

Motorcycles and Guns

1964. I was just a year out of University, worked hard, saved up some money and quit my job. I had a very severe case of wanderlust that could only be cured in one way - by wandering. I still suffer from that and I'm compelled to seek treatment from time to time.

In those days, air fares were regulated by governments, very expensive and based on the distance travelled. No bargains. I took the shortest transatlantic hop in a Douglas DC8 from Montreal to Shannon for \$500 including an open-dated return; that's like \$5000 in today's dollars.

Now to the motorcycle tale. I arrived in Belfast on an old pedal bike that I bought in Limerick, near the airport. Europe is a small place on a Canadian scale but as seen from the saddle of a bicycle it was a big place that I was impatient to see. It called for a motorbike.

My nose pressed against the window of a Belfast motorcycle shop, a long, narrow little store that was just packed with used bikes. I was hooked. Inside, the bikes were so jammed together that you couldn't get to the other end without climbing over them. The old guy came out of his corner office at the back and I called out to him. "I want to buy a motorcycle."

"NO no no no, I will not buy another motorcycle!"

"No! - I want to buy a motorcycle"

A big smile lit up his face, "Ooooooh, come right in sir!"

This place could have been the British Motorcycle Museum, except no such place existed. He had every British bike from the popular BSAs, Triumphs, Matchless and Nortons up to the Ariels, Vincents and Broughs. My need was for a basic and reliable machine, so I took away a 1950 BSA model B31, a single cylinder 350cc commuter. A basic, bullet-proof machine for £18.

The guy had missed the signals and he was trapped inside his excess inventory. The British people had survived the depression, the war and years of gas rationing after the war. Now the Austin Mini was on offer from England, the Beetle from Germany, the Citroën 2CV from France and the Fiat 500 from Italy. Inexpensive cars, everybody was dumping their old motorcycles.

I had an idea that the bike should be properly registered in my name, but when I tried to do this, they required that I should have a Northern Ireland address to register the bike in Northern Ireland. So, I gave them the address of Canada House, the Canadian Consulate in Belfast. OK, that was accepted; ah those were the days.

The bike carried me through Scotland and down to London, while I worked on the little detail of keeping to the left. Only one failure when I swerved into a parking spot at Edinburgh Castle and narrowly missed getting smeared by an oncoming truck. The driver was alert and quick on the brake pedal. Thanks for that.

London traffic was a challenge, but drivers were orderly and disciplined and I didn't feel threatened, though I did park the machine at the youth hostel, Holland House, and I rode the tube and the buses.

My English rides showed me why I got the bike for £18; there were a lot of old bikes on the roads, many of them with sidecars. The sidecars were often extra wide and fully enclosed against the rain, with room enough for mom and the kids to keep dry while dad, wrapped in his Mackintosh, rode in the rain. Motorcycles were marks of hardship and poverty. The Austin Mini was the object of desire, the symbol of success.

Crossing the Channel on a British Rail ferry, I got a lesson on the quality of British imperial arrogance. I sat at the bar with my hand wrapped around a beer. A Frenchman sat on a nearby stool and asked for "une bière s'il vous plaît". He was ignored, repeated his request a few times until the bartender lost his patience and shouted into the Frenchman's face "Speak English!" I translated for him and he at last got his beer. This on an international ferry between England and France.

From the youth hostel in Boulogne-Sur-Mer I headed south toward Paris. At the first village I observed many people walking or riding bicycles with the day's fresh bread sticking out of a basket. We have all seen that iconic French picture in the travel ads. I headed toward the direction they were coming from until I found the boulangerie. This became a morning routine, repeated every day until it became well fixed in my memory, - the early morning air cool and fresh, the bike wet with dew rumbling along the road, the throttle control in my right hand, a fresh baguette in my left, undiluted by any tartinade, fromage or café. Ah, que c'est bon!

Paris enchanted me from the very first sight, though the traffic was intimidating. I rode south until I came to the Rue de Rivoli next to the river Seine and then pulled out my Paris map. The way to the youth hostel in Courbevoie in the north-western suburbs was a long and very challenging urban obstacle course. When I got there I parked the machine in the back yard and never touched it until it was time to leave town. Paris became my home base in Europe, the place where I must still go from time to time to recharge my spiritual battery.

South again down the Vallée de la Rhône to Avignon, Marseille, Toulon, Cannes, Nice, Monaco and up into the French Alps and on to Switzerland. Riding in the mountains was a grand adventure, summer in the valleys, winter ice and snow in the high passes. Then back to Paris.



St Gotthard Pass, Switzerland. One of the world's greatest motorcycles rides.

In the hostel I met this Scottish guy, David Faulk who had an idea. With an eye on my motorbike, he proposed a ride to Spain where we could buy antique guns cheap and bring them back for sale in Paris. Spain at the time suffered under the Fascist dictatorship of Generalissimo Francisco Franco and was considered to be more North African than European. “Europe ends at the Pyrenees!” David’s argument was: “Look, the Spaniards have been shooting each other for centuries; there will be lots of guns.” So, why not? We rode south toward Spain.

A story was going around in the French Youth Hostels about a young man who was caught smuggling drugs in Spain. He was sentenced to be garrotted, but the sentence was reduced on appeal to life in prison. True or not, the story represented well the popular view of Spain in those days.

Time has blurred the travel details, but some strong impressions remain clear. The power of the Fascist regime, partnered with the dominant religion was every bit as bad as predicted, but the people were ever gracious, generous and welcoming.

