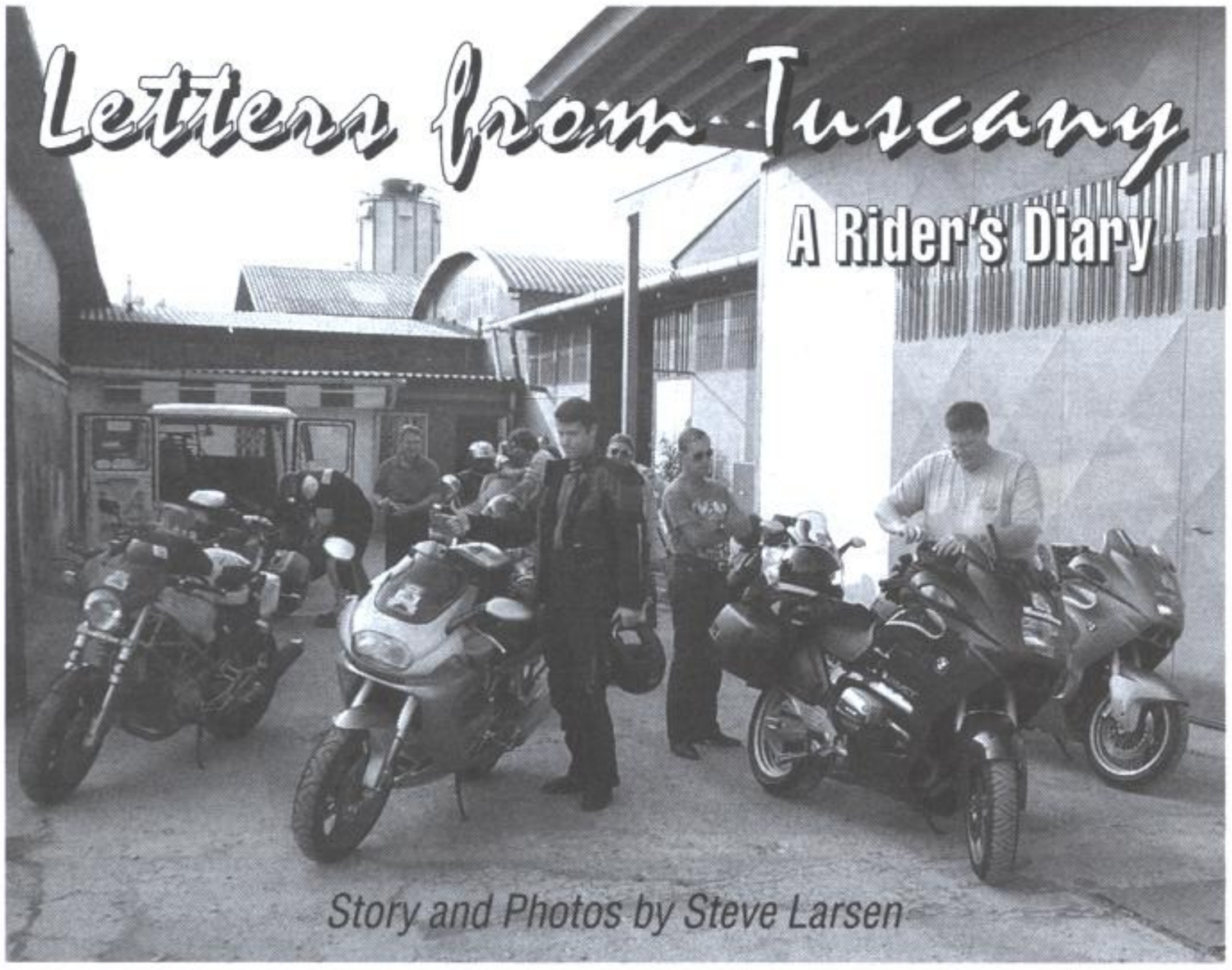
Letters from Tuscany

A Rider's Diary



Story and Photos by Steve Larsen

The American Flyers and friends, 11 riders plus a support truck, prepare to depart from Milan for Tuscany.

