



Rudy explained that the new system goes through Munich for re-programming, as he hooks Blanks up again! Reprogramming done, and I am good to go! I am so impressed and satisfied with the service I have gotten. These guys not only made me a priority, but didn't give up until the problem had been solved... not even a tea break!

I ride back and park in the underground garage where Blanks will be for the next couple of days while I and my girls tour Euro-Disney.



July the 30th.

Day 1, Euro Tour- Paris to Strasbourg, France!

A lazy start, as I am reluctant to leave my girls... and it's been drizzling overnight, but it's time to go. Load Blanks up, and bid farewell to my girls! My goal for today is *Strasbourg*. The GPS plots my route, and I am off. About 20 minutes into my trip, and I notice that I am feeling uncomfortable. What's not right? What's happening? Then it hits me... I have left my *Airhawk* in the apartment! Well I figure that since I have survived all this while, albeit with it, it won't make much difference without it. Why lose the time to go back just for the *Airhawk*? I get on the highway and make tracks. It's a relatively cold day with slight showers here and there, but overall, I make progress and arrive *Strasbourg* without incident! Locate a hotel close to the central train Station, park the bike, go for dinner, and it's an early night for me. I have to get to Malta tomorrow, which would mean quite a few kilometres... so the earlier I start, the better.

July the 30th.

Day 2, Euro Tour- Strasbourg, France to Malta, Austria

Temps: low- 18° | high- 27°.

Distance covered- 497 kilometres

Malta, Austria! That's my destination for today! The GPS does not know such a town exists. So the hotel owners have graciously provided the coordinates, and the route is clearer. As I ride out of the secure underground parking where the bike spent the night, the GPS plots the route, and I am off. Funny thing, I make a couple of turns, and am in Germany! My bike isn't even warm yet! So stop over at the first fuel station, and fill the bike and my 10 litre can for today's "run to empty" trial. Reset my odometer and fill up my tires to the right pressure, and am off!

My route takes me directly on the Autobahn, and the kilometres start piling up!



There are quite a few sections where there are road-works going on, but there is no traffic to contend with. Periodically I get on to the limitless speed section of road, and I open the taps! The GS doesn't have high speed as one of its strong points though! The road is really spectacular. Four lanes wide, made from concrete in most sections, and so, so smooth!

Eventually, my tank reads empty, and it has done 308.3 km. I continue riding as dictated by the road speed limits. I am amazed as the kilometres keep piling on! Of course I am riding on the right lane of the road in readiness for the loss of power that will come when there is no more fuel. And it finally comes... at 366.8 km! That means that even when the instrument says "0 litres", I still have enough fuel (and vapour) for almost 50 km! No problem, refill from my jerry can, and I am off again!

Stop at the next fuel station, and meet two bikers at the pumps. Both with their wives, and both obviously over 50 years old! Come to think of it, most of the bikers I have met on this trip have been over 40! There are quite a number of bikers on the road, most with touring bikes, and riding two up! I also notice that in Germany, the bikers behave very differently from the bikers in France. In France, everyone displayed some form of courtesy or the other, from waving a foot to operating the blinkers! But here... nothing! I guess it's a German thing. Perhaps a sign of weakness to offer a greeting to a fellow traveller? Having said that, I must confess that on my first day in Paris, I was amazed at how the bikers ride.....impressed, but amazed. The lane splitting, at speeds... and the scooters... even in *Lagos*, we don't ride like this!

Back on the road, and I pass a Skoda towing a *Hayabusa* and an *Aprilia*! I nod to the driver as I pass, wondering if there is an event somewhere. I've also been surprised at how few bikes are on the road! Perhaps everyone is at work! Ok! I make progress, and soon enough I am in Austria. I don't need to buy the "*Toll Pass Vignette*", as I got mine already at the fuel station, and my bike is already wearing it on the windscreen. I have decided not to run on the highway as I go to Malta. John, who is the owner of the hotel, has described the roads to take, and I put them on the GPS! These *B* roads take me through the towns where the speed limit is 30 or 50, depending on what road it is. He has also mentioned that breaking the speed limit is a big no-no, and the police are always checking with speed traps and radar guns, so I stay alert and watch for the changes in the speed limits of the roads!

