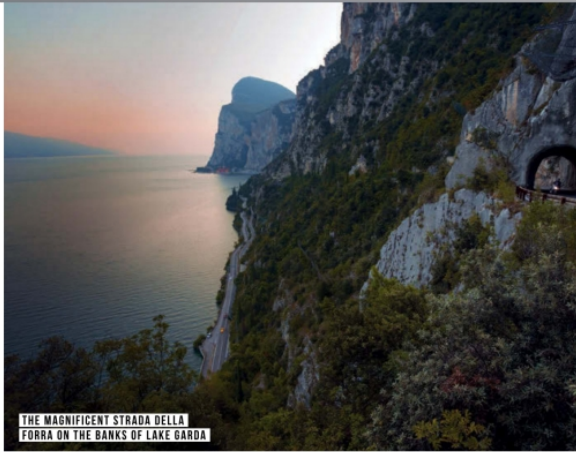




YOU HAVE TO STOP FOR A BRATWURST AT THE SUMMIT OF THE STELVIO



THE MAGNIFICENT STRADA DELLA FORRA ON THE BANKS OF LAKE GARDA



RIDING ON THE SOUTHERN SIDE OF THE STELVIO PASS



LOOKING DOWN TO BORMIO

At the top of the pass, it's a bit of a biker tradition to stop and have a bratwurst from one of the stalls and take in the spectacular views over the glaciated Ortler Range. Whilst the northern approach to the pass is a relentless procession of tight hairpins, the ride down the southern side to Bormio is more open but no less spectacular or demanding.

From Bormio a left turn takes you up and over one of the most unsung passes in Italy, the Gavia Pass. The pass is mostly single track through spectacular scenery, features multiple switchbacks and it's very popular with bikers. At 2,621m high it's also the third highest pass in Italy, and many a motorcyclist will tell you the riding experience is better than that found on the Stelvio which can, in the main summer season, be very busy.

Speaking of which, I've ridden both

these roads in mid-summer and early October and, if you get the weather (we had bright blue skies), early October is a great time to tour with far less traffic on the roads.

The Gavia Pass road hits the main SS42 highway at Ponte di Legno where you can open up the throttle on the superb curves leading to the Tonale Pass. You'll find plenty of hotels and cafes at the Tonale Pass and it's a good place to overnight before pressing on to the Dolomites in the morning.

There's no doubting the draw of high Alpine passes to motorcyclists, but no tour of Italy can be complete without taking in one of the many lakes to be found in Lombardy. Lake Como is probably the best known and offers both great riding and magnificent scenery, as does Lake Maggiore and the smaller Lake d'Iseo.

However, given the choice, I prefer

to head further east and onto the road up the western coast of Lake Garda. If you've only visited the flat southern shore of the lake, then you don't know what you're missing.

One easy way to check out what you've been passing up on is to watch the opening scene in the James Bond film *Quantum of Solace* where the bad guys chase Bond along the road skirting the Lake Garda shoreline. If you find yourselves in these parts, do not leave until you ride the incredibly spectacular Strada della Forra road, which Winston Churchill defined as the Eighth Wonder of the World.

Before leaving Lake Garda, I'm going to recommend you take the SP9 from the village of Gargnano over to Lake d'Idro, it's just one of those scenic local roads you'd never think of taking but will always remember riding.



▶ HIGHLIGHT: THE STELVIO PASS, 2,757M

If Carlo Donegani had re-routed his original plans a little to the left or right and, in the process, picked up an extra 7m of elevation the Stelvio would now hold the throne as the highest paved mountain pass in the Alps.

That claim goes to the French pass the Col de l'Iseran, which tops out at 2,764m. As it stands, the Stelvio is the highest paved mountain pass in the Eastern Alps, cutting through the Ortler Range, a glaciated mountain range I'd long admired during my climbing days.

Ortler, the highest summit in the range, stands at 3,905m above sea level, which means it's just below the 4,000m mark demanded by serious Alpine peak baggers. What's probably more interesting is that the peak contains the highest 'trench' in military history, which was hacked out of the main glacier at

3,850m by Austrian troops during World War One.

It was only in the mid 1990s that a mountain guide 'discovered' the two World War One cannons just below the summit which had been covered by snow since 1918. That's something for you to ponder over as you look out over the snow and ice bound summit of Ortler from the crest of the Stelvio Pass.

It was an ascent of the Ortler, coincidentally in the mid 1990s, that first brought me into contact with the Stelvio. I arrived at the northern approach in early June to find signs warning that the pass was closed due to snow. With the start of the climbing route in Trafoi, about half way up the pass, I decided to chance it.

I can remember thinking at the time 'I just have to come back here on a motorcycle' and that was way before the TV show *Top Gear* picked the Stelvio Pass as its choice for the 'Greatest driving road in the world'.

The original road was built between 1820 and 1825, and it still follows the

primary route as of today. The pass runs for just over 24 miles from Gornagoi in the north to Bormio in the south and is famed for the 75 hairpin turns, of which 48 are on the northern approach.

There's no doubting the riding can be tense and gripping with so many switchbacks coming one after another, but the spectacle of the road carving its way up the steep sided valley is one that should not be missed.

At the top of the pass, it's tradition to stop and have a coffee and a bratwurst from one of the many stalls and cafes. I guarantee you will not be alone, this is as close to a riding mecca as you're going to get in the Alps.

The ride down the southern side to Bormio is less committing when it comes to switchbacks and, in a lot of respects, it could be said to offer better, or should I say smoother, riding. Don't let that fool you, though, it can be just as exciting and there are great opportunities for you to check out the scenery as opposed to lining up the next 360 bend.