



Discover the Passo Gavia

The lesser-known Italian road that definitely needs to go on your bucket list



'It's a bit like leaving town through a secret portal'



BY GEOFF TOMPKINSON
'The Honorary Austrian'
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When touring in Northern Italy it has become an almost mandatory rite of passage to pay pilgrimage to the Stelvio Pass. But once you've ridden that legendary road, dodging the coaches and cars, and taken the obligatory pictures at the summit, you'll discover that the region has more up its sleeve, and the Passo Gavia is just one of those secrets. Thirty kilometres south of Stelvio, Passo Gavia is the tenth highest paved road in the Alps and connects Ponte di Legno in the South with Bormio in the North. The southern

side is mostly single narrow track and full of tight hairpins; as a result, coaches are banned and cars are rare. In many places there is only just room for two motorbikes to pass each other in opposite directions, which makes for some interesting and potentially challenging moments. Even finding the pass itself is a bit of a test. Following a route we planned on the satnav through Ponte di Legno's maze of cobbled side roads, we are just beginning to lose confidence

when we encounter a short underpass with an ornate iron plate with the words 'Passo Gavia rising to 2620 metres above sea level'. It's a bit like leaving the town through a secret portal that we would never have found by chance. The road rapidly leaves civilisation behind and follows the glinting light of the cold looking and suitably named Frigidolfo river for a few kilometres before reaching the first hairpins and the start of the climb. At this point it is reminiscent

of so many other Italian passes and their riders no doubt deciding to come back via a different and less challenging route. From this point upwards the scenery opens out as the trees fall behind and we traverse a gently winding route along the shoulder of the mountain. The scenery to our right is moor-like with occasional stunted trees contrasted by spectacular drops to our left, only occasionally protected by rusty steel poles and tired looking wooden beams. As we climb ever higher the landscape becomes more rocky and barren and the road surface more broken up.

you feel like you are about to drive off a cliff into nothingness. Then the road suddenly flattens out, the asphalt improves and we can see the buildings at the top; time for a break on the terrace of the Rifugio Bonetta, and a few pictures with the usual array of sticker-festooned highpoint signs. After lunch we leave the parking



The road is narrow, winding and hugely rewarding to ride



The surface is patchy so be ready to take it steady



You meet a few bikes but it's hardly packed



There are plenty of photo stops



Park up for a break on the terrace



Definitely the road less travelled



Lower levels are gorgeously green

I DID IT

'We had to take refuge'

James Allen
Maintenance electrician at Crosshouse Hospital

"Myself and my friend Rab, me on a Hayabusa and Rab on a Vmax, rode the Gavia Pass in both directions back in 2009, en route to the Stelvio. On the way there it was 30 degrees and beautiful riding conditions. The initial climb on a very narrow road was both challenging and exciting due to the not-so-great road surface at the time. It's a very steep climb with breathtaking views and tight hairpin bends (try it with a Hayabusa!). The run down the other side was every bit as exciting and a very worthwhile experience. On the way back the temperature as we climbed went from 30 degrees and sunny to 12 degrees and cloudy, and when I say cloudy I mean we were in the clouds with zero visibility. We had to stop at the rescue cabin and put a few more layers on and wait for the clouds to clear. I would love to do this pass again as it's a beautiful area."

area and pass the deep blue Lago Bianco on our right against a backdrop of hundreds of sheep being driven across the hillside by a lone shepherd. Ahead are spectacular views of the snowy peaks as we descend to Bormio and the start of the hustle and bustle of the aforementioned Stelvio. The ride down this side of the Gavia is beautiful and relaxing after the challenges of the ascent, being now two lanes instead of one. It's a road that has it all – but with less of the traffic – and goes to prove that often the lesser-known routes are actually better experiences than the famous ones. **MGN**

NOW'S YOUR TURN...

Passes usually open in the second half of May and close again at the start of November, so you've plenty of time to start planning – restrictions permitting. Mid September usually provides the best weather and is a little quieter in terms of tourism. But, like anywhere in the Alps, be prepared for cold or adverse conditions. Base yourself at Bormio to be central to all the passes as well as taking your

pick of the hotels – some are biker friendly with garages. Or you can choose to stay in one of the smaller outlying ski resorts. Bormio is 600 miles from Calais.