

A private carpark at the back of
the hotel was used for the bikes
so there were safely locked up
for the two days we were in
Krakow.

Simon wasn't impressed with his
room – reckoned it was
previously used by Frankenstein
as his laboratory!

Day 5 – 9th July – Schindler's Factory and Auschwitz

Today was a unique day on the trip – no riding, just “tourists” visits.

First off was a trip to the factory where Oskar Schindler employed over 1,000 Jews in order to prevent them being put into concentration camps run by the Nazis. It was a 30 minute walk from the hotel to the museum on a day that was promising to be very hot!

Little is left of the original factory, the bulk of the site is given over to an exhibition showing the wartime experiences of those living in Krakow during WW2.

Factory entrance:



Oskar Schindler's desk:



Following the museum visit, we took an electric cart ride and tour of some city highlights to get back to the main square in Krakow Centre.



The tour guide took us through a number of notable locations including the last remaining section of the wall that encompassed the Jewish Ghetto and the only pharmacy the Jews were allowed to access (where food, medicine and falsified documents could be obtained).



On returning to the old square in Krakow centre (Europe's largest medieval square) we had lunch at a restaurant next to St Mary's church, where every hour a trumpet calls out from an upper window of the church tower. The trumpet call is named the "Heynal" and has been played every hour throughout the day for over 600 years.

Afternoon visit to Auschwitz

After lunch, we assembled at the front of our hotel to be collected by minibus for trip to Auschwitz. None of us knew really what to expect other than the stories we had heard from others about how emotional they felt.

The bus journey was just over an hour during which a video was shown giving an overview of the camp and images from the liberation carried out by the Russian army at the end of the war. Some members of our group missed large sections of the presentation as they were busy snoring.... Perhaps a visit just after lunch wasn't a brilliant time!

On arrival at Auschwitz, an English speaking tour guide was organised and we bypassed the queues of people waiting to get in.

The tour consisted of visiting each of the significant buildings that showed the journey of an arrival at the camp, from the disembarking of the wagons through the various assessments and ultimately either the work house or the gas chamber.

The numbers of people who suffered the Nazi system were incomprehensible, some of the exhibits were truly shocking to view bearing in mind we only saw a small part of what was left after the liberation of the camp.



This is the entrance to Auschwitz

Our group with our guide on the far right of the picture.



Just inside the entrance to Auschwitz, there was a bandstand – music was played to the new arrivals to relax them and reassure them that this was not a place to be fearful...



Model of the gas chambers and adjacent crematorium



The second camp to be built at Auschwitz was 30 times larger than the first. Very little remains of the camp as it was mostly built of wooden structures that are no longer in existence – only the foundations and chimney stacks remain. Some blocks were built of brick and one of these is open to visit.

The approach to Auschwitz-Birkenau



One of the wagons used to transport up to 100 prisoners at a time to the camp, no food and water and the average journey time was 4 days:



The remains of one of the four crematorium at Birkenau (after the Nazis had it destroyed):



Some of the remaining huts:



4 lipca 1947 roku ustawą polskiego Sejmu na podstawie dwóch zachowanych części obozu: Auschwitz I i Auschwitz II - Birkenau utworzono Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim - Brzezinka. W 1979 roku miejsca te wpisano na Listę Obiektów Światowego Dziedzictwa UNESCO.

OKAŻ SWÓJ SZACUNEK ZACHOWUJĄC SIĘ W SPOSÓB GODNY, NALEŻNY PAMIĘCI TYCH, KTÓRZY TUTAJ CIERPIELI I GINĘLI.

Throughout the world, Auschwitz has become a symbol of terror, genocide, and the Holocaust. The German forces occupying Poland during the Second World War established a concentration camp, on the outskirts of the town of Oświęcim, in 1940; the Germans called the town Auschwitz and that is the name by which the camp was known. Over the next years it was expanded into three main camps: Auschwitz I, Auschwitz II-Birkenau, and Auschwitz III-Monowitz and more than forty subcamps. The first people to be brought to Auschwitz as prisoners and murdered here were Poles. They were followed by Soviet prisoners of war, Gypsies and deportees of many other nationalities. Beginning in 1942, however, Auschwitz became the setting for the most massive murder campaign in history, when the Nazis put into operation their plan to destroy the entire Jewish population of Europe. The great majority of Jews who were deported to Auschwitz - men, women, and children - were sent immediately upon arrival to death in the gas chambers of Birkenau. When the SS realised that the end of the war was near, they attempted to remove the evidence of the atrocities committed here. They dismantled the gas chambers, crematoria, and other buildings, burned documents, and evacuated all those prisoners who could walk to the Interior of Germany. Those who were not evacuated were liberated by the Red Army on January 27, 1945.

