

Tyrol, Austria

# The hills are alive...

...with the sound of silence. Geoff Tompkinson explores Tyrol and rides the pass that has banned noisy bikes

'A narrow ribbon of good asphalt snakes along the forested mountain'

The Austrian region of Tyrol has hit the biking headlines for all the wrong reasons this year. After a study into noise pollution, the local government decided to ban excessively loud motorbikes (not cars) from some of the region's best roads during the summer months. The Hahntennjoch pass is just one of these contentious routes, effectively outlawing all motorcycles louder than 95dB. Just as there's no smoke without fire, there aren't noisy bikes without tremendous tarmac to tempt them. So, as Europe emerged from lockdown, it was time to venture on to the route causing all the furor, on sub-95dB bikes, of course.



Turquoise water contrasts with the wooded valley floor

**Valley deep, mountain high**

Leaving the flat Elmen valley floor on the Bsclabler Landesstrasse, the fun starts with a right-hand hairpin leading to a rapidly climbing straight section, seemingly bolted to the side of the mountain on our left. The road turns left and continues to climb alongside a deep gorge with glimpses of the Streimbach river a long way down below us to the right. The wide open vistas of the valley have now been replaced by a narrow ribbon of good asphalt snaking alongside the forested mountain. Around one curve the road cuts through a section of rock via a tiny picturesque arch, followed by a series of more modern looking short tunnels and avalanche protection overhangs, until it arrives at the lovely little village of Bsclabs, after which this section of the Hahntennjoch is named.

Leaving Bsclabs the road gets ever more spectacular as it snakes its way around and clings to the side of precipitous cliffs dropping steeply down to the Plötzigbach river below. A sharp right-hand hairpin winds up and towards the distant peak of the Dremelspitze mountain and the village of Boden where

**'Alpine riding is all about these tingling moments of perfection'**

we take a left turn to continue on the Hahntennjoch. A green traffic light here indicates that the pass is currently open; routinely closed in the winter months the pass can also be closed at any time as it is very prone to avalanches, falling rocks, and mudslides.

**Alpine biking at its best**

Leaving the cliffside drama behind, we continue to climb through a series of forested hairpins. The road surface is immaculate with Armco barriers where needed and attractive red and white edge tiling on the inside edges of tight curves. With the traffic being so scarce at the moment the ride is free flowing and uninhibited. As the road bends and twists on its relentless upwards journey it instils one of those tingling moments of perfection - this

is what alpine motorcycling is all about. It's easy to see why this road is one of the most popular motorcycle routes in the Austrian Tyrol.

Slowing to 30kph through the tiny hamlet of Pfafflar, where you'll find some of the Tyrol's oldest wooden houses - dating back to the 13th century - the perfect asphalt opens up then winds on through a series of sweeping bends and occasional hairpins until we pass the treeline to arrive at the 1894m highpoint in an environment of shrubby ground cover and loose gravel.

As the road levels out on the top signs warn of extreme danger of Muren (landslides) in bad weather and on the descent it becomes obvious why. The mountain ridge meets the road via a huge steeply inclined slope of loose scree and

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It's easy to see why the road is so popular, just don't fall foul of the new noise regs

WORDS AND PICTURES GEOFF TOMPKINSON



The ibex is the symbol of the region



It's not a race, take time out for a decent lunch



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Some forms of travel are classier than others

# 'The ski lifts are going and the café is in après ski mode'

small rocks intermittently striped with struggling green vegetation. It looks like one of those two-colour-sand-in-a-bottle souvenirs you sometimes see at seaside resorts and feels like riding through a gravel quarry that could shift at any time. Which it clearly does.

Another few kilometres of this strange landscape brings us to probably the most iconic section of the Hahntennjoch: a narrow – but still two lane – tightly winding snake of a road clinging to the side of the crumbling cliff to the right, and unconvincing horizontal tree trunk guarding against a plummeting drop the ravine floor to the left. This is one of Europe's standout motorcycling sections, but is also sadly the scene of many unfortunate accidents in the summer months, when over-eager riders take too many chances passing slow cars.

