

Milan to Barcelona to Milan



Story By [Yossef Schvetz](#) - October, 2005

"Ride to work." Yes, I'm all for it. After all, we do have to show the world that we aren't just a bunch of weekend only hedonists, don't we? And what about that 150-hp baby sitting in the garage, it can surely do the daily commute, can't it? It's just that in my case, riding to work means crawling between three walls of 18-wheelers for a good 25 miles in Milan's ring road. The "Tangenziale Nord" is one of Europe's



busiest highways and even if lane splitting is permitted here, when I do opt to ride I usually end up arriving at work with a minor nervous breakdown. Sorry then, my daily commute is via subway and train with a good book in hand, My apologies to the "ride to work" brigade.

Luckily an atonement day arrives. Turns out that I have a work meeting in Barcelona on a Friday, if I take Thursday off and use the weekend for the return leg, I'll have a nice, 1,500 mile "ride to work" loop. Should make up somewhat for my everyday sin, me thinks. Apart from that, I've the new Triumph Sprint ST 1050 to test, a good chance to see how those triples are on a really long run and if this is really the new anti VFR. So then, Wednesday

evening after work I pull into to the premises of Triumph's Italian importer. I throw my soft bags (the original hard luggage wasn't available) over the ST and proceed to tie up a tube with blue prints and a box with models I have to present at the meeting to the rear seat with bungee cords. Stefano, Triumph's PR guy, gives me a strange look; have to wonder why...maybe it's because of the way the huge tube protrudes out to the sides?

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I hit the road then, and in order to avoid the evening rush hour around Milan, I opt to head towards Torino and enter France from the Alpes area instead of heading to the Italian Riviera. I'd rather spend some time on the twisties than droning on the highway and Michelin's excellent [map site](#) says that I'd be adding only 40 miles to my loop. Smart boy, ain't I? After a few minutes on the ST, it looks like its going to be one comfy and fun ride. The new 1050 Sprint is a perfect fit for my 6'4" frame. The seat, although deeply carved, is really plush and there is plenty of legroom. That Battle of Britain/Spitfire sound emanating from the impressive under seat can filters through my earplugs and urges me to roll it on. Super,



The light forward cant and very relaxed riding position means you can also dig the vistas around you. It's got this real Gran Turismo air about it.

by 9:00pm I am nearing the French border but it turns out that I wasn't all that smart after all in choosing my route. I've forgotten that the Frejus tunnel between Italy and France was closed down due to a fire a few months ago and all the traffic is diverted to my beloved secondary roads. But the worst is yet to come. My plan is to continue riding till darkness and then find myself a cozy hotel and a good French dinner but while getting near nearer to the French border, I discover that the area is uncommonly busy considering it's off-season. Strange. As I cross the border and pull into the first Hotel I spot, I notice that the parking lot is crammed with colorful

vans and trucks... The receptionist gives me the bad news. The Tour de France is in the area and there's not a chance in the world to find a hotel for the next 60 miles. Maybe deep, deep in France he reckons. In the meantime it also has started to rain.

Well, that's what I call a good start. I ride on towards Briancon but all hotels are choked full. In the meantime, the ST is doing all it can to keep my spirits high. At night, in the downhill and wet mountain twisties west of Briancon, the last thing you want is a peaky powerband and nervous steering. This peachy triple though pulls so nicely from the lowest of revs without a hiccup and the front feels planted and reassuring even in these nasty conditions. It's already 11:00pm; there's no hotel in sight and the hunger overcomes my resistance. Out of choices I pull into a McDonald's on the roadside and eat my little grease spot while fireworks light the sky in honor of the tour and Mr. Lance. I couldn't care less. Where's my French dinner may I ask? It's only by 1:00am that I reach the large village of Gap, and at last, I do find a room in the sleaziest hotel in town. The sultry receptionist takes me to see my room in a tiny elevator and what do you know, we get stuck! Great. In theory this could lead to some steamy action in an unconventional location but in my condition, all I want is a bed and to be alone. The rather attractive fake blond starts yelling "Merde, merde!" while kicking the door and eventually the elevator frees.



**New, narrower streets
designed to
accommodate the Sprint
ST1050.**

While in the room I finally take my earplugs out to discover that in the City Square nearby there's a rock concert with speakers blaring. Out of choices again, I put them back in my ears for the night.