***Editor's note**: What follows is a distillation of Steve Larsen's letters to his wife over the course of the Lotus Tour of Tuscany, a private trip specially designed for the American Flyers. Steve was kind enough to produce this story, with photos, to share with his fellow tourmates. I felt it captured the sense of our Italian adventure perfectly.*

I'D HAVE LOVED to spend more time in downtown Milan. It was a beautiful day, but I was anxious to get back to the hotel and hook up with Arthur, Andy and all my buds. So I headed to the hotel, arriving back at about 4 p.m.

Beginning about 5 p.m. they arrived, and I met some people for the first time: Bob Golant from Chicago, Mike Silecchia from New York. Bob and Jean Kirby from Atlanta, Georgia were next, followed by Rich Marin. Then it was Arthur Einstein, Andy Forrester and "Seattle Bob" Meador. Finally, two brothers from California, Don and Dave Searle arrived. Dave is the editor of *Motorcycle Consumer News*, one of my favorite magazines. After hooking up and meeting everyone, we all went over to the place where we'd rent the bikes. I was absolutely thrilled to find that my bike was a Ducati 900 Monster—but much more. My bike is about three years old and is owned by a guy in Chicago who stores it in Italy. It is very much tricked out with carbon fiber everything, a custom exhaust (*great* sounding), more horsepower, race suspension and a Corbin seat (no room for passengers and very little padding), in addition to an oversized rear wheel that looks just wicked. Best of all, it's *yellow*! It is a real hotrod.

After handling the paperwork for the rentals we had a safety briefing, and in addition to learning how to "keep safe," we learned that Italy really doesn't have any speed limits, and because the drivers are so good and experienced (most began by riding scooters and motorcycles before driving cars), they will let you pass when you come up behind them. Sounds cool.

We had a quick dinner at a sort of no-name restaurant with fine but forgettable food, but everyone from the States was almost head-down in their soups by 9 p.m., so it really didn't matter. Afterward, we walked to an ice cream shop, had some *gelato* and headed for bed.

Day 1 of the real trip, the Lotus Tours "Adventure": Getting out of Milan, 11 of us on motorcycles, most of us not accustomed to the bikes we were riding, following a small white van filled with our gear was a real trick, but we did it. The road to Lucca mostly was getting used to the bikes. It became apparent very early that the yellow Monster had a tremendous motor with awesome torque. This thing was fast and loud. And it handled like a dream. The Autostrada was and is not, for me, all that much fun on a bike, and as soon as we got into the smaller roads the traffic became much lighter and a lot more fun.

After we got on the Autostrada for the second time (we had to, the road we wanted was closed for some reason), Kaz (Kazim Uzunoglu, a partner of Burt's on this trip and one of our tour guides) along with Rich and I headed off in the lead. Rich and Kaz pulled out and I tried to keep up, going well in excess of 100 mph, but this meant that we lost sight of the group behind us. We went through countless tunnels, which were nice to look at but a bit frightening given the changes in light and the speeds at which we were traveling. We exited and waited about 15–20 minutes for the rest of the group, but they never came by, so Rich said only one of two things could have happened: There was an accident *or* they took a different route. Taking a different route was a logical assumption, as we had discussed an alternative in our briefing. In either case, it was useless for us to continue waiting.

So we went on and spent about three hours riding at a pretty good rate of speed, taking advantage of the fact that Italian drivers let you pass, especially the trucks, and the lack of speed limits. You would not have been happy about the way we were riding, and while it appeared risky, we were well within our comfort zones. Rich is a skilled rider, Kaz is a superbly confident and experienced rider, and I took my lead from them. However, we did stop and have a lovely lunch and did see some nice scenes along the way—one being a beautiful bridge (see Photo 2).

Unfortunately, the three of us took such a long route that it began to get dark and we got lost going through and around Lucca on the way to the hotel. We went through numerous cell phone calls to the hotel and to Burt, and finally found out that we were on the wrong highway. There were *two* SR12 routes, one was SR12s and one SR12r. So we ended up at the hotel, after dark, about 7 p.m., very tired after almost eight hours of riding, much of it at high and intense speeds, so we were tired and not in the best of moods.

Things got worse when we found out that the reason the rest of the group never showed up was that Bob and Jean Kirby had crashed on the Autostrada at 65–70 mph. Fortunately, they were not seriously hurt, but would miss a couple of days of riding.

