

ULYSSES EUROPEAN GATHERING 2015

Five National Presidents, rides in three countries, 120 members from seven countries all in four days – this was the European gathering.

I first heard about the European gathering from my good mate Perry Stephens when we were both on the National Committee a while back. He was the National Committee International Liason at the time, so knew all of the National Presidents, and was instrumental in helping them start many of the overseas clubs. He told me what a great event it was, and he wasn't wrong!

Dianna & I arrived in London a few days early, which gave us time to pick up the rental bike from West Sussex Motorcycle hire. It was a 2014 Suzuki 1250 Bandit, and turned out to be perfect for the job, at home down the hairpin bends in the alps, or cruising at 130 + down the motorways in France. It came with panniers and a large topbox, but we still didn't have room for all our gear, so left some at the rental office along with our suitcases that had carried our bike gear as well.

We were based 45 minutes out of London for the first four days, so rode in to do the typical tourist musts, Buckingham Palace, London Eye, London Tower, Tower Bridge, open top bus trip etc. We purchased a new Tom Tom the day before we left home, but had trouble loading the Europe maps, so relied on a road atlas that we purchased from a market in Alice Springs when we were there for the AGM Event in 2014. We took a couple of wrong turns, and saw some of the less desirable suburbs of London, but all in all Dianna did a great job. The main arterial roads around London are covered with fixed radar cameras, but they are all preceded by signage, and even have white lines on the road where the camera reaches – very sporting of them. The limit drops to 20 MPH in the city centre, and there is a £12per day congestion tax, so the roads are fairly easy to negotiate. Luckily the tax doesn't apply to motorcycles, and we even managed to find free bike parking every day.

By the fourth day we were ready for some country riding, so were happy to be off to Canterbury to meet up with the Great Britain National President Andy with his wife Caroline, and GB members "two Shed" Pete and wife Ilz`e and Barry & Brenda. Dianna & I joined the GB Club when we booked this holiday, so were made most welcome by everyone. They were all very interested in Ulysses in Australia, and had lots of questions on our rides and other social events in Oz.

Early next day we headed of to Dover to board the ferry for the trip to France. We met up there several other riders, including Uncle Frank, a frequent Australia AGM Event attendee, Martin from Townsville and Andy & Marilyn Luck from Melbourne. A quick glance at the passport by the guy on the gate, and we were soon onboard tying our bikes down for the crossing. At Dunkirk we were waved on from the terminal, and out onto the right side of the road in France. Since the European Union, the borders are very relaxed, at times you cross from country to country without realizing. It is only when you read a road sign in a different language, you realise you have crossed the border.

I'm so glad our venture into France was behind another rider. It takes a bit of getting used to riding on the right side of the road, especially negotiating roundabouts. Pete was an excellent ride leader, constantly keeping us in sight and patiently helping us at toll booths (Andy Luck was definitely **not** aptly named. Every time he passed through a toll booth he had trouble, a theme that seemed to plague him for most of his holiday it seems!). We arrived at Fourmies in time for a few drinks before tea at a delightful little French Restaurant right next door to the hotel. The menu was all in French, so once again it was nice to have friends to explain the menu (in Ulysses there are no strangers, only friends you haven't met yet).

Next morning it was a slightly quicker pace along the motorways, as we had a fair distance to cover. The speed limit is 130 kph on the motorways, but the locals tend to use this more as a 'guide' more than a 'rule'. If you travel at any less than 160 kph in the left hand lane, you soon have a Mercedes or Audi a metre or so behind you with the left hand

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indicator flashing impatiently. This means the left hand lane is usually empty and makes for easier passing of slower (120 kph) vehicles. I really enjoyed riding in Europe, the roads especially the motorways are very good, and the faster speeds means you can cover long distances in a relatively short time. The fixed cameras are well marked with two metre wide signs, and are only situated in high risk areas like downhill winding roads or near towns. It was interesting to pass through the lush green countryside. I was amazed how much corn is grown in France. Acres and acres of the stuff, and in between that was acres of sunflowers, all ready for harvesting. Unfortunately it was also fertilizing season, which meant tractors towing huge spreaders loaded with pig poo that was flung high into the air over the ploughed fields, definitely hold your breath time as we rode past, even worse than a three day old dead 'roo at home!

Besancon was a lovely town, with buildings from the 1500's, and canals running through the centre of shops and houses alike, all overshadowed by the huge cathedral on a hill. We walked into town for dinner which we had in a cellar under a restaurant, a lovely setting to eat in.