This road takes me past, beside, and through some awesome landscape, with the mountains and streams all around! It's really so neat! And the curves! I notice that even in the tight turns, the white centre line is not continuous. This would mean that overtaking is allowed. But as I can imagine... it would be at your own risk! The elevation gets to as high as 1,755 m; then drops suddenly to 1,432 m. It's almost like I am on a roller coaster! There are so many things fighting for my attention! Eventually, I have to stop and take a picture or two! It's simply magnificent!



And the amount of bikers here is unbelievable! I pass a couple, and most of them have foreign plates! There must be a reason why on this short stretch of road, there are so many riders! I continue to be extremely cautious around the small towns, which are almost every 5 to 10 kilometres. Sure enough, my care pays off, as I find a couple of bikers paying their fines round a bend where the police have stationed a speed camera.

I arrive *Malta*, and my coordinates are right. In front of the hotel is parked the Skoda with the two bikes on the trailer. By the way... *The Hochalmspitze* must be one of the best kept secrets in Austria.

I passed this car somewhere around Munich! Aahhhh, he went on the highways while I took the *B* road! John comes out to welcome me... and a warm welcome it is! With a *raddler* in my hand, he takes my picture, and posts it on his website as the first Nigerian to visit! I meet the driver of the Skoda. He is here with his wife, along with some friends, and like I mentioned earlier, they are all in their 50s and 60s! Some were even racers back in the day! I meet other travellers, and soon find friends in Piet and Trudy, and all the crew from Holland! In the evening we have dinner together, and I find that bikers here are just as vain as everywhere else in the world... wearing their bike colours and stuff... I vow to wear mine the next day!!



We sit around the table well into the evening, exchanging stories, and I at once feel so at home

here! As the evening progresses we continue our story-telling over dinner! Piet shows me his website and pictures, and eventually everyone is around his laptop looking at them!

Dinner over, and John helps me plan my tomorrow! I have close to 400 km to do, taking in some of the most spectacular roads in the Austrian Alps! And he taps me in on one thing- here distances are not given in mileage, but in time! As I go to bed, I imagine that this is a biker's dream! I have my plan ready for the next day, and say my good-night around 10 pm... then it's off to my room and my bed... I have such a happy and peaceful rest. The air, the surroundings, the beauty of this place just point to the awesomeness of God. I consider this as I drift off to sleep with thanks on my lips for His great goodness.

1st of August.

Day 3, Euro Tour-The Grossglockner and Nockalmstrasse

What a view!

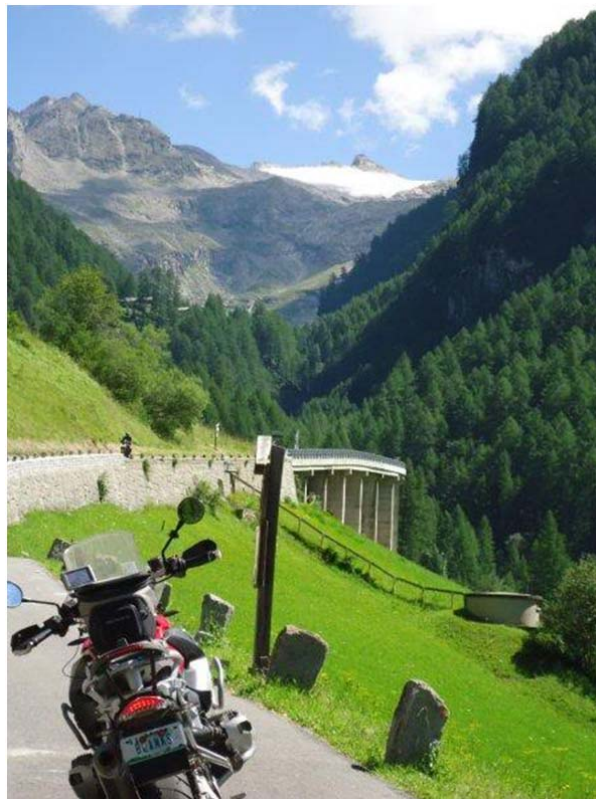


That's what greets me as I wake up this morning! Awesome! I am so excited! Having spent last night listening to the "*exploits*" of others, I am so eager to see things for myself! Take a shower, and I am off to have breakfast! Lol! Same-same!