I wake up at 10:00am, the sun is shining, and the rain is all but a memory. Guess the trip starts for real now. The descent from Gap to Aix-en-Provence turns out to be a fast and furious three-lane stretch with curves gently flowing along the Durance River. A good chance to open the throttle at last. The ST just loves this kind of fast stuff. It feels utterly planted while cranked well over, yet the light forward cant and very relaxed riding position means you can also dig the vistas around you. It's got this real Gran Turismo air about it. In Aix-en-Provence I pull into town for a quick lunch of Quiche Lorraine in the main square. I park the ST just in front of me and for the first time take my time to

admire it and I have to admit, it looks good and quite original. In the mean time, the square is alive and kicking, Aix is one of Provence's pearls and the big university here draws a young and hip crowd. No time to watch the birds though, I have to reach Spain by this evening. It's time to gas it some in the AutoRoute, that's French for Autostrada or Autobahn. The first 200 miles going west aren't that interesting. The river Rhone's delta is a vast and flat area and I switch to a 90-100 drone mode. The actual speed limit is 85 so at that kind of speed, a quick dab on the brakes will put you back on the legal zone. To American ears this might sound fast enough but until a few years ago you could tear along France at 120 without many problems. Back in '98 I did a London-Florence-London run on a Superblackbird at an almost constant 120 mph through France. These days are long gone as French AutoRoute's

are filled with speed cameras, and most people really stick to the 85 limit. In such tank-fill to tank*fill stretches you can really start to appreciate the special charm of the Triumph's big new Triple. Indeed, it doesn't buzz like an in-line four, doesn't throb like a twin, only a very light hum reaches the rider. Okay, it might not be as silky smooth as a VFR but it certainly has much more presence and character.

After passing Beziers, the landscape changes dramatically. The low hills next to the sea shore turn much drier while on my left, there is a wide and flat sandy coast, totally different from that of the famous Cote'd Azure in the east of the French Mediterranean coast. I've got only another 100 miles till the Spanish border and just as I am calculating my schedule and noticing that I am running behind, an Audi Turbo overtakes me doing at least 120mph. I think I can hitch hike a ride with him. I tuck behind the bubble, downshift twice and shoot the revs up to 10k rpm. With after burners on I cling to the Audi turbo's tail (not too close though) and together we proceed like a high speed train towards Spain devouring those last 100 miles in little more than three quarters of an hour. At high speed I also discover that sixth gear is a slight overdrive, with top speed in fifth and top gear being almost equal. Told you about the speed traps and indeed my use of the Audi as some kind of laser shield proves to be the right strategy. Near the end of the highway I spot a cop, laser speed gun in hand and miles later the Audi gets nicked while I proceed free as a bird. After last night's hassles, I deserve some good luck.



**Interesting mix of bikes
and characters.
Europeans just love to
ride.**

At Perpignan I leave the coastal highway and head Southwest towards Andorra. It's a tiny independent country that sits smack in the middle of the Pyrenees, in the heart of Basque country. To this day, the Basque people are in a cultural/politic dispute with the Spanish government with their

quest for independence. In a cultural war they might be but they know how to design twisty roads. The road climbing up to Andorra is one fine piece of sweeping tarmac and is also dotted with beautiful ancient castles. As if this wasn't interesting enough, on a deserted parking lot next to the highway I spot a couple of riders practicing their wheelies. I stop by the roadside to enjoy the professional action on their tricked out R1 and Fireblade. At the border crossing to Spain there are armored cars and machine gun totting soldiers, reminding me that this is indeed a high tension area.

Yet the riding makes me forget all this very quickly. The vast and high windswept plains between the Pyrenees peaks allow some quick riding. There's little traffic, a clear view for miles ahead and speeds and lean angles begin to creep up. The golden fields by the roadside dance to the strong winds and reflect slow waves of late afternoon light into my visor. Time is flying and I take a slight shortcut to Barcelona through the Cadi tunnel and find out that the descent from the Pyrenees is no less exciting than the climb. The main highway is fast and flowing while the landscape changes again and draws my attention. The mountains around are quite barren and

their color is a strange dark red. I stop in front of the impressive sharp peaks of Montserrat, which in Spanish means "The Saw Mountains". If chorales are your thing, you might want to know that Montserrat is home to the oldest chorus school in the world. From now on it's a steady ride till Barcelona. I reach the outskirts around eight in the evening, hoping that by now the rush hour will be over but the traffic on the main highway leading into town is real bad and just as bad is the 90 plus degree heat. When I arrive to my Barcelonean friend's house, I am happy to park the bike and walk around the old city center. When accompanied by a local, the chances to hit the right restaurant are much better. My friend's recommendation? The "Mundial Bar", a real cool Tapas place near the Arc del Triomf in the Casc Antic quarter. The place's decor is original 50's but the crowd is super young, hip and very loud. Spaniards seemingly like to yell. The seafood tapas are nothing short of amazing and I flush it all down with Sidra, the superb Basque apple cider.



