

The Fast 'n' Sluis Tour

23rd~27th September 2017

Our Motorcyclists' Trip To The Netherlands

5 days, 4 countries, 3 different hotels, all on 2 wheels, just 1 objective – to have a jolly good time! Sounds good, huh?

Planning completed, eleven of us gathered on the sea-front in Dover on the Friday morning, some having stayed over Thursday night at the Marina Hotel with others choosing to rise extra early and travel down to Kent with the larks.

Soon all my fellow members were line-astern following me for the last mile or so in the direction of P&O's finest, the Pride of Burgundy. Just a few minutes wait then once onboard we headed for the rather nice Club Brassiere, each to enjoy something from the variety of breakfast items on offer whilst taking in the beautiful panoramic window-seat view of the White Cliffs and the English Channel during the lovely smooth 90-minute crossing to Calais.

On arrival in Calais we were unfortunately split up by the normally diligent P&O deck team and departing the ship by different paths, needed to re-gather just at the exit of the port. Once on our way though, what followed was an enjoyable scenic and beautifully quiet route through the French and Belgian countryside; a really lovely area if you have the time to seek out the good bits. Coffee stops were taken at several places including Borsele and Poperinge. The riding was so good it was almost too soon that we found ourselves "guessing" our way through the myriad of roadworks populating the Belgian/Netherlands border at present - even confusing my route planning trip of just 10 days before! Nevertheless, we arrived in Sluis approximately on schedule and were made very welcome at the impressive Dikke van Dale Hotel. A quick wash'n'brush-up and time for a casual wander into this lovely little town before settling down to an excellent supper at our hotel.

Saturday morning dawned bright and dry, and after a sumptuous "help yourself to all you can eat" breakfast, we filed out of the hotel's underground car park and set off north to visit the small but excellently presented "For Freedom" Military Museum just outside Knokke-Heist. As well as the rather nice little coffee shop they have within (there's a theme developing here!) the museum itself is fascinating and we were even treated to a personal tour by the owners, in English! After a couple of hours some amongst us declared that although they weren't really into museums, this one was indeed well worth a visit!

On the bikes again we turned south onto some "secret" minor roads and avenues alongside further picturesque canals towards our lunch break at an ostrich farm near Schobbejaks. And YES, ostrich egg omelettes were available along with a plethora of related goods and products but we resisted and opted for a more traditional lunch before enjoying a tour of this absolutely amazing place with yet another English-speaking guide. I didn't realise how little I knew about these extraordinary and very interesting creatures! By and large they were all very friendly but inquisitive and both Hugh & myself were (gently) pecked by two of the adult birds – namely 007 & Money Penny – I kid you not!! Almost too soon it was time to leave and since this place is in the middle of nowhere, it wasn't difficult to find more lovely country lanes to Sluis, this time entering the town from the East via - you've guessed it - more roadworks! It was during this return that we came upon a classic car cavalcade coming towards us; the second such event we saw on our trip. Again we pulled over into a convenient lay-by to watch the 50 or so classics pass by, all following each other – a nice few minutes, and some VERY rare cars too! Then back to base where after a quick shower we all gathered in the hotel's bar as tonight we were dining out. A short time later found us strolling into town following the river which led to the pretty little harbour, then into the cobbled streets of the village doing the window shopping bit before arriving at our pre-booked restaurant on the edge

of the very active square where it seemed all the Saturday night "action" happened - but not until 10pm when spirits of the locals were suitably ... err lubricated! I know one of our number took more than a few "incriminating" photos of us all doing a little street dancing to music that was almost impossible to ignore - blackmail is sure to be on the cards! At the hotel following our fun day, some turned in for an early night whilst us night owls had a last coffee before making our way to our rooms.

Sunday morning was much as the previous two days – lovely, warm and sunny. Another hearty breakfast then it was all down to the bikes, now loaded up and ready for our ride back across Belgium & France. Beautiful canal-side lanes and mile after mile (or should that be kilometre after kilometre) of lovely quiet country roads made for some truly excellent leisure riding. We made a very nice stop for lunch where we got chatting to a party of "celebrating" local clientele (motorcycles are a great conversation starter in any language, don't you find?) and even took part in the "I've lost my wedding ring" hunt within the venue when one of the guests mis-placed his ring - Colin B was the one that came up trumps and found it! On our way again, this time on much twistier lanes plus a few up'n'down bits, eventually arriving at an old friend – Cassel – a small town overlooking the Belgian/French border. Here we had to endure another hour or so relaxing in the sunshine in the village centre on the patio at a favourite cafe/bar with coffees, snacks and some local bikers - chatting, chilling, and watching most of the world go by... Ah, it's a tough life alright!

Moving on, and off the cobbled streets of Cassel, the road dropped down and reverted to being smooth, sinuous and interesting as we twisted and turned, rarely seeing any traffic other than the odd group of cyclists! We were now heading for St Omar and our night stop at the Hotel La Sappineire, Wisques. Traversing the city was another challenge since it had hosted a national cycling race that very day and although the event had finished some hours before, my familiar route was still closed off because the organisers were clearing up all the banners & barriers. However, all was successfully circumnavigated and soon our impressively positioned hill-top hotel appeared in the distance, with the last few kilometres of the day proving an excellent finale to our day on the road (so good was this last little section that we rode it again the very next morning just for fun – in both directions!!). Those that needed it had dinner at a local restaurant before returning to our hotel for a relaxing evening involving a few small beers, a large amount of banter and a couple of tough battles on the pool table!

Yet another lovely day on Monday so breakfasted, packed and bills paid, we headed off for petrol. There are a few hills and some lovely roads in this area which were exploited fully en-route to yet another familiar coffee stop. This time a stunning chateau in Le Wast and somewhere I've used previously on our club's classic car tours. Once again Veronique & Ramon, the lovely couple that own this hotel, were very welcoming and almost force feeding us with copious amounts of tea, coffee & assorted home-made cake while they were out in the car park taking dozens of photos of our bikes - for once all neatly parked along the edge of a rose garden! Upon departure, our bills were very small - they were just so pleased to see us all! We simply must return there again very soon! Onwards and northwards heading for the picturesque coastline that leads us via Sangatte to Calais, I'd allowed enough journey time for two more stops before the ferry. The first at Escalles which is nicely placed for a half-way halt along this beautiful amazingly quiet coastal road then the ever-popular final pause (and now becoming traditional) ice-cream stop on the peninsula between the beach & the harbour-side at Calais before we pop around the corner to get to the ferry. Onboard we again gathered outside the Brasserie area where some were tempted to eat whilst others remained still full from the day's multiple stops!

Off the ferry and into Dover to outside our hotel where some had planned to ride home from whilst others were staying on until the Tuesday for a final day's ride around the quieter lanes of rural Kent. This turned out to be a very pleasant day with two nice tea stops and a visit to the lovely little Morgans & Motorcycles Museum in Rolvenden. Fortunately it didn't start raining until the ride had finished at Westerham and I was heading home on the M25!

Phew! It takes a long while to organise these things and the time goes so fast when it's actually happening - s'pose that means we're having a good time! Some brilliant roads, great cameraderie plus dry & sunny throughout - well, until I reached Clackett Lane anyway!

Thanks to all those that supported the Sluis Tour – and very special thanks to Hugh who did 'Tail End Charlie' duties for us throughout the trip. I trust you all enjoyed the whole experience as much as I did. -AG