I had observed some oil where there shouldn't have been any, and I am slightly alarmed! I speak with John, who was a Citroen mechanic for like 30 years, and we look at it together. There are no oil shortages at the gearbox or engine, so he wipes off the "*oil streak*", and we agree to look at it in the evening.

GPS up with the routes that John had suggested... I have a trip into the National Park up the *Grossglockner*, and later up the *Nockalmstrasse planned*. But first a trip to the BMW dealer, to see about the leak. So I ride into town and locate him. But I suddenly have second thoughts about going in, so I just make a U-turn, and am headed back to my route! The number of bikers

continues to rise the further I go! All sorts, but mostly touring bikes. The view, the crisp air, the winding road... biker Heaven! I am so, so astounded by all the beauty. It's truly amazing! I will definitely be here again! The pictures will tell the story!





The white dot in the middle of the picture is actually a helicopter... that should give some sense of proportion!





Needless to say, I ran out of memory on my camera! So I start using the iPhone! It's got a fairly decent camera, and I rely on it for the rest of my day. At the top of the *Nockalmstrasse* there is a restaurant, The Glockenhütte! And I am hungry! Walk in and talk with the owner, Fam.



He acn't believe that I have ridden all the way from Nigeria! He has to come out and see the bike for himself! He is utterly amazed, and tells me how he has a Harley (showing me the picture on the wall), but that he can never ride during the season because that's when the restaurant runs!

So he travels to the US during the winter to get some saddle time. Follow his recommendations for my late lunch, and have roasted pork chops, sour grout and dumpling! As I wolf it down he comes to my table and gives me a neck tube, compliments of the restaurant! Along with a map and some other small gifts!

A couple arrives on an antique *NSU* that looks so, so nice, it deserves all the pictures I have already taken!

Then it's back to Malta! I do pass through town to get a new memory card for my camera, and eventually arrive my hotel at a little past 7! And of course...in the evening... over dinner... as we exchanged our stories for the day... I showed everyone my ERMC crew shirt!!!



From Left to right; Piet, Klass, I, Ap and Trudy.

I realise that I have to return to this place, and for that visit, I will need a little more time!

We stay late into the night as Piet and Trudy will be leaving the next morning. But eventually it's time to say goodnight, and go to bed. What an incredible day!! Fantastic!

2nd of August.

Day 4, Euro Tour- Malta, Austria to Treviso, Italy!

Temps: low- 18° | high- 32°

Distance Covered- 326 kilometre

Another lazy start today, as I have less than 400 km to go on my way to the Ferry in *Livorno*. Have my breakfast as Ap and Klass tell me I have just missed Piet and Trudy who are on their way back to Holland. We have a low-key photo shoot, and it's time to go. The two nights spent here were simply wonderful! I know I must return.



John and I



Klass and Ap

On my way out, I stop and spend about 1 hour at the Porsche Museum that's close by, taking pictures of almost everything on display. It's actually a private museum, but provides quite a lot of interesting displays and information about Porsche automotive history.





So my route today will take me up the Austrian Alps, through to the Italian Dolomites, and I maintain an open mind as to what today's riding will be like. When the word "Alps" comes up, you need to know that for a biker, it means twisting, turning, climbing and descending, with sheer cliffs off the left or right side, and views of scenery to make you marvel. Smells that cause a stir deep in one's soul.

The roads do not let me down, and very soon the climbing starts! In these parts, the climbing is done via roads that do a 180 degree turn every 100 metres or less! Sometimes the turns are so tight that I find that I need to be in first gear to make them! All the while I am looking over the top of the trees that are now at the level of the road! This view is better than to consider the plunge that is just a couple of inches away! I keep on riding, twisting and turning, through one tunnel after the other. And all of a sudden I am in "Italia". OK!