A further 3km or so of clinging to the cliff face bring us away from our rocky adventure and back into more familiar territory. A wonderful downhill blast through the forest mixes straights, curves and hairpins to delight. As our descent flattens out we spot a turning to the right signposted 'The Belmont Hotel' a short diversion later we emerge on a sunny plateau above Imst and take lunch on the wonderful Belmont Terrace. Part one of this ride is over. Next we head to a completely different experience.

## The Kaunerterer Gletscherstrasse

This road's stats are impressive: 26km long, with 29 hairpins which climb 1500m in altitude. It is the second highest paved road in Austria and at the foot of the Weißseeferner Glacier, where it ends, it reaches an altitude of 2750m. Two hundred metres higher than the mighty Grossglockner road. Because of the extreme climb, it passes through every vegetation level in the Alps. It is said that what can be experienced here in a very

short distance can otherwise only be found on a trip from North Germany to Greenland.

Initially the descent continues as we zig zag our way down to the village of Kauns where a sharp left turn leads us to the floor of the Kauner valley. The distant snowcapped peaks of the Ötztal Alps and occasional glimpses of Austria's second highest peak – the Wildspitze, draw us forwards and hint at what is to come. As we leave Kauns and pass Berneck Castle on our right the road is a narrow winding rural ribbon through deciduous forest and wide fields dotted with makeshift sheds. For a while we snake along the valley floor with the river to our right and pass through picturesque villages until we arrive at the toll just after the village of Feichten. C15 each and the real fun begins.

## Counting ibex

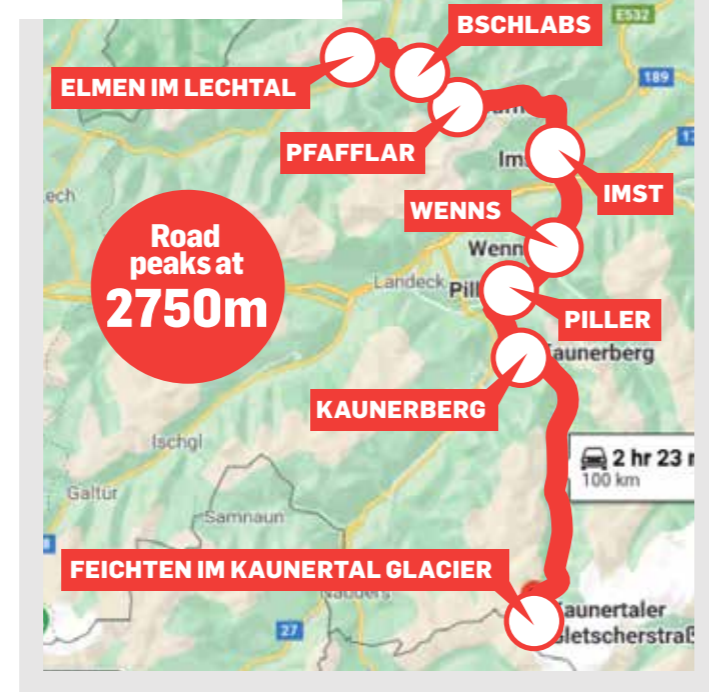
Initially the road continues on the same trend. Gently snaking along the valley but the incline is a little more and the deciduous forest has been replaced by pines that encroach on both sides. Every km is marked by a sign with a cutout ibex (the Kauner valley is home to the largest ibex colony in Austria) and a number counting up from the toll booth. At kilometre 7 we hit the twisties with hairpin number 29 (they count down towards the top). A short series of climbing hairpins reveals a strange vision ahead of us that turns out to be the massive dam wall of the Gepatsch reservoir. Completed in 1965 this 160-metre high rockfill dam (the highest in Europe) holds back a reservoir of 140 million litres of water.