On July 2, 1947, the Polish Parliament established the State Museum of Oświęcim - Brzezinka on the sites of the former camps at Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau. In 1979 these camps were formally recognized by UNESCO by their inclusion on its World Heritage List.

PLEASE BEHAVE APPROPRIATELY, RESPECTING THE MEMORY OF THOSE WHO SUFFERED AND DIED HERE.

ברחבי העולם נעשת השם "אושוויץ" סמל לרצח-עם בכלל, לשואת העם היהודי בפרט ולטרור אכזרי. הגרמנים העניקו ב-1940, לאחר שכבשו את פולין בתחילת מלחמת-העולם השנייה, הקימו הגרמנים כאן, בתחומי העיר אושוויינצ'ים, מחנה ריכוז. הגרמנים העניקו

Day 6 – 10th July – Krakow to Prague



Brian, Mike E and Simon decided to get up early and get on the road to Prague, Alex, Eamonn and Mike I decided on a later breakfast and ride through the forestry areas to Prague.

Eamonn had some Czech notes provided by his wife from a visit she made to Prague a few years ago. Although only amounting to about £6, it would still be useful to have some local currency for snacks etc. Having stopped for fuel, a small seated area near a shop was spotted so Eamonn, Alex and Mike decided to take a quick lunch break. It was a hot day and bottles of cold drink were the order of the day – Coke, Sprite etc. were seen to be around the 20 Korona price and since Eamonn had six 50 Korona notes that would be fine. We selected the drinks went to the till and handed over the Korona notes. The girl on the till shook her head.... “No” she said, clearly she would accept our money. Eamonn offered Zloty’s as we’d only just left Polish territory, “No” she said..... Eamonn offered her Euros, “No” she said..... Eamonn tried once more with the Korona notes, by this time her two colleagues were also in attendance – “No” she said, “All finished!”. It seems the notes I had were out of date by 5 years, the currency had changed. Mike I paid by card, Eamonn waved the 300 Koronas he had and confirmed these were useless, the girls burst in laughter.... The English were hopelessly out of date!

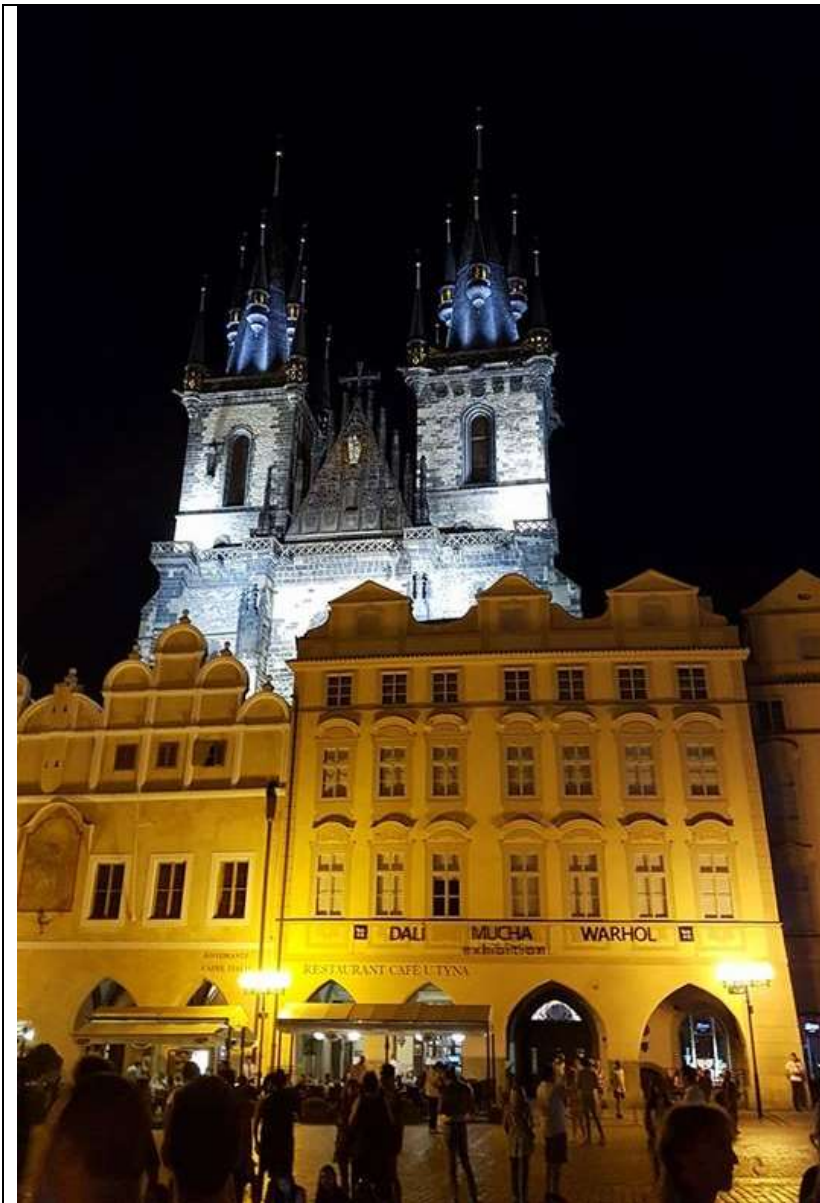
The Salvator Boutique hotel in Prague – no space for the bikes to be safely parked here, but they had an arrangement with a nearby hotel to use their car park. So a short ride to a different hotel for parking!