I am surprised to find that the beauty of the Alps can take on an even different dimension, but it does... the Italian side takes on a completely different kind of beauty as I descend. The roads are also narrower, and I distinctly remember a turn I made which had me facing a truck with less than 1.5 meters to spare. I wonder how a car would have made it in that situation! My descent leads into a town, and I stop to take a picture of the Italian side that I just came down from.



Mount up again, and about a kilometre later come upon a radar trap. I wave to the Policeman as I pass, and he waves back. The roads are devoid of traffic today... or so it seems, and I ride more or less alone for another 100 kilometres... passing one sleepy village after another. Then I start seeing bikers, and I realize I must be coming close to Dolomite country. An interesting sight catches my eye as I climb again!



The pain in my backside also begins to remind me that I didn't do right by forgetting my *airhawk*. The pain gets progressively worse, and my appreciation for the *airhawk* gets deeper and more profound. As my route takes me to bigger and bigger towns, I realize that I must get a replacement for the *Airhawk*. I will definitely not be riding to Lagos with my bum if I don't get it! So I start looking out for bike stores. And that's how I come upon *Valerisport*, A bike shop in *Cornuda*! And Valerie herself, who turns out to be camera shy!



Communication is a bit of a problem, as I don't have any Italian whatsoever, but Marco steps in and helps me out. Marco works for TCX, and I find out that they make almost all the boots for BMW!! After a lot of back and forth, it is clear that I will not get the *airhawk* here. He makes a few calls, and directs me to Treviso... which, being a bigger town with a lot more stores, might have what I am looking for. In Treviso, I go to the BMW dealer. No joy, but he directs me to the Honda dealer. No luck... but I do get to test ride the manual version of the Honda *Crosstour*. And riding it back to back with the GS leaves me feeling like the GS is the better deal. Perhaps if I had the *DCT* version, I might have felt differently? Oh well... I am directed to yet another outlet, which is close to the airport, and find my way there.

The search for an *Airhawk* has taken on a serious dimension, as I imagine what my bum (or what's left of it), will feel/look like by the time I get back to Lagos, if I don't get it. Still no joy. But the kind man at the store tells me about www.bikerfactory.it. OK. We search the website and sure enough, the *airhawk* is there, and listed as 109 Euro. With the way I am feeling, I could pay 5 times that price to lay my hands on it! We call, and the voice at the other end explains that they do not do counter sales... all purchases are done over the internet. But my newfound friend will not take no for an answer, and I listen as he passionately pleads my case in Italian. I hear Lagos several times in the conversation, and eventually he puts the phone down. The offices will accept to open this once to allow me pick up the *airhawk*. *BUT*, the store is in Arezzo, which is like a 100 km detour for me. What!! Only 100 km? That's not a problem at all! We locate the address on the GPS, and I have a clear plan for the next day. That done, I am happy to close for the day.

I find a nice hotel, have a shower as I do some washing. Then I am off to the restaurant, down the road for some dinner, and it's an early night for me. My Hotel is a family owned/run affair, and I begin to notice that in Italy, so many businesses are family owned and run. The weather has been quite warm, and even bordering on hot here, and I figure it will get hotter the further south I go! But for now... it's sweet, sweet sleep for me.

3rd of August.

Day 5, Euro Tour- Treviso, to Livorno, Italy!

Temps: low- 26° | high- 36°

I have to get the *airhawk* cushion, which is held by the online retailer in Arezzo! He doesn't sell direct to people usually, but he's agreed to make an exception in my case. I have decided that I need to be very early to avoid the lock-up that occurs in Italy between 12 and 3 pm as people go for their lunch! The Italians do not joke with their lunch break! So 7:30 am finds me en-route! No *B* roads for me today, so it's unto the expressway, and straight into a toll station! The ticket issued, and I'm on my way!

I arrive and find the address, and the treasured *airhawk* cushion! All is well. Just one little thing though! I have also seen a new *GIVI* box, which I would like to get as well. I am directed to Enzo of Motor Shop *Mengozzi*.... with an address that the GPS knows!