The hotel room was neat and weird—wallpaper on everything, great public areas, but we were there such a short time that I didn't spend that much time in the hotel until the following morning. Dinner that night was at the hotel, and very much a full-blown gourmet meal. The kind you would have loved.

Summary: A great day of riding, trial by fire, so to speak, on the new bike, very tired when arriving after dark to our hotel.

Day 2: We left Lucca and I ended up in a group with Rich, Arthur, Andy and Bob Golant. We took a very long, circuitous

route to Pienza, ending up at a converted cloister. The whole of Pienza seems centered around this cloister and it is very interesting and worth a return visit. Within the walls of what was either the old city or the cloister, are meandering tiny streets filled with restaurants, interesting shops, including a good deal of local art, all the usual tourist things, as well as shops displaying the most wonderful meats, cheeses, olive oils and cooking stuff.

We took our bikes right into the courtyard of our hotel. It was awesome. Tourists and locals ended up looking at our bikes almost continuously. The whole town was a ball with great views as it is very high up on a hill overlooking the surrounding area.

Summary: Lots more nice riding and we arrived before dark, although it took us a long time to find our way into the walled cloister and to where our hotel was located.

This ancient stone bridge is typical of the historic architecture to be found in Tuscany. Fortified medieval towns and castles abound.

Day 3: We left Pienza for Gaiole in Chianti. After an hour, the rain came. Let me tell you about the Ducati in the rain. In Milan I discovered that the bike had been modified—including the fenders. Well, it was the shortened rear fender that made the bike throw up a huge rooster tail of water on the wet roads, and not all of the water fell down on the road. A good amount hit my back, and water ended up running down my helmet, into my rainsuit, down my back and into my pants. Not fun.

However, the rain finally stopped and about half of us that had stayed in the Rich Marin group had lunch at the base of a beautiful castle. The appetizers were wonderful, and Rich and I had a sirloin steak that was to die for. The rest of the group ended up going straight to the hotel and bagging the rest of the day. But for those of us who stuck to the original plan, we ended up with just an awesome afternoon of riding as the sun came out and the roads dried out. Everything is so clean and clear after a rain—it was marvelous.

Near Greve, I began to recognize the roads as ones I'd driven when in Italy several months ago. I was with Arthur, Andy and Rich, so I convinced them to stop in Greve. We bid hello to the statue of Giovanni Verrazano in the square. Rich and Arthur headed from there to the hotel, but Andy and I went up to Roberto's and saw Louis. That was a lot of fun. At the end of the afternoon we headed to Gaiole in Chianti and our hotel, part of an old parish church and castle. It sits at the very top of Gaiole, on the western hill. The parish church is the mother church of Gaiole and is basilican-shaped, one nave, two aisles and a truss roofing. When the church was restored, they took off almost all the centenarian plaster and exposed beautiful grey colors and it now looks like it used to in its original form. The castle is now a four-star hotel. My room was a suite, where everything in it was very old but very elegant.

As a super nice dinner is scheduled in the castle tomorrow night, we went into town for dinner that was supposed to be low key, but it turned out to be more food than anyone could eat. We cut them off after two courses, because no one could go on. The group sang me, "Happy Birthday."

Day 4: Today Arthur, Bob Kirby and I took off on our own as everyone else wanted to go to Florence. I did not want to ruin our upcoming visit to Florence by seeing everything in advance, so I skipped it. Instead, we headed out for a good ride. Our first stop was Carlos' leather shop in Panzano, which is in between Greve and Gaiole in Chianti. However, it was too busy so we did not spend time buying anything. We did make a stop at a Rampini Ceramiche (a pottery place) that you would absolutely love, located about half way between Firenze and Siena on some beautiful roads, right near Radda in Chianti. However, we really need to come and visit as they will custom-make just about anything you want. A number of people in the group have gotten stuff there. It is truly beautiful.

Bob and Jean Kirby had done a bicycle trip in this area last year and knew something of some of the towns. As a result, Bob (who was back on the bike by now) was able to take Arthur and I by some wonderful old Etruscan ruins.

