Biker's love for the Alps made him a million-mile man

by Joe Michaud

One million miles on a motorcycle?

Do that math. That's 1 million motorcycle miles. At a thousand miles a week, that's a 20-year quest. Not many riders will ever approach this.

KING OF THE ALPS - John Hermann has ridden 1 million miles on BMW motorcycles. Behind him is a road sign from the highest road in Austria. CNS Photo by Scott Linnett. But John Hermann has the trophy from BMW of North America to verify his claim. An additional award came from BMW Motorcycle Owners Association - a pin for his leathers stating the million-mile status of its wearer.

Mileage must be verified via legitimate shop service records or some other unimpeachable source. Most members of the Million Mile Club are "Iron-Butt Rally" riders. Iron Butt endurance events require epic time in the saddle, often at speed, and they are not Hermann's cup of tea. His method is presenting his rental bike receipts from his twice-a-year European trips into the Alps that started in 1975.

For the first four to five years, Hermann kept a U.S.-registered bike in Germany. But after his K75 gave up the ghost in Switzerland, he signed for his first Euro rental. After putting 5,000 kilometers on that bike, he never brought his bike back over.

"European dealers are prohibited from selling American-spec bikes in Europe," he says. "You can certainly buy a Euro-spec bike over there, but what do you do with it? You're not a resident so you can't register it, and you can't bring it home. I might as well use the rental rubber, plus I don't have to worry if there's a problem."

Hermann prefers renting. Shipping your own motorcycle to Europe, plus providing your own tires and maintenance is equal to the costs of renting a bike. And those costs are only a bit more than automobile rates. Simply rent a new bike and enjoy your ride.

Hermann estimates that he has ridden the Alps 60 times. A popular destination is the Grossglockner, the highest road in Austria. The road passes through the little town of Heilingenblut, the sister city of Julian, Calif.

One day in Lakeside, Calif., Hermann was discussing his many trips with restaurant manager Franz Dorninger, who is Austrian. Dorninger asked how many trips John had made through Heilingenblut.

Hermann says, "I told him at least 50 or 60 times, so he wrote to Austria and said, 'I've got this guy here in San Diego ... '"

About a month later, when an Austrian contingent visited Julian during a U.S. tour, they brought Hermann a galvanized sign - the altitude sign from Heilingenblut.

Hermann has recently fallen in love with Corsica.

"The Corsicans have resisted outside development, so everything is owned by the locals," he says. "You can stay at a gorgeous white-sand beach for about $80 a night."

Touring leaves the rider at the mercy of the local weather. Rain is always a factor. It can snow, too.

"We got caught in a snowstorm on a pass in Italy and all my colleagues - from San Diego, especially - fell down. One of them helped get my bike aimed downhill and once under way I immediately decided that first gear was faster than I wanted to go," Hermann says with a laugh.

"So I had both feet down, skiing. I put it into neutral and thought, 'I sure hope the ABS works.' I was the only one to make it," he says.

After Hermann made it into town, their hotel staff was able to retrieve the remainder of the crew using four-wheel-drive vehicles. The snowbound machines were left overnight.

Sound like fun? Bike rentals in Germany and Corsica run about $800 a week. Hotels range from about $100, and most feature dinner and breakfast. Commercial tours are offered by various moto-tour companies.

Joe Michaud is a motorcycle writer and rider and restores vintage bikes.

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