



# Henry goes Heidi high!

London chef **Henry Harris** wanted a few days away from the kitchen. So he leapt on his BMW motorbike for a trip that combined challenging roads, lovely hotels and great food

**AFTER TOO** long in the saddle, the descent into Switzerland finally began. A few miles of sweeping curves down to a border crossing and then a journey on smaller roads at a gentle pace, observing the speed limit towards Montreux. I went around the ring road of Lausanne and headed into Montreux as twilight approached. The satnav became a little confused at this point as I climbed from the lakeside up to my hotel.

It took me around the back of the property and into the side of the mountain, suggesting a 32% gradient road as the best route. I decided I knew better on a well loaded BMW.

At last... at 8.45 at night, having left West London at 4.30 that morning, I rode through the gates of the Hotel Victoria ([victoria-glion.ch](http://victoria-glion.ch)): beautiful, classic and splendid. Someone came out to welcome me and to help with my luggage.

## Riding tip

Take a look at [myswitzerland.com](http://myswitzerland.com) which offers details and photographs for nine motorbike touring routes.



## The high road



I walked up to reception, thinking more of a cold refreshing beer than anything else... only to discover that I had no reservation. I was ready to sit on the floor and refuse to move and in fact never get on my bike again.

The receptionist could not have been more charming and helpful. "Don't worry, Mr Harris, you will have a room," was all I heard. Minutes later I walked into a room with large balcony

windows that had the most stunning view of Lake Geneva as the sun went down. I discarded my leathers, changed and headed downstairs.

I walked along the road to stretch my legs and popped into the Café de Jaman for my cold beer and supper. I enjoy dining alone from time to time. After a couple of beers, I tucked in to a restorative and very large bowl of pasta dressed with local ham, cream and cheese. Comfort >>

**Main pic:** there were a few more gentle straight and level stretches, too.

**Right, from top:** Ducati and BMW handle very differently on the tight bends; the Spreuerbrücke in Lucerne; a well-earned pasta dinner.

# MACELLERIA

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>> food without equal. When I arrived back in my room, it scarcely took seconds for me to fall asleep.

Muesli, bread, cheese, ham and fruit made up a good sound breakfast to keep me bright and alert for the day. I admit I was nervous at the thought of my first Alpine pass on two wheels. First, a little bit of Swiss motorway then smaller roads toward the Col du Grand Saint Bernard, well known to anyone who has watched *The Italian Job*.

Past the sign to Verbier and the ascent started. There were hardly any cars, but some very fit cyclists taking the same route. These roads require a very different style of riding and, I sense, a lot of practice to be ridden well. I applied myself to turning in when there was a big drop, or no barriers in some places.

All the time, everyone seemed to be going past me, but for me, *Arrive alive* was the plan.

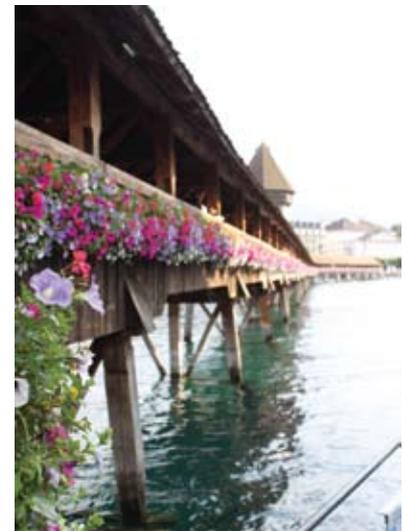
The weather became cold and misty, so I stopped to add layers and to watch the cyclists I had passed earlier pedal onwards and upwards, past big banks of snow. I was immensely relieved when I made it to the top and could look down over the icy lake and the unmanned border post into Italy.

More moments of nerves followed, as I thought about having to ride down through the sweeping curves and tight switchbacks. The roads were almost deserted, so I was able to focus on learning new skills. Some while later, and at the bottom of the mountain, I stopped to stretch and reflect on how I had enjoyed it.

Satnav guided me to my next hotel, in Mendrisio, and I stepped happily into my lovely little terraced room. I enjoyed a beautiful plate of local salamis and cured meats with very good bread. I had the chance to rest for an hour before meeting Jasmin Haslimeier from Ticino Turismo. She turned up on a Ducati Streetfighter to guide me up to the Muggio Valley.

On the way we stopped to meet a cheesemaker, Marialuce Valtolini, who takes milk from dairy herds in the Valley and makes a stunning cheese called Zincarlin. Aged in stone caves that have a natural cold airflow through the rocks, the cheeses are washed regularly with a local wine and salt and turn from a delicate soft curd to a sharp pungent cheese that packs a real punch. Sadly for us it doesn't get as far as the UK, but Marialuce gave me a cheese to take away and try later.

Heading up into the Valley, it was like going back to school. Jasmin has been riding these mountain roads ever since she first climbed on a motorbike. She was swift and confident. Whilst following at a distance, every move started to become more fluid and enjoyable as I followed her line more proficiently. As we climbed higher, we found ourselves on roads barely a car's



width, with looser surfaces. I did proceed with a greater degree of caution.

From a technical point of view, my longer wheelbased K1200R Sport lacked the agility of the Streetfighter and I did start to notice that the sportier V twins were always the bikes that disappeared into the distance first.