One of the best parts of today was coming back to the same hotel. That was nice. Back at the hotel, it was the "exotic" high-end dinner night.

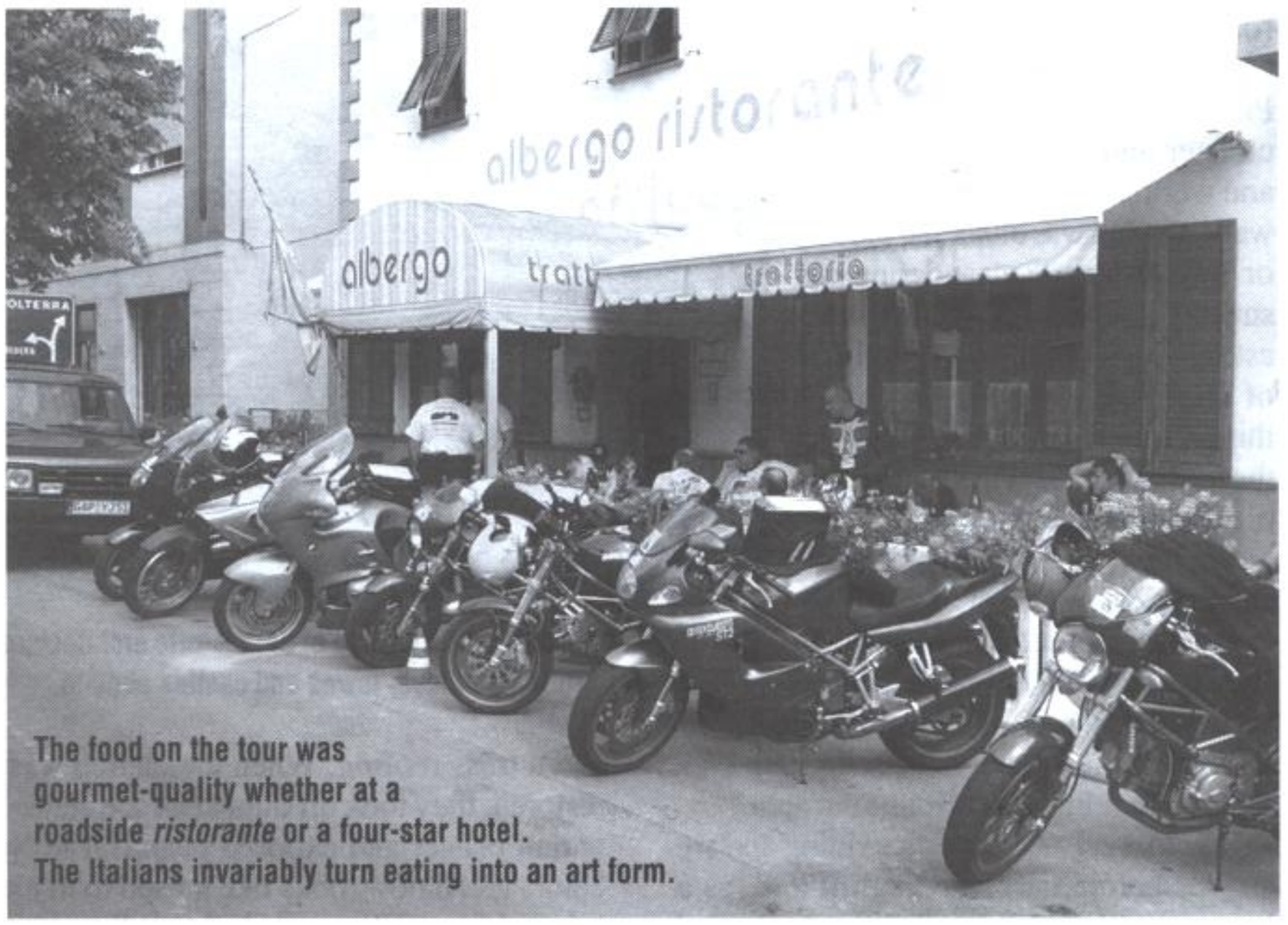
Day 5: Today began with Dave Searle, the editor of *Motorcycle Consumer News,* giving us all a seminar on motorcycle suspensions. It was very good, and I learned a lot.