The final days ride to Chatel where the European Gathering was held, was along the Swiss motorways, and then into the Alps. This was our introduction to the hairpin bends that are on every mountain you travel up or down. Most riders venture onto the wrong side of the road as you approach the corner, then cut the corner to keep the speed up as you exit the corner. You also have to keep an eye on approaching traffic, as trucks and buses need to venture onto the other side of the road to negotiate some corners. It all makes for interesting riding, but it does wear you out after a few hours.

We arrived at our chateau mid afternoon on Friday, and were welcomed by owner John and several other Ulysses GB members who had made their own way there. The chateau was lovely, one of the largest in town and completely refurbished with Ensuites, a bar and a large downstairs dining room. Our room had wonderful views of the mountain behind the chateau. Dinner that night was at the other main accommodation, the chateau across the road. We were met by an enthusiastic sea of smiling faces. As we mingled with the crowd we were introduced to members from France, Germany, Great Britain, Denmark and Switzerland. Some of the other members spoke very good English while others spoke none. Everyone was excited to be at the event and asked a lot of questions about Ulysses in Australia, amazed at the size of our branches and the distance we travel on our rides. The staff there had prepared a delicious buffet dinner and the tables were soon full of plates overflowing with food and glasses of wine and beer. The French President Enzo welcomed us to the event. He had an infectious smile and turned to his VP John to help with some of the English words. He was obviously proud that his newly formed club was hosting the event only two months after being sanctioned as the France Ulysses Club. He promised us a weekend of great rides and good friends, a promise he delivered over the next few days.

The rides were well organized, and members could study maps and ride details before adding their names to their chosen ride. Rides were identified by colours and coloured ribbons were given out to attach to the rear of your bike to make sure everyone was on the ride they had chosen. I opted for the cruisey rides on Saturday and Monday, and the fast (fast for the road conditions but still well below the speed limit) ride on Sunday.

Saturday morning we assembled at the meeting point outside the chateau and were soon off on our first ride led by John with Pepe as tail end Charlie. Pepe doesn't speak any English but always had a big welcoming smile when you met him. His hair was long and all over the place... a lot like mine.

First stop was a small café near a beautiful gorge. Some opted to trek down to the lookout, while the rest of us were happy to sit and sip our espresso's in the sunshine. Our next stop was a stunning lake surrounded by steep rocky mountains. The lake was like a mirror and reflected the trees and mountains perfectly. We sat and ate our ham and cheese baguettes as we took in our surroundings before having another espresso in the small café.

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On the ride back to the chateau we stopped to have a look at an ancient Roman road that had been carved out of the hillside. The path up and down was incredibly steep and it is amazing to think they carved through the stone by hand almost 2000 years ago. You could almost imagine the Roman soldiers marching through the hillside like in one of those old gladiator movies from the 60's.

At dinner that night we were told that the fast ride would now leave at 9am instead of the published 10am so we could fit in some more mountain riding. The next morning 5 brave riders met outside the chateau. Our ride leader was Camille who is also President of SAMVA, another local riding group. On his pack was a patch declaring he was a dynamite rider, which certainly turned out to be the case. I found out later he drives a cement truck up and down the hairpin bends that are common throughout the area, which explains his skillful riding style. The majority of the day was spent on narrow winding mountain roads with drop-offs of several hundred metres. We visited many of the area's spectacular scenic locations including lakes and lookouts before stopping at a delightful little café that was perched high on a mountain and looked over the houses in the valley below with the beautiful Lake Geneva in the distance.

At lunch we met up with the other riding groups for a delicious lunch that included local cheese and sausage that was all provided by the local council. After lunch we bid farewell to the other groups and headed back into the mountains. The afternoon became a blur of hairpin bends, tunnels through the mountains and a number of small villages followed by more hairpin bends, sometimes travelling 10kms to move 1km closer to our destination. Our last stop was a small tavern where we had a well earned icy cold beer and talked about the great roads we had been down that day. We finally arrived back at the chateau at 8pm exhausted from concentrating all day on the roads. I'm glad it stayed light until 9pm as I would hate to do these roads in the dark.

Next morning we had a sleep in as the ride didn't leave until 10 and we arrived to join the group of about 40 riders lead by Enzo with Pepe once again performing the tail end Charlie function. I never thought I'd say this, but it was actually nice to be on some straight roads for a change!!! The scenery was still stunning with mountains and waterfalls on both sides. We stopped at a motorcycle café for morning tea where they had a great collection of old motorcycles on display. Even the tables were supported by old Benelli's, BMW's, and there was an outstanding Indian above the bar complete with tank change gears. The glass top tables were a great idea and I would love to have a go at making one, one day. Our next turn off the highway saw us climbing once again and we were soon a kilometer above the small town with the sheer drop off the side of the mountain more than a little distressing for my pillion. We stopped on the side of the road to take some photos of Mont Blanc. The locals said we were very lucky to see the top of the mountain as it is usually covered in cloud.