Prague restaurant in the evening:



In the old town area of Prague:



Church of Our Lady Before Tyn

A gothic style church built in the 14th century and completed in 1511

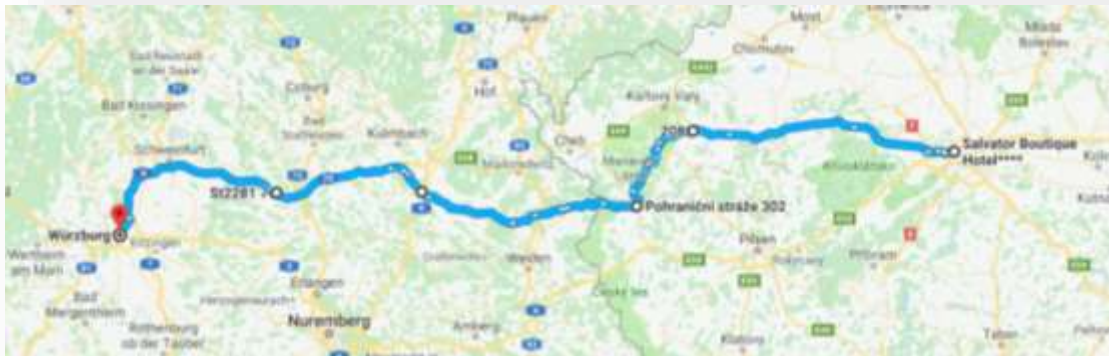


Prague Astronomical Clock

Installed in 1410 it is the third oldest astronomical clock in the world and the oldest one still working.

The clock mechanism itself has three main components: the astronomical dial, representing the position of the Sun and Moon in the sky and displaying various astronomical details; "The Walk of the Apostles", a clockwork hourly show of figures of the Apostles and other moving sculptures—notably a figure of Death (represented by a skeleton) striking the time; and a calendar dial with medallions representing the months. According to local legend, the city will suffer if the clock is neglected and its good operation is placed in jeopardy; a ghost, mounted on the clock, was supposed to nod its head in confirmation.

Day 7 – 11th July – Prague to Wurzburg



Arriving into Würzburg, we spotted a fair in town – perhaps worthy of a visit later...



Hotel Meesenburg

Unpacked, met up with the early group and settled down to meals of beef burgers and steaks. Alex had a glass of wine spilt over him by the waiter who apologised profusely and donated a replacement bottle (albeit not full!) as compensation. Alex wasn't too disappointed...

After the evening meal, the late group decided to walk a bit of the dinner off and crossed the bridge to the fun-fair.



"Let's go on the ferris wheel" says Alex... So Alex, Eamonn and Mike I jump on after Alex has paid for us all. As the wheel starts to rotate, Alex announces he doesn't like heights and he'd be concentrating on the very centre of the seat we're sitting in and not looking outside. What a time to remember...!

After a couple of rotations, Alex relaxed and appeared to be enjoying the ride, then Mike found how to make the whole seat rotate, Alex wasn't keen on this!