**The "Mundial Bar" in
Barcelona: A real cool
Tapas place near the Arc
del Triomf in the Casc
Antic quarter.**

Actually it doesn't really matter which downtown bar you choose. The whole old center is crammed with beautiful eateries and happy crowds. This city's energy is quite intoxicating; the parade of fashionable Spaniards goes on deep into the night. Time to get some sleep, although considering I've put 600 miles under the Triumph's wheels during some nine hours of riding, I am not that tired. Kudos to the Trumpet's ergonomics.

Next day, my work meeting finishes in the early afternoon and I've got some time to tour

the city. As an avid architecture fan, I've got a lot to feast my eyes on. Starting from Gaudi's crazy Sagrada Familia church, through the ultra modern stuff built for the Olympic games and up to Jean Nouvel's crazy cucumber, a building that constantly changes its color through the day according to light conditions. The downside for riders is that the city street grid is super tight and there are unsynchronized stoplights every 100-150 yards! Yack! As a rider, another thing strikes me. In the homeland of Criville, Gibernau, Checa, Pedrosa and Angel Nieto, I am half expecting to see sportbikes parked under every tree. Well, turns out that even though 200,000 spectators turn up to each of the three MotoGP rounds held in Spain, the two wheeled reality is quite disappointing. Most scoots are 125-250 c.c. and the few big bikes I do spot are usually quite old and not very well maintained. Really different from what you can see in Germany, France or Italy. The rather low average income in Spain somewhat explains the paradox of one of the ruling countries in road racing. At stoplights, my "big" ST doesn't fail to impress the kids on scooters. "Che guapa" they tell me, which means "what a beaut".

A last round in a downtown bar and off to bed. I wake up early but that doesn't save

me from getting stuck in the weekend traffic leaving Barcelona. If you do tour Europe in July-August, try to avoid the highways on the weekends, everybody is on his way towards their "vacance". I ride the coastal highway up to Beziers and take the exit towards Paris instead of continuing east for Italy. First, I really want to check out another area, that of the Massif Central in France, the big mountain range south of Clermont Ferrand. I've just heard too many awesome stories about a certain road there from people who used to ride down to the Bol'dor race when it was still held in the Paul Riccard track in the French Riviera. Second, continuing the architectural theme, one of the most striking bridges in the world has been inaugurated and it sits on this very highway to Paris. Indeed, the new bridge designed by Sir Norman Foster near

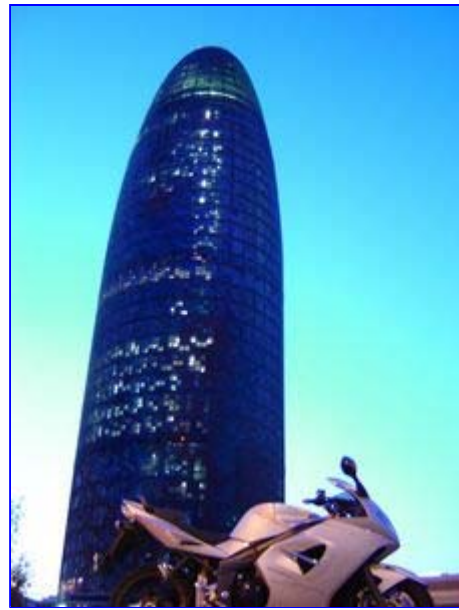
Millau leaves me speechless. It's just a few miles long but its most impressive feature is its height. It just hovers above a huge valley at a height of 1000 feet from



"Crossing it you might think that you are flying on an ultralight."

the ground and crossing it you might think that you are flying on an ultralight. That's the height of the Eiffel tower more or less. The single pillars rise above the bridge path another 300 feet. Very impressive.