Enzo's is a fairly big place, selling scooters and bikes! We talk a bit, and he let me understand that the luggage accessories are in his second shop, where there is also a service centre! Really? Fantastic! I can have the bike serviced also! It's already about 10,000 km since I left Lagos! So he hops on his scooter and we go to yet another shop selling bike accessories! Apparently his

wife, *Grazia*, runs it, and I end up buying a pair of gloves and a summer jacket! He points me to a restaurant for lunch, gives me the address of the service centre, and we are booked for a service at 3pm.

I follow the GPS to the Tuscani restaurant that Enzo has recommended! As I park the bike I am approached by a young man bearing stuff he is trying to sell! As soon as he opens his mouth to speak, I realize that he is Nigerian! Patrick, that's his name, and Emma, his friend, came from Nigeria about 8 months ago and are in the process of getting papers! He is so ecstatic to see me! And as typical Nigerians, we cause quite a stir with our loud voices and laughter! I wish them all the best, as they wish me a safe trip back, then we part!



Lunch is really nice, a pleasant surprise, then it's off to Enzo's Service Center! I see the box, and the bike gets serviced. He has also arranged to send my old box to Lagos by freight, so all is well!





My mechanic for today!

We are done, and I am on my way to Livorno! I hit the highway but am very quickly bored! I think to myself and decide to get off it and move to the *B* roads! Next exit, I'm out, and on to the nice scenic countryside. I make a stop for a drink and batteries for my toothbrush! I have decided not to buy any more fuel in Europe, and I figure what I have will be enough to get to the fuel station in Morocco! Drink finished, and I am on the road again! But not before some photos of Blanks with her new box! Isn't she lovely?



I arrive Livorno, and drive to the city centre in search of a hotel! First one is full, as is the second and third! What's up? I am told that as the weather is so warm, everyone is coming to Livorno for the beach during the weekend! However, there is still hope, and I am directed to the central train Station, as there are quite a few hotels around it.

Hotel Stazione might have a room, but I won't know for another hour! Ok! I will ride around and see if there are alternatives! My petrol level is very low, and I decide that I need to put in at least 5 Euro's worth of fuel, to avoid running out!

At the service station, I reach for my wallet, and it's not where I expect it to be! A thorough search reveals that I have lost my wallet! In my wallet are all my cards and all my Euro! I am in a daze! Another thorough search of everything on me and the bike only reconfirms that the wallet is indeed gone ☹! What's my plan B? I find that I have 10 Euro left, and \$100. All other currencies are African. It's back to *Hotel Stazione*, where I can have the room! I explain what has happened to me, and after talking with the Manager, Christine accepts to be paid in dollars! I also get 10 Euro back as change. I park the bike in the secure parking, and go up to my room.

Emptying my entire luggage out on the bed and taking stock of all I have reveals that I don't even have enough money to cross through Morocco and Mauritania! I refuse to panic! But I am already feeling the tension mounting! I take a shower; drink some water (can't afford dinner today), and go to bed! I have only 20 Euro for the next three days! What a mess! But I refuse to feel bad! My thinking is that it's just money, and I could always sell my watch or a phone or something if and when I have to! I have options! This begins to look like a plan, and I send out emails to have my cards blocked, turn off the lights, and am asleep in no time!

August the 4th.

Livorno

I woke up with a start around 2:30 am! Thought running through my mind pointed to the stress I was going to encounter on account of my wallet loss... the money I didn't have now, the credit cards I couldn't use as a back up! As I considered solutions to this, I felt a deep sinking feeling as it occurred to me that I had also lost the memory card containing all my pictures from my outbound trip! Whaaat??! This new realization caused me to desperately consider all options for recovery immediately!

I tried thinking back to when I had last seen the wallet for sure, and what exactly had happened. I had stopped for a drink and used the wallet to pay! Ok! Put on the GPS and locate the point there this happened... an Agip fuel station about 50km away! Fine! I resolve to go back there first thing in the morning! With this, I felt a peace come back over me, and was able to go back to sleep again!

Up at 8, and start trying to raise funds! It's good to have dependable people as friends! In no time, 100 Euro is wired to me, and more is being arranged for *Tangier*! Great!