As we crest the climb and pass the Infopoint café the turquoise glacier water of the reservoir leads away towards the ever closer snowcapped Ötztal Alps. The narrow broken road winds alongside the left-hand side of the reservoir with occasional small waterfalls dropping down to the road from the left. At the end of the reservoir the climbing hairpins

start again. After kilometre 16 a sweeping right-hand turn takes us across the Faggenbach river to one of the most enjoyable hairpin sections of the ride. A steep spiral of curves with alternate views of the snow-capped Alps above and the turquoise blue reservoir below lead us up above the tree line and into the snow.

We are on top of the world and the last few kilometres to the foot of the glacier are a wonderful twisting ribbon through a snow and rock desert with blue skies above. As we pull into the carpark past Austria's highest bus stop and make our way between parked cars and skiers clamping their boots on, the glacier is right there in front of us. The ski lifts are going and the café terrace is in full après ski mode. It seems so strange to be amidst all this on a motorbike. Undoubtedly one of the most varied and spectacular days riding we have ever done. A dream ride if ever there was one. **MCN**

## The Route



Road peaks at 2750m



The obligatory stickers adorn the Hahntennjoch sign



There are 140 million litres of water in there...

'Views of the Alps above and the blue reservoir below'

## LET'S HEAD TO TYROL



The roads around the Austrian Tyrol are a real treat

# Everything you need to know about riding in the Tyrol

**1** Tyrol has stunning mountain roads and breathtaking scenery. Due to the altitude on some of the passes, the best months to ride are between June and October. It is always advisable to check on the ÖAMTC website whether particular roads are open or not.

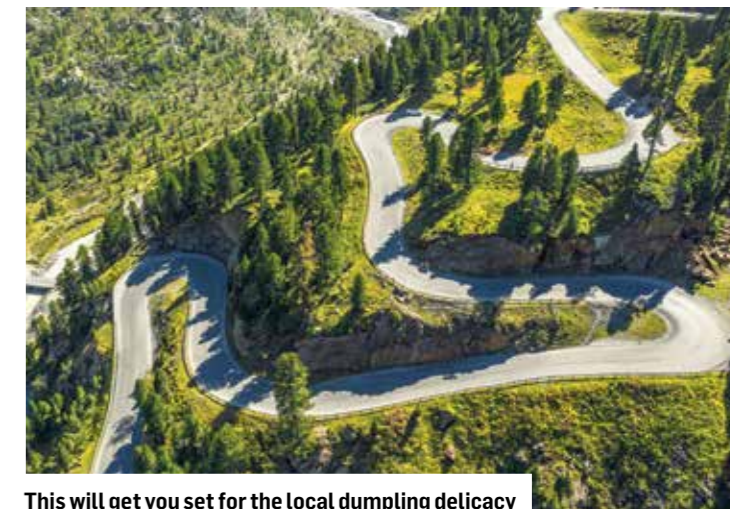
closed due to landslides. You can check whether the road is open here: [www.oeamtc.at/poi/passroad/ps-07](http://www.oeamtc.at/poi/passroad/ps-07)

**2** Speed limit in towns is normally 50km/h and in the countryside 100km/h. Police checks are frequent and it is advisable to stick to speed limits if you want to avoid a fine.

**4** Kaunerterer Glacier Road: Toll road from Grasse (just after Feichten) - €15 per bike. Road surface is generally good, but there is a narrow and broken asphalt section along the reservoir. Normally open between June and October. Check whether the road is open here: [www.kaunerterer-gletscher.at/strassenbericht](http://www.kaunerterer-gletscher.at/strassenbericht)

**3** Hahntennjoch: L246 between Elmen and Imst. No toll. But motorbikes over 95 decibel are currently prohibited between June and November. Road surface is good. In heavy rain the road can be

**5** Eat this: Hearty dishes are popular in Tyrol. You should definitely try bacon dumplings, cheese press dumplings, Tyrolean Gröstl and Schltzkrapfen. In addition to Kaiserschmarren pancakes, there are also apple fritters and mountain blueberry dumplings.



This will get you set for the local dumpling delicacy