After Millau I get off the highway and find myself some secondary roads to play with. The first one is slow, tortuous and picturesque, buried deep inside the canyon of river Tarn. The next climbs up to some high plains, is narrow, fast and bumpy and reminds me more than anything of on-board camera footage from the Isle of Man races; it's my last adrenaline shot before stopping in Mende. This time the Tour de France is not in the area and as expected, I easily find myself a nice room in the main square hotel. There's still light and I use it to tour this mediaeval city's center by foot. Many of the buildings carry plates explaining their history, and to my surprise one of them used to be the synagogue of the Jewish ghetto till the late 16-century. Turns out that the long arms of the Spanish inquisition reached deep into France too. This night I enjoy a proper French dinner in front of Mende's cathedral while reflecting on the strange asymmetry of its twin bell towers. On the next morning, a small but cool flea market is held in the city square, a good chance to get my sweetheart a souvenir from the trip.



"Phallic. Very Phallic." Says Gabe.

Back on the bike, I am heading towards the southbound N102 road from Aubenas, the fabled route to the Bol'dor race. But as it would turn out, the first road I tackle,

the N88, a road I've never heard or read about, is simply mind blowing. 50 miles of the most perfect high speed bends, all flowing beautifully one into the other and the best of it is that as it leads from nowhere to nowhere, its totally empty. Highly illegal stuff, highly addictive. After this high-speed orgy, I mount the onboard camera for some even hotter action but the fabled N102 is a bit of a let down. Entertaining, but not nearly as perfect or empty. Never mind, it led me to discover the amazing N88. I'll be back here, that's for sure. Both roads though have served to show me that the ST might be defined as a sport tourer but it should have been "sport-sports-tourer". The thing handles and dances through these very demanding roads really, really well, down to peg scraping angles. The triple's burbling sound when cracking the throttle open on a highish gear is pure joy to the ears.

By now I've got another 20 miles till hitting the highway again and what do you know, a puncture. It's Sunday, and finding an open tire repair in France is mission impossible and obviously, I left the tubeless repair kit under my

GSXR's seat. Guess that's why God invented the GS1150 and their nice under-the-seat tool trays and puncture repair kits. A French rider on a bright yellow GS comes to my rescue. Using my Leatherman tool I pull out a three-inch long nail from the rear tire, press in the rubber plug and it holds. Great! And just as great is the fact that French riders are very helpful and friendly. Jean Claude, my saving angel, tells me that he used to race Velocettes in his youth and we exchange e-mails. I cross the Rhone again through a beautiful old steel bridge and hit the highway towards Italy. It's traffic jam time again but now I've got the extra punishment of temperatures in the high 90's. With all due respect and acclaim for the ST, heat management is really poor and the cool undertail exhaust certainly doesn't help here. Looks like Triumph road testers do their riding in cool and chilly England. The heat is so unbearable that in some of my stops, I pull into the public showers in the resting areas with my



This pic will get you in the Rider Warehouse



Yossef's saving angel rides a yellow Beemer.

Aerostitch Roadcrafter suit on. After being soaked in water, the natural evaporation while riding provides a really nice cooling effect, just don't forget to take out your wallet and cell phone from your pocket before doing it...

The nasty traffic jams continue all the way into Italy along the crazy autostrada to Genoa. As I crawl on, a CBR1000RR rider breaks the boredom. The guy is riding like crazy, zig-zagging through stopped traffic

catalog, Yossef.

notice that something is wrong with his tail section and he leaves an abnormal trail of burnt tire smell behind him. I decide to chase him, not an easy task with the heavy traffic and my luggage in the back. I reach him and start honking and pointing at his rear tire but the guy is on a suicide mission, doesn't really want to stop. At the end he gets trapped in traffic and I simply block his way. We pull to the side and it looks like he's going to hit me very soon. It's only then that he notices at last that his number plate has fallen off and is jammed between the swingarm and the rear tire. The metal has already cut two deep grooves in the tire, in a few more minutes it would have blown. That's when he says "Oh really? I didn't even notice." he mumbles. Stupid riders on big sport bikes are the perfect combination. (Amen to that.-Ed.) After the help I received with my puncture, at least I feel like I paid back my dues to the two wheeled world. I arrive back home at 12:00 at night. Some ride to work that was.

at high speed. Thing is, that after the guy passes me, I

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