View from the top of the ferris wheel looking down into the fair.



Skyfall

"I've done one of these before" says Alex, why don't you two go on and I'll take a picture...

Mike and Eamonn fall for this old trick and jump on the machinery only to reconsider whether this was really a good idea just after a meal – too late now!

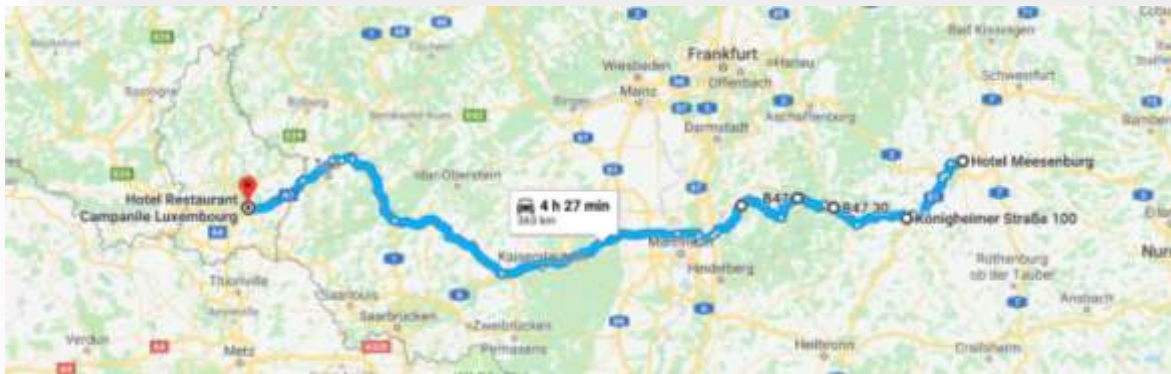
The Skyfall device lifted the chair section 80 metres above the ground and after a random delay, dropped the carriage down in a free fall stopping just before the bottom.

Fortunately, neither Eamonn nor Mike suffered any revisits of the evening meal.



Day 8 – 12th July – Wurzburg to Luxemburg

After



After breakfast in the hotel, Brian, Simon and Mike E left to head directly for Luxembourg whilst Alex, Eamonn and Mike I left a little later and headed across country to enjoy some of the forest roads.

The forest roads made for superb scenery on the ride through with very little traffic to impede progress. One notable exception was a hot-hatch that didn't appear to want anyone to overtake. Mike took his opportunity and went past, I started to prepare for an overtake but then noticed our speed was well into 3 figures. At that point I thought it best to follow the car as he clearly knew the road and provided a good guide as to where the road went. After a few miles of high speed, the car peeled off leaving Alex and I to connect up with Mike.

During the journey, our riding skills must have been noticed by the local German police. We made such an impression that they even took photos of us as we passed one of their special cameras!

On the journey we passed through Worms, and we crossed the river Rhine via a spectacular bridge. This looks to be a place that we should return to again in the future.

Hotel Campanile in Luxembourg



As the hotel was some way out of the town centre, we had our evening meal in the hotel restaurant. A few beers beforehand, just to unwind of course! We met an English couple who were travelling through Europe on an old Lambretta scooter, they were staying at the hotel that night as they had a puncture that was being repaired. Didn't sound a very comfortable journey, but they were happy riding along at 40 mph and taking in the scenery.

Day 9 – 13th July – Luxemburg to Saint-Omer



Shortly after leaving the Hotel Campanile, we came across a bikers café where we stopped for an early coffee. In talking to the owner, we found he was an ex-Belgian army motorcycle outrider. Under covers to one side was an older style BMW twin. He told us he wasn't able to ride the bike at present as he was recovering from a snake bite that he had suffered last year. He showed us pictures of the original bite and infection – it was truly horrendous. He was confident that the doctors would confirm he'd be OK to ride again within the next few months.

The Arden forest roads were beautiful – mixtures of sunshine and shade with both straights and twisties made for an interesting ride.

