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DISCOVER THE SÖLKPASS

Experience a ride back in time on Austria's 6000-year-old trade route

● **'We are alone on the road and at one with the scenery'**

Far from the crowds, it is the ideal destination



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What better way to celebrate our long-awaited freedom than by tackling the highest pass in Styria, Austria, the Sölkpass between Stein am Enns on the north side of the Alps to Schöder on the south? This pass is one of several ancient trade routes that straddle the alpine barrier between the north and south and was traversed as far back as the Bronze Age by mule, by horse and cart in the late 1600s and paved in the 1950s before being fully surfaced in 1986. Historically traders brought oil,

wine and spices up from the south and returned with salt, leather and minerals. These passes were of vital importance to cultural and economic exchanges across Europe, but nowadays they're traversed more for pleasure than business. Yet unlike some of the better-known Austrian passes, there aren't pelotons of cyclists, caravans of sightseers and heaving hosteleries on every turn, one of the Sölkpass's many alluring features is its relative tranquillity.

close several times in response to fresh snow falls at either end of the season. Luckily for us in the late spring sun, it is open today but should still have some snow up top. There are five bikes in our group and as we leave the regular valley

traffic behind and start the climb we are alone on the road and at one with the scenery. This is one of the high passes in Austria that is toll free but there are signs warning that if there are too many motorcyclists breaking the speed limits they may close the pass to motorbiking completely. On the north side the road follows the valley floor and the Sölkbach river, climbing steadily past small villages on a patchwork quilt of tarmac. There are so many different coloured asphalt patch repairs from the annual winter erosion that at times it is like riding over a randomised chessboard. After

● **'One of the truly great riding roads'**

several sweeps and turns we eventually pass a small reservoir on our right and soon find ourselves passing through the village of St. Nikolai im Sölkatal and the real start of the pass, the point where the barrier goes down at closure times. The road is narrower now and



Treelined roads on the south side



Time to stop at the lovely Hirschenwirt Restaurant



At the peak the sign is plastered in the obligatory stickers



Inside the rustic Hansenalmtutte



The sign is a welcoming sight



Alpine coffee and cake perfection



No need to worry about locking up

'I DID IT TOO'

'Spring sun and hairpins'

Paul and Liz Truckle run a B&B in the Austrian Alps. Liz rides pillion on Paul's BMW S1000XR, and Paul also has a Triumph Sprint 955i. Here's Liz's take on the Sölkpass from her view on the back: "Early spring sun shone as we swept through the various shades of green on the lower pastures which are replaced by grey rocks and scree as we ascend. We cross the occasional stream and start to climb, twisting around a number of steep hairpin bends, and eventually reach the car park, just before the peak. Much as we wanted to continue on a longer circuit, we had to return the same way (to greet guests arriving at our B&B), but there is always next time."



Paul and Liz pause at the peak

'YOU CAN DO IT'

The road is normally open between mid May and October – check the ÖAMTC website for up-to-date info www.oeamtc.at/poi/passroad/ps-59 Unlike more frequented passes, the Sölkpass isn't overburdened with cafés and eateries, that said there are a couple of choice places to stop, chiefly Hansenalmtutte (hansenalmtutte.at) and Hirschenwirt in Schöder (hirschenwirt-schoeder.at).

of them on this side of the pass before we crest the high point in the snow at 1790m. We are greeted with the usual sticker-covered high point sign alongside a small chapel that originally served as a place of worship and thanks for safe passage as well as a bad weather shelter. This high point has been a rich source of archaeological finds from ancient arrowheads and Roman coins to sections of barrier wall. The ride down the southern side of the pass drops steeply through the tree line and away from the snow with six hairpins before reaching a newly resurfaced joyride through the forests and along the

Katschbach river. This section has been completely transformed by the new road surface and is now one of the truly great riding roads in Austria. We decide to stop at the 600-year-old Hirschenwirt Restaurant in Schöder at the southern end of the pass for lunch. Great food and very biker friendly – they even have a box on the wall with tools and cleaning equipment. Toni, the proprietor, is a motorbike freak and a font of knowledge about the Sölkpass. After a leisurely lunch it's time to turn around and do it all again – too many photo opportunities for just a one-way ride. **MCN**

has taken on the more familiar twisting, climbing nature of an alpine pass. But after only a few turns we emerge into another long winding valley with the snow covered peak of the Hornfeldspitze glistening like a jewel ahead of us. Time for a coffee stop at the wonderfully rustic biker friendly Hansenalmtutte. We leave helmets and jackets on the bikes (theft is not much of a risk here) and pass through the creaking wooden entrance door into a time gone by. Eyes momentarily struggling to adapt to the low light

levels and senses bombarded by the aromas of speciality burgers mixed with sweet impressions of Kaiserschmarren (a shredded pancake Austrian favourite) and Apfeltrudel. We settle into the cosy interior and try to resist temptation. Back on the road the real fun ride begins. The glistening mountain peak gets ever closer as we wind our way through twisty forest sections interspersed with alpine meadows and free wandering cattle. We soon reach the first of the hairpins. There are only five

WORDS AND PICTURES GEOFF TOMPKINSON