Some lasting impressions, in no particular order:

We walked into a small shop; I think it was in Pamplona. Looking for some directions, David and I both had our English and French but no Spanish. The shopkeeper pulled us out to the street, drew down the shutter and led us to the place we were looking for. A handshake, a “bienvenidos en España” and he returned to his shop.

A lot of mopeds in Spain, but we never saw a real motorcycle, and donkeys were as common as mopeds. One young lad who saw us coming called out to his friends – “Mire, un camión!” (“Look, a truck”).

A typical bar scene, when we dropped in for a lunch and a glass of wine: A small group of older men were sitting together, chatting quietly. Some were drinking from burettas, that’s a glass container with a long, narrow spout. They raised and tipped the buretta and gradually drew it away to arm’s length, skillfully directing the wine into the open mouth; it made a loud splashing sound. A single bare light bulb hung from the ceiling. A picture on the wall of Jesus in a rustic frame, a crown of thorns, his eyes looking up to Heaven. On the opposite wall, a picture of Franco in his General’s uniform looking down sternly upon the drinkers.

Sitting in a sidewalk café, we saw two Guardia Civil officers approaching, uniformed officers with their shiny black patent leather hats. All conversation stopped, eyes were averted from them, looking down at the tables. The officers passed by and conversation resumed.

We stopped in a small village whose name has fallen out of the rolodex in my brain. A dusty street of low buildings facing a big stone wall that enclosed a big house. People were in the street, all dressed up in their twenty-dollar suits, celebrating the harvest.

They put glasses of wine in our hands and drew us into the tavern where we found more people and music and more wine. We accepted their generous hospitality, but not wanting to make a day of it, we moved soon out to our bike, a crowd following to see us off. A big Mercedes car slipped past, toward the gated wall. This was the owner of the big house, and effectively the owner of all these people who were his tenants.

We parked our bike in the plaza of a small village and took a room in the inn; these places usually cost a dollar or two. In the morning we came out; our bike was still there and a uniformed man was watching it. Were we parked illegally here? No, not illegal, but there was a parking charge. He wrote us a ticket and collected three pesetas, about five cents Canadian.

We found our guns, here and there in small shops; the line between junk store and antiquary is not very distinct. The guns were mostly small pistols, double barrelled with triggers that folded up so that you could shove them under your belt or into your pocket without shooting yourself. When you drew back the hammers, they locked in position and the triggers descended, ready for action. They cost us about two or three dollars each and we knew they would bring a much higher price in Paris. There is no ammunition in existence that would work in these guns, but that's OK, we didn't really want to shoot anyone.



We got as many guns as we could handle and turned our Beeza to the north, toward Paris. The bike served me very well and reinforced the reputation that BSA had for reliability. In all that time I hadn't had a problem and never put a wrench to it except to adjust chains. Now, after some hard riding with a heavy load, it was starting to seize up when I pushed it too hard. Overheating, scored cylinder, that was my diagnosis, but I had no tools, no access to parts, no way to go on except to go slowly and gently. It was getting embarrassing because the mopeds were passing us as we geared down and crept up the hills.

High in the Pyrénées near the French border, the front tire went flat. A shivering cold October rain, gentle but persistent, a clapped out engine, a flat tire, what to do?

In Spain the people were gracious and welcoming, but their Fascist government was quite something else. We wanted nothing to do with them, no reports, no questions about a motorcycle brought into Spain and abandoned by guys who were buying guns. To our left the Rio Bidasoa below a steep hill, hidden by trees; we could hear it tumbling through rapids. To our right, a near vertical wall of stone. We pushed the bike over the side and heard it clattering far down from the road. We hitch-hiked back to Paris.

Hitching was easy in those days; mass tourism hadn't yet arrived and people were genuinely interested in meeting the young adventurers from far away. In Paris, we opted for a real hotel in the Latin Quarter, close to the centre, cost about five dollars. Our old hostel was far away and infested with bedbugs; we were now international businessmen and we could afford five dollars for a decent room with no bugs.

How good was the welcome in Paris? We bought some lunch stuff in a shop, sat down in a sidewalk café on Boul Mich, ordered beers and unwrapped our food. The waiter brought our beers, plates, cutlery and serviettes. I don't think you can do that anymore.

We two international businessmen were pretty much out of cash, so we took a blanket and some of our guns from the hotel and set up shop in front of the bouquinistes at the river bank. They didn't seem to mind our presence there, maybe because they were sellers of books, not guns. Then the policeman came along.

Oh! We hadn't really thought about this. Is it possible that we are breaking some laws? I mean, two foreigners sitting on the curb and selling guns in the streets of Paris, there may be some issues here. We just looked at each other with that "whaaaaat?" look on our faces. We were international businessmen, not lawyers.

The policeman towered over us and looked down on the evidence. Then he announced to us – "you cannot do that here. You must go to the flea market at Clignacourt on the weekend."

"Oui m'sieu" we picked up the corners of our blanket and hauled our stuff back to the hotel. We had made some sales and had enough cash to see us through to the weekend. At Clignacourt our inventory sold quickly and profitably.

Now I am the owner of another BSA B31 that called out to me on Kijiji. It's quite weatherbeaten and hasn't turned a wheel in fifty years. I will restore it. Not really a believer in Karma, but I remain concerned that I once had a B31 that served me faithfully and carried me to some of the great adventures of my life. Then I murdered it when it became an inconvenient burden.



Spain 1964, David Faulk threatens the photographer with his unloaded pistol