Bob Golant, Andy Forrester, Arthur and I formed a pod and spent the day together. We began by taking a somewhat circuitous route to the Prada outlet store. This was a fantastic place. You have to "take a number" outside before you can even be allowed in. Once inside, the store is full of designer clothing at roughly 50% off, with a 20% discount added on top of that. It was all top stuff, and Bob Golant helped me find a pair of shoes before we headed off. The weather was wonderful, the roads unbelievably good and we had a great time. Andy did most of the navigation and did a great job. We covered quite a distance.

We ended up at the end of the day in another four-star hotel inside of a walled city named Monteriggioni. Dinner was at the gourmet place tonight. The dinner was fantastic! Seattle Bob (Bob Meador) ordered the most incredible dessert. Before dinner we had fun clowning around in the square of this place, which had very few tourists as the tour buses had all left. It was really pleasant, just us and the locals, and some fancy Mercedes car exhibit.

The American Flyers gather in front of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, Day 2.

Imagine roads laid out by the most passionate drivers on Earth: Twisting, rising, falling, smooth, well-kept and winding through delightfully historic scenery. Now imagine that the only crime is to drive badly—fast is not a problem, and that the other drivers are equally safe and skillful. No, it's not heaven, it's Tuscany, home of Ducati, Aprilia and Moto Guzzi.



The food on the tour was gourmet-quality whether at a roadside *ristorante* or a four-star hotel. The Italians invariably turn eating into an art form.

Day 6: Today is comfortable in that we will be coming back to the same hotel. This makes things very nice in that we don't have to pack up so much in the morning. The day started on a bit of a downer as Arthur dumped his bike on a gravel road, managing to get both the bike and himself totally upside down. He was moving at less than one mile an hour, trying to get down a steep slope. We took a back way out of the walled city, that we really should not have taken. Instead of turning around, we tried to take the bikes down the hill. Everyone made it without mishap except Arthur, who chose a route that put him over an area where he could not reach the ground. Not good. He was bruised, but should be okay.

We planned our route and then Andy, Bob, Kaz and I formed a pod that would have us doing a bit more riding (and less sightseeing and shopping) than some of the others. We made a long trip south over some great roads and then back north toward Siena on a route which Burt says is the best road in Italy. He was not exaggerating—it was truly wonderful. We stopped in a very non-touristy town and had a great lunch in a small cafe. Then we headed into Siena and managed to make it right into the center of the city. Rather than park outside the walls as the signs told us to do, Kaz led us to within one block of the famous "D"-shaped square. After having a cappuccino in the square, we headed back to our walled city. Dinner was in a nearby town and we traveled in the van so we could have a few drinks. The food was good, particularly the appetizers. We walked around a bit afterwards.

Day 7: Today we left the walled city and headed for Sestri Levante, which is on the coast. The morning began with us all thinking it would rain, so we outfitted ourselves in our rainsuits. The karma thing is, if you all put on rainsuits, it keeps the rain away, and that is just what happened this morning. By 11 a.m. the sun was out and it turned into a beautiful day. We did a good bit of mountain riding and then headed for the ocean after getting north of Lucca. We ended up having lunch at Forte del Marmi on the coast, with the whole group together. It was right in the middle of lunch that the only rain fell, and then pretty hard, but for only about five minutes. After that the sun came out and we rode the coast roads toward Sestri Levante. Other than a good number of stoplights in the beach sections, the roads were again wonderful, with beautiful views of the ocean. The only thing that complicated things was fog. It came in very heavy, particularly in the higher elevations, and we could barely see 30' in front of us. So it was with some relief that we reached our hotel. This stop welcomed back our fearless leader, Rich Marin, who had taken a detour to meet up with his new lady, Stacey. Rich brought her back to see us for drinks and dinner from Portofino where they were staying. She is just delightful and it is easy to see why Rich is so smitten. Before dinner, Andy, Arthur and I took a walk and I grabbed pictures of some of the sights, including a fabulous one of the three of us taken by balancing the camera on a railing. The night concluded with a fabulous dinner at the hotel. I tried to get the waiter to take a photo with me in it, but alas, he did not get it right.