And me? I set off for the fuel station pronto! As I ride, doubt creeps into my mind again, but what to do?! My ride is quite slow actually, as I am trying to be as economical as possible with my fuel. This means very gentle acceleration, and avoiding using my brakes as much as possible! Slowly but surely, I come upon the fuel station, and park my bike exactly like I did the last time!

My eyes scan the surroundings but alas, nothing! I walk into station store, and the attending lady appears to remember me because she has a smile on her face! But what does this smile mean? We both start speaking at the same time! I understand that my wallet was found, but there was no way to reach me! Such sweet relief, as she hands it over to me! Unbelievable! God's hand clearly in action.



I am not your big spender! Buy more fuel, and start my journey back to *Livorno*, after expressing my profound gratitude! As I approach *Livorno*, I decide to go to the port to confirm my ticket! No luck, as the office doesn't open till 16:00 hrs, and it's not even 13:00 hrs yet! Ok, it's back to the hotel, with a plan to visit Pisa and its leaning tower... less than 20km away! Get directions, and I am off! So many tourists, and everyone taking pictures of themselves 'holding or pushing or carrying' the tower!



I take my pictures, making a note to return with *all* my girls! I am done and heading back... it's close to 16:00 hrs now, so I am back at the port, and have my boarding pass. With some hours more to kill, I find my way back to the hotel! Pack up my stuff, and laze around in the lobby till 20:00 hrs, then I am off to the port! So many bikers! Wow! Apparently my ferry goes to *Tangier* via *Barcelona*, and a good number are on their way there!



I meet with Marco, Carlo and Andreas, and we chat as we await the boarding call! Bikers keep on coming, and a group of 3 bikes with 4 people arrive! One of them immediately gets off and starts looking at number plates of the bikes on the boarding queue! He is ecstatic when he discovers *BLANKS*! Aldo and Lori are travelling to Morocco with Angelo and Cinzia! We exchange stories as we take pictures and all! It's so funny how I have discovered that even though people are so different, they really remain the same!

Boarding time, and we all ride into the ferry! The *Ikarus Palace* is massive, and this time... it's a packed house!



Bikes to *Barcelona*



Bikes to *Tangier Med*

Departure is supposed to be at 23:30 hrs, but there is still a long queue of cars making their way into the belly of the ferry, and it's already 23:00 hrs! I find a sleeper and stake out my territory, then I am off to familiarize myself with the ship! I locate the showers and all the vital services. It's late, and I head back to knock off for the night! It's almost midnight, and there are so many cars still left to board! Looks like we will be late! I sleep off peacefully and happily... what a spectacular turn of events!

August the 5th, 6th and 7th.

The Crossing, and on to Tiznit!

What's there to do on the ferry?! I have 46 hours to burn, and thanks to my newfound friends, the time passes rather quickly. Pretend to be a photographer?



Life on the ferry! Hmmm...

I had gotten a “*pullman*” for accommodation, and this can only best be described as a hostel. There were about seventy or so men, to share about six toilets and two showers! The first night, I had my shower around 4 am, which was the low period for the showers, ☺ !

I spend most of my time with Angelo, Cinzia, Aldo and Lory, and we share stories and all.



Angelo, Aldo and myself



Myself, and Aldo's Lory

It's so interesting to hear that even though they are Italian and live in the “*developed*” world, where most people are better educated and “enlightened” than in Nigeria, the opposition to riding from family and friends is still there. And the arguments are still the same! The days pass more quickly, and I hear from them that the cabins are not so bad. Hmmm... Nevertheless, I can imagine that if I was in a cabin with a stranger, it would be quite similar to being in my “*pullman*” seat. I use this to console myself, and vow to make this trip again with someone I can share a cabin with, ☺. We transit in Barcelona, and Marco, Carlo and Andreas get off! We take a picture together before they depart, and wish each other all the best.

It's so amazing the way we all have just “flowed” with each other, even when the language was a slight barrier.

Then it's on to *Tangier*!

We say our goodbyes, and I promise to send email and updates. Then I go below to the car deck to get ready to disembark.