Ticino is very Italian and the locals I met are fiercely proud of this and their unique Swiss heritage. Food and wine too. The countryside, pastures and mountains are beautiful.

Back at base, Jasmin took me to a local grotto, not a cave but what the local Ticinese restaurants are often called. Grotto Bundi is owned by Stefano Romelli. Like some of the dishes of Northern Italy, the food is hearty and warming. Polenta is a key part of the meal. Local salamis and hams made another great starter. Then Stefano bought a succession of different dishes for me to try: wild mushroom ragout; stewed rustic sausages and braised beef that melted into itself. A plate of grilled onions was worth the journey alone.

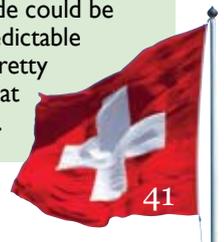
As in any good restaurant the wine is as important as the food. Stefano introduced me to a local white merlot. Virtually unheard of outside the region, Bianco Rovere is >>

**Facing page:** the Ticino region of Switzerland is famous for its range of salami and ham products.

**Above:** Mrs Valtolini presents a rack of Zincarlin cheeses; the 80-metre high Foroglio Waterfall in Ticino's Bavona Valley; flowers adorn the Chapel Bridge in Luzern.

### Riding tip

I did my trip in June, so I made sure I had as much lightweight gear as I could. But I also packed warmer gloves and a fleece, as well as rain jacket and trousers, as weather at high altitude could be unpredictable and pretty chilly at times.





>> made by local wine maker Guido Brivio. Creamy with a good mineral finish, it was an excellent way to start the meal with the cured meats. After that we followed on with a glass of Guido Brivio's red merlot.

I had brought the previously mentioned Zincarlin with me to taste. Its spice and unique flavour finished the meal off perfectly. I lamented that I wasn't going to be able to bring the cheese home with me to share with the family. Stefano disappeared with it and returned it in a vacuum packed pouch. As long as I kept it in the minibar fridge of my hotels for the next few days it should make it, he told me.

At breakfast, I showed my day's route to the hotel manager, Patrick. It turned out he does a lot of riding and whilst he liked my planned route, he suggested his favourite Alpine passes. I headed off and was soon sweeping along the edge of a spectacular lake, pleased with the change of route.

As I approached the Gotthard Pass, I stopped for coffee and a gasoza (a fizzy drink that is popular in this Ticino part of Switzerland and is truly refreshing). Patrick had recommended the Susten Pass as his favourite, but it wasn't on my list. A personal recommendation is always welcome, so with a few tweaks to the Garmin, I headed up the Gotthard Pass with Susten next on the list.

By the time I made it down the other side, I was heading towards the trio of Furka, Grimsel and Susten passes. Equally dramatic scenery, very technical roads that really do drop away down the sides of the mountain. A clear head and concentration are vital. There really is no room for errors, ever, at all.

The Furka Pass was incredibly technical and those sheer high drops did at times spook me a little. Also when you get over and down to the bottom, the only choice you have is to go straight up and over the Grimsel Pass on the other side. Rest is so important here. Whilst it might be only 15 to 20 minutes to go up and a similar time to go down, the level of concentration is such that it can tire you very quickly, especially when the roads are so unfamiliar. I always had plenty of water with me to keep hydrated. This is so important for staying focused. Of all the passes that I took on, Susten was the most enjoyable that day. A great surface, stunning scenery and, as I was becoming more familiar with the techniques



**Top:** Church of Brienz, Lake Brienz. **Above, from left:** the clock tower in Luzern's old town; a high section of Swiss road - this one with barriers; dinner at Nix's.

needed, I found everything started to feel more relaxed and fluid.

After Susten I realised I was famished. I went into Meirigen, home of the Reichenbach Falls, and found a lovely mountainside restaurant where I sat on the terrace and had a large rosti, topped with melted raclette cheese and good ham. Röstli, the classic Swiss grated potato cake with a little seasoning, is both filling and comforting. It was just what was needed to see me on my way to Lucerne.

After some motorway miles and a few long tunnels I arrived at the Hotel Wilden-Mann ([wilden-mann.ch](http://wilden-mann.ch)) in the heart of the old town. Genteel and quiet, it didn't seem to be the type of hotel that would welcome a pannier-carrying leather-clad biker. But, just as

Henry Harris is one of the UK's finest chefs. Until January 2015 he was Chef Patron of Racine in London's Knightsbridge. Prior to that, he was Executive Chef at Harvey Nicholls' Fifth Floor restaurant. A regular contributor to national newspapers on food matters, Henry also finds time to indulge his enthusiasm for motorcycling.



### Fact file

Henry Harris's tour was organised by Switzerland Tourism ([myswitzerland.com](http://myswitzerland.com) or call freephone 00800 100 200 30). Check the website for a selection of tours. The Grand Tour ([myswitzerland.com/grandtour](http://myswitzerland.com/grandtour)) is a self-driving route for cars or motorcycles that goes 1,000 miles through four language regions, over five Alpine passes, to 11 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, as well as through two biospheres and along 22 lakes.

### Touring tip

Bearing in mind my priority of arriving alive, I did not fall foul of the traffic police. But I saw several riders whose wallets had been lightened as a result of going too fast. So be warned and take it easy.