We got a late start out of Sestri Levante. I was really interested in getting back to Milan before dark and attempted to hurry people along. However, for some reason people thought that "Milan is only a couple of hours drive." I could see by the map that it was a lot longer than that. After a nice long cappuccino and cigar in Portofino we left. But only to go a few miles to where we ate in a village overlooking the ocean.

Things were complicated a bit by Andy having to switch bikes due to the ABS draining the battery on the BMW, but we managed to all get together and we charted a winding course north to Milan. Truth be told, miles and miles of these roads north of Portifino were the best roads of the entire trip. Of course, I thought this every day. Our pod consisted of Kaz, myself, Andy Forrester, "Seattle Bob," and Bob Golant. It was a great ride in, other than that we did not hit Milan until after dark and there was a tremendous traffic backup on the Autostrada. Kaz led us in, doing a long bout of high speed highway lane splitting, and we got back to the rental garage and turned in the bikes. Everyone was really tired, but Burt had planned one more really special dinner near our hotel. It was truly delightful. As a gag gift, I gave Burt a refrigerator magnet of Pisa. He'd told us all how we should not buy them as he had three of them on the dashboard of the truck and we were welcome to take them. Rich, of course, bought one and immediately gave it to Burt while at Pisa. I also bought one there but held back and presented it on our last night together.

Well, that's the end of the trip. We got back to the hotel about 11 p.m. I put in a wakeup call for 3:30 a.m., left the hotel at 4:00 a.m. for the airport and boarded a 6:45 a.m. flight to Amsterdam where I caught the direct flight from there to the Twin Cities. All in all, a wonderful trip. Lots of wonderful riding, some great new friends and strengthening of friendships with existing friends. I can't wait to do it again.

—*Steve Larsen*

Lotus Tour Evaluation *rated by the paying participants*

Quality of Accomodations	●●●●●	Value for money	●●●●◐
Quality of Food	●●●●●	Tour guides	●●●●●
Quality of Preparation/Organization	●●●●◐	How likely are you to take another Lotus Tour?	●●●●●

Cost Breakdown: This private tour was designed by Burt Richmond, owner of Lotus Tours, in cooperation with Rich Marin, leader of the American Flyers. The cost of the tour was $5515 and all riders paid for upgrades from the basic BMW F650 or Monster 600 included at that price. Also included were all hotels (shared two to a room), breakfasts, dinners, support vehicle, tour guides, maps and a souvenir embroidered polo shirt. Not included: International airfare, fuel for the bikes, Autostrada tolls, tips, wine/beer/mixed drinks with dinner. The additional items, when they were not covered individually, were totalled and divided amongst the riders, the bill came to $247.38 each.
Contact: Lotus Tours—1723 N. Fern Court, Chicago, IL 60614; (312) 951-7313; Fax: (312) 951-7313; e-mail: lotustours@juno.com; website: www.lotustours.com. Prices: For 2001, Lotus had tours ranging in price from $1755 to $5613.

Gear Evaluations & Comments

Andy Forrester, Age 62, Occupation: Former Investment Banker, now Private Investor. Years riding: 12. Tour bike: BMW R1100RT—Rating: 5—great for curves and the highway. Helmet: Shoei RF800—Rating: 4. Boots: Frye cowboy boots—Rating in dry conditions: 3; Rating in wet conditions: 1. Gloves, dry weather, brand:? Rating: 4. Gloves, wet weather: skindiver's gloves—Rating: 5. Riding suit, dry weather: Hein Gericke—Rating: 4. Pants, dry weather: Levis with Bohn armored long johns; Rating: haven't been tested, don't know; Tank bag: BMW—Ease-of-installation: 4; Map pocket rating: 4; Water resistance: 5 (covered). Camera: Elph film-type, 23-46mm zoom lens. Comment: Maybe I'll bring a digital camera next time, I liked Steve Larsen's results.