Lunch stop felt like it was in the middle of nowhere! We found a roadside café that looked popular judging by the vehicles outside it, but it was so popular they couldn't take us, so we carried on. We stopped in La Capelle where we found a bar (Le Grand Cerf) that served food and had space for us. After beers and burgers, we continued our journey to the Canadian National Vimy Memorial. A huge monument with views across the landscape, it was easy to see why this ridge was of strategic importance during World War 1

Vimy Ridge:

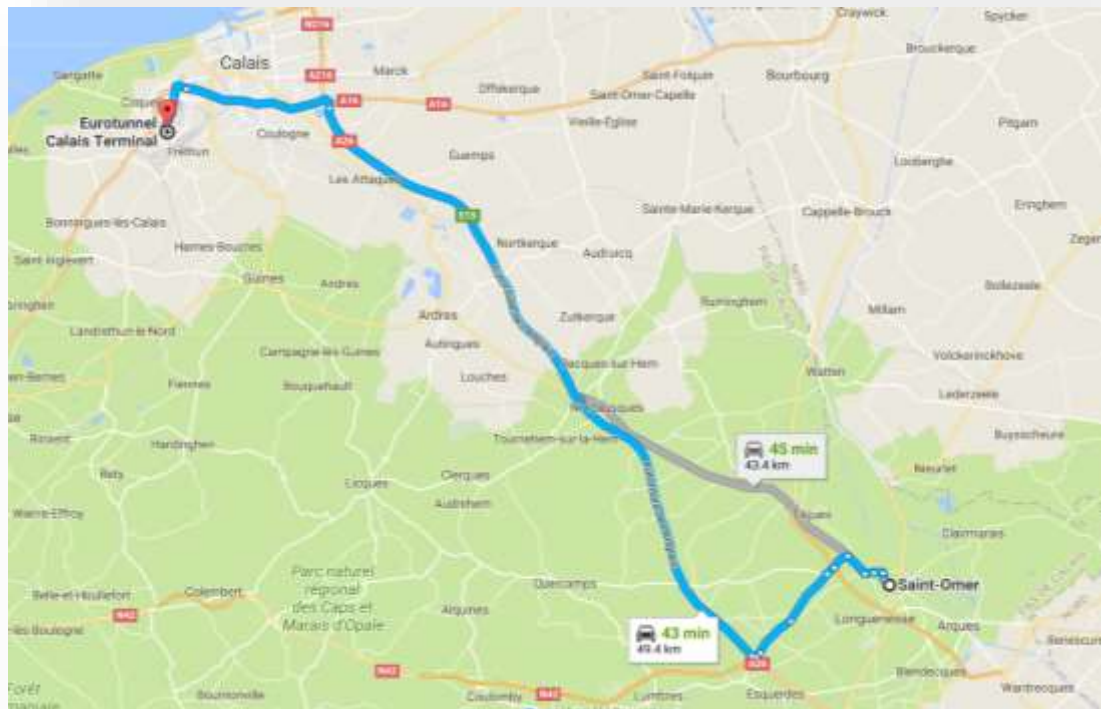


With Eamonn and Mike in front of the monument, you get some idea of the size.

Following the visit to the monument, we headed to the last hotel of the trip at Saint-Omer. Having checked in and changed out of the riding clothes we headed into town for food. We met up with Brian, Mike E and Simon in the town square at Restaurant La Terrasse. There was a lot of activity in the square with some form of event going on with lots of firemen, a music truck and loads of local people. Apparently it was some form of public recognition of the services that the firemen provide to the locality. We found a bar and had a few drinks of course!



Day 10 – 14th July – Return Home



After breakfast we packed the bags onto the bikes for the last time of this holiday and left the hotel for the short journey to the Eurotunnel. As we left it just started to rain lightly.

At the first toll both we stopped to put on the waterproofs as the rain was getting worse. After the usual struggle with waterproofs the weather then improved within a few miles and the sun shone again!

Brian had an earlier train ticket (10:50 departure), but decided to come with the rest of the group on the 11:20 departure. When checking in, since he had missed his 10:50 booking, the automated system allocated him space on the 11:50 departure! Somehow Brian “lost” this ticket on his way to the waiting zone and so had to accompany the whole group on the 11:20 train....

Mike I initially led some of us into the car waiting area, but we found a pedestrian access to the bike waiting area and used this to cross from one to the other, probably confused a few officials!



Bikes on the Eurotunnel train for the return journey.



Eamonn was put into a separate carriage and ended up having a lengthy discussion with a rider from Nottinghamshire about his journey through Germany.

A final goodbye to Mike I as he was heading directly home to Gillingham, the rest of us left the tunnel, quick refill of the tanks and headed for Berkshire to a lunch stop at The Old Bell and then on to our respective homes.

--- End of Report ---