

'IT'S TOTAL RIDING BLISS'

Step away from Croatia's boozy beaches and you'll find some of the best roads in Europe



Away from the coast the Croatian landscape turns lunar but with perfectly tarmac'd roads

By Jordan Gibbons
SENIOR REPORTER

“They used to sit up here on the hillside and fire mortars at the people in the town,” I’m told as I shovel food into my mouth. Not a line from Thomas Cook’s latest brochure admittedly, but the arresting truth of Croatia’s all-too-recent history. If you’ve not gazed east just yet, Croatia is going through something of a tourist renaissance. But there’s so much more to Croatia than sports bars and stag-do hangovers, it’s also home to some of the finest riding roads in the world.

Riding heaven

Heading out of Split, on Croatia’s southern coast, there are two riding options. You can head along the coast road, which is a well-ridden path but packed with drivers glued to their phones, or you can head up into mountains towards Bosnia. I decide to skip the dicey drivers and head for the hills.

It isn’t long before the tarmac begins to climb and the traffic thins out. Within 20 minutes, I have the road to myself. Well myself and The Cult, who are currently blaring out of the stereo as I pick up speed and work my way alongside the Svilaja mountains, towards Vrljika. It’s here that I get my first proper taste of Croatia’s roads.

Once you’re up in the hills, it’s virtually just one big road and it traces an unbelievable path through the rock-strewn moonscape. The road surface is perfect bar the odd bit of sand and the corners flow beautifully one after the other. For mile after mile, the road flips between following the contours of the land and cutting a path through it. It is absolute riding perfection. The road rises steadily until you’re up on the high plains and you can just about make out the Adriatic sea twinkling in the distance. Its cooling breeze long replaced by the oppressive heat of the midday sun. I’m in a stupor of riding bliss until reality suddenly bites.

Having climbed to the highest point of the day, I approach a corner at a fair old speed. I just about clock

a road sign on the way in but the advice it offers disappears out of my mind in an instant. You see Croatia is jam-packed full of twisty roads and to help you gauge just how twisty the next corner is, they stick up signs with recommended speeds. 60kph you don’t really need to slow down, 40kph you probably need to throttle off and 20kph you need to throw out an anchor.

As the corner looms, it becomes desperately clear that the sign I had seen and not taken in said 20. Rats. I grab as much front brake as I dare but the corner is getting closer. Bigger. I stomp on the rear brake pedal of my Harley Street Glide with all my might but I am now well into the corner. S**t. I let off, look around the bend, and begin to wrestle all 361kg of this behemoth around the turn. The tyres groan, the bars rumble, the footboards scrape and the chassis shimmies but I just about

● **‘The road traces a path through the rock-strewn moonscape’**

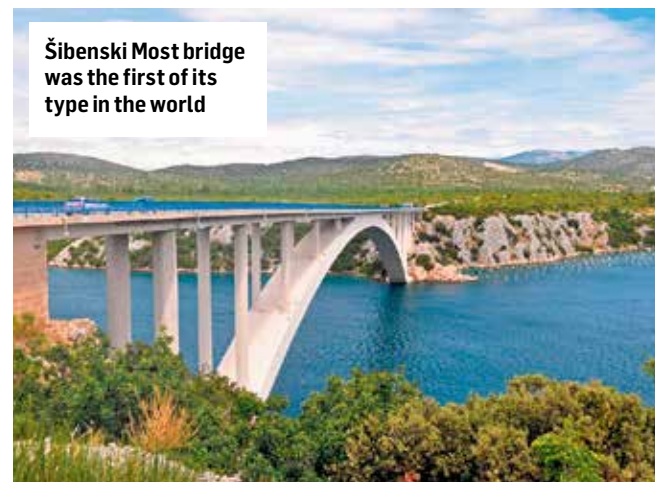
make it round. I’m clearly in need of sustenance and a coffee, or failing that a good slap. Mercifully, as I turn down the mountain, the illuminated sign for a roadside café shimmers in the distance. I stop at once.

Unlike in the UK, where a roadside food stop is usually either a Little Chef or dodgy wagon serving burgers and botulism, Croatian cafés are a veritable feast for the senses. Outside this one is a pig slowly rotating on a spit, its skin cracking and spluttering from the intense heat. Sitting astride my own Hog, my thighs roasting either side of the air-cooled big twin, I think I know how it feels. I take a seat in the shade, point at pictures

Continued over



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Šibenski Most bridge was the first of its type in the world



Dodge the coast and it's deserted



Rusting tanks are a grizzly reminder of civil war



You don't get this at the Little Chef



Sweeping bends abound out here

on the menu and wait for the food to arrive. I devour plate after plate of fabulously cooked dishes, slathered in butter and salt. I gulp down pint after pint of Coke, yet still more food and drink arrives. Soon I am fit to burst yet, like Mr Creosote, I manage just one 'wafer thin' crepe. The bill arrives: £8. It's safe to say even at the halfway point, that I am liking Croatia.

Bitter memories

Darting out of Vrlika, it's like I'm taking the Street Glide on a tarmac roller coaster. The road pitches up and down, left and right. I speed up and hit the crests like a giddy schoolboy, delighting in the weightlessness as my full stomach lurches up and down. Then I get carried away (again) and before long I crash back down to earth with a thump. The Harley floats along nicely, but it doesn't like the landing. Soon the road opens out arrow straight, stretching out of sight and disappearing into nothingness.

It's like I've ridden onto the set of *Mad Max*. I crack the throttle and unleash the full might of the staggering twin. Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth. The scenery is shooting by in a blur until in the distance something catches my eye and I throttle off. Resting at the side of the road, as if it has just paused for breath, is a tank. The barrel of the

● 'Like taking the Hog on a tarmac roller coaster'

gun is staring straight down the road, agape at my arrival. I return the favour by staring right back at it, agape at its existence.

Cruising further down the road, I ride through a town that still bears the scars of the civil war during the 1990s. The houses at the crossroads are peppered with bullet holes down one side, as if that T-72 from a few miles back had pulled up and sprayed everything it could from a standstill before driving off.

It's one of the truly mind-boggling things about Croatia, especially for someone too young to remember the war. It's not like the UK where there's a nice end of town and a slightly rougher end. You ride through villages and see houses still obliterated by bomb damage, next door to beautiful villas. A few

doors down again there will be a shop and after that, a building that was started 20 years ago and never finished. Some damage has been deliberately preserved as a memorial but plenty of it has just never been repaired.

Once out of Knin, it's a chase back down towards the coastline again and the mercy of its cooling breeze. This end of the coast road is breathtaking. I can barely keep my eyes on the road, so I stop for another coffee by a bridge and watch the water gently lap against the cliffs. I manage to rouse myself once more for the final few miles back towards Split, before parking up for good by a bar at the water's edge. I finish the day like the rest of the visitors, sipping a beer on the beach and bathing in sunshine. **MCN**



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Damage from the fighting is still evident

NOW DO IT YOURSELF

I rode the route on a Harley-Davidson Street Glide, which was a delightful match for the Croatian roads. It also has an in-built GPS, which is helpful for finding your way around. The nearest Harley-Davidson dealer that offers rentals is in Austria, and a tourer will cost you around £1500 for the week. If you want to ride your own bike you can get there in a few days, or use a service such as BikeShuttle, who will take your bike as far as Geneva for £465 return. It's then just a case of riding over the Alps and down through Croatia.

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