"Arturo" Einstein, Age 68, Occupation: Marketing Communications Consultant. Years riding: 20. Tour bike: BMW R1100S—Rating: 4—not quite enough grunt for passing Fiat Pandas in tight esses. Helmet: BMW System 4—Rating: 4—needs more space between the chin bar and my chin. Wet/dry weather riding jacket: Aerostich lime yellow—Rating: 5. Wet/dry-weather pants: Vanson cordura—Rating: 3.5—lining isn't well-attached and it's hard to get the hip and knee pads back in after washing. Wet-weather suit: plain-jane rubberized—Rating: 5—You sweat a little, but you stay dry. Tank bag: Eclipse Standard; Ease of installation: 4; Map pocket rating: 3; Water resistance: 1; Ease of disconnection: 2. Camera: Canon Elpha film-type—Rating 3.5.

Steve Larsen, Age 50, Occupation: Venture Capitalist. Years riding: 30+. Tour Bike: Ducati 900 Monster—Rating: 5—Perfect for the roads in Tuscany, albieit too loud. Helmet: Arai Quantum—Rating: 4—comfortable except when it's hot outside. Boots: Harley leather—Rating in dry conditions: 3—too heavy; Rating in wet conditions: 4 (soaked with mink oil, they actually kept my feet pretty dry). Gloves: leather smothered in mink oil—Rating in dry: 4; Rating in wet: 1—wringing water out of them after 15 min. Dry weather jacket: Joe Rocket Sport Leather—Rating: 4—heavy while walking. Dry weather pants: Heavy leather made in Pakistan—Rating: 4. Wet-weather suit: Hondaline—Rating: 5; Tank bag: Rev Pack Junior—Installation: 4; Map pocket: 3; Water-resistance: 5; Ease of disconnection: 4. Camera: Kodak digital DC280—Rating: 4+ (see photos in this article).

"Seattle Bob" Meador, Age 36, Occupation: Entrepreneur. Years riding: 1.5; Tour Bike: Ducati ST2—Rating: 4—a little uncomfortable on the hands for the longer hauls, but great handling and shifting. Helmet: Shoei Synchrotec—Rating: 5—love the flip-up, stays cool. Boots: Alpinestars w/Gortex—Rating in dry: 5—a bit warm; Rating in wet: 5—superb. Dry-weather gloves: Fox motocross—Rating: 4—probably not much protection in a crash; Wet-weather gloves: Joe Rocket Dry-Tech—Rating: 4—a bit bulky and warm; Dry/wet-weather riding suit: Cycloak—Dry rating: 4—could use more ventilation; Tank bag: Tourmaster—Ease of installation: 3; Water resistance: 5 (with cover); Map pocket: 3; Ease of disconnection: 5; Camera: Nikon N60 film—Rating: 5.

Rich Marin, Age 47, Occupation: Venture Capitalist. Years riding: 33. Tour Bike: BMW R1100RT—Rating: 5—best touring bike made. Dry weather riding jacket: BMW Cordura w/Kevlar armor—Rating: 5—comfortable. Helmet: Arai full face—Rating: 4—prefer flip-face. Boots: Corbin—Very comfortable for big/wide feet—Rating in dry: 5; Rating in wet: 4. Dry weather gloves: Leather—Rating: 5. Wet-weather gloves: French—Rating: 1—not too dry. Rainsuit: Harley-Davidson—Rating: 5. Tank bag: BMW—Ease of installation: 5; Map Pocket: 5; Water resistance: 4; Ease of disconnection: 5; Comment on tank bag: Disconnects too easily up front. Camera: None.

Don "Fratello" Searle, Age 44, Occupation: Lawyer. Years riding: 30. Tour bike: Ducati 620ie—Rating: 5—like racing a unicycle. Helmet: Shoei—Rating: 4—a little noisy. Boots: Alpinestars w/Gortex—Terrific walking boots—Dry weather rating: 5; Wet-weather rating: 5. Dry weather gloves: Tecknic w/carbon fiber knuckles—good for bar fights—Dry weather rating: 5. Wet-weather gloves: Triumph—Wet rating: 3—once wet, always wet. Wet/dry riding suit: Aerostich one-piece—Dry weather rating: 5; Wet-weather rating: 3—wet-crotch syndrome is a drag, must remember Pampers. Camera: Olympus OM2n film-type w/50mm and 80mm lenses—Rating: 4.; Anything you'd like to do differently next time?: Trade snoring brother for bodacious Italian babe.