The trip back down the mountain was just as nerve wracking and Dianna was pleased to be back on level ground. Her relief was short lived as we then proceeded up the other side of the valley to Chamonix at the base of Mont Blanc. There was a cable car to the top where you can walk out on a glass platform and look down at the town 1000m below. After the excitement of the trip up there Dianna and I decided to give it a miss. We made our own way home as I was keen to try out the GPS before we headed off on our own the following day.

At dinner that night the various club Presidents all gave short speeches thanking the French Club for organizing a great weekend. It was great to hear how passionate they all are about the Ulysses Club and to see how many strong friendships have developed between the Clubs. It is amazing to see such a bond between people that in some cases don't even speak the same language. As we walked around the tables saying goodbye and thanking everyone for making us feel so welcome, we felt a genuine friendship with these people we had only met a few days previously. We had a lot of invitations to visit and hope that one day we can return. In the morning we packed the bike and said goodbye to the GB Club and thanked 2 Shed Pete, Ilze, Barry, Brenda, Andy and Caroline for their help in organizing our trip and I hope one day we see them in Australia and can offer them the same hospitality they have shown us.

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We headed off on our own through the rolling countryside of Italy before stopping on the coast at Savona. That day we left France, travelled through Switzerland, crossed the Italian border in the middle of a tunnel and had a pizza in Italy for tea that night. The next day we followed the coast to Monaco where we stopped to admire the boats in the marina from the top of the hill near the palace. After Monaco we continued along the coast stopping the night in Nice. We took a slow ride along the waterfront admiring the huge grand hotels along the promenade.

We visited some markets the next morning and luckily our panniers and top box were already full to bursting so Dianna had to be satisfied with just window shopping. Most shops and markets close for a couple of hours at lunchtime so as the markets emptied out we hopped back on the bike and headed to the land of the rich and famous, St Tropez. Dianna found a quaint old hotel with a window that opened over one of the narrow streets, the perfect place to sit and watch tourists and the wealthy locals walk by. We wandered down to the marina for lunch and watched the celebrity tour boats that cruise along the waterfront pointing out the homes of the famous. That night we dressed up and went to a restaurant opposite where the luxury boats tied up. Many of these were well over 20m and carried jetskis, some even had helipads on the back and most had underwater lighting that attracted the small fish in the harbor. When we returned home we googled some of the boat names and found most were owned by rich Arabs and European billionaires.

We headed towards Montpellier but decided that we didn't want to stay inland overnight and looked for a seaside area. It was a case of "Palavas looks good, let's go there". Palavas is an area that looks like it should be a picture for a jigsaw puzzle. It has a beautiful inlet that is lined with colorful boats and restaurants, and from the bridge at night, is such a pretty sight. In the bay there were some wild Flamingos which looked like they were pink. The underside of their wings were orange and the colour reflected through their white feathers. The whole area was like a postcard picture.

The next day we crossed over the magnificent Millau bridge which spans 2.5kms at a height of 343 m and then rode into a thunder storm. We were glad to reach Clermont-Ferrand where we left a huge puddle at reception as the water ran off our jackets and boots. In the evening we wandered around the town square and back streets and admired the beautiful old buildings.

The following morning it was back onto the motorways and heading for Paris where we arrived just after 2pm so spent the afternoon exploring the local shops and streets. In the morning we rode to the Champs Elysee and came across some Segways that we promptly hired for 45 mins. We had a tour along the Champs Elysee to the Arc de Triomphe. These were great fun and surprisingly easy to ride. Next on the tourist list was the Eiffel Tower. We joined the queue and within minutes we were in the lift going to the first level. After 2 more lifts we finally reached the top, a mere 320 metres high. The view from the top is amazing. After taking a heap of photos we noticed a storm approaching. It was soon upon us and the tower started to sway slightly in the strong winds. A queue quickly formed at the lift as people were a little uneasy with the swaying. That evening we went to the Moulin Rouge which was excellent even though expensive. The décor and costumes were extremely lavish and extravagant.

We headed off early the next morning and I was glad of the 130kph limit on the freeway as we had to be in Dunkirk to catch the 12.30 ferry. When we left the ferry at Dover we headed for Brighton. We had a quick look at the pier and the pebble beach in the morning before returning the bike to West Sussex Motorcycle Hire. It was then taxi and train to Heathrow Airport where we had time to look through a few of the 4,800 photos we had taken and reflect on what a great holiday it had been.

We travelled 2,900 miles on the bike through 4 countries and met 120 new Ulysses friends.

Chris & Dianna Glover