

2... 4... 6... GREAT!

How do you like your trail bikes: small and light... good all-rounders... or fast and challenging dual-sporters? We gathered together a Gas Gas EC200, KTM 400EXC and a BMW 6650Xchallenge and headed down to the Lozere region in southern France to find out which performs best: small, medium or large...

Is there an optimal capacity for a trail bike? Is a small, lightweight dirtbike better than a more relaxing big trailie? Or is the middle-of-the-road middleweight the best compromise for trail riding? It was a question we were hoping to answer as we forced the doors shut on our loaned Citroen Dispatch van, and headed for the Channel Tunnel. Ahead of us lay 750 miles of Autoroute, 370 miles and three solid days of trail riding, and three nights spent



abusing our bodies in a French hotel bar. It was going to get ugly.

In the back of our van was our own personal choice of bikes for the trip - each of us utterly convinced we'd picked the right weapons for the job. Being a fan of lightweight bikes, I'd naturally plumped for a small-bore two-stroke. My choice - the Gasser EC200 - is a perennial TBM favourite.

Restyled for '07 the Gas Gas benefits from a much more modern look, even if the underlying machine is actually unchanged from last year. Aside from the new plastics there's a bigger volume airbox, redesigned subframe, and a seat carved from billet. Otherwise it's the same long and low EC enduro bike we know and love.

If you've never ridden the 200 Gasser before, you'll be amazed at how well it performs. Nowhere near as frantic as the KTM200, it's actually a far more civilised machine to ride which makes it just perfect for dual-sport trail/enduro use. All modern Gasser engines are fairly smooth these days and the EC200 builds power in a very linear way at the bottom-end, which culminates in a typical two-stroke charge once the power-valve opens up. However (and this is what makes the Gasser so good in our opinion), the power-valve seems to open fairly progressively meaning that you don't get that traction-breaking explosion like you do with the more powerful KTM, but instead just a rush of usable power in each of the bike's six speeds.

With Marzocchi forks, Öhlins shock and class-leading Nissin anchors the spec is good even if Gas Gas's quality control dept left early for the beach with a sign on their door saying: *Mañana*. For sure the new sharper styling and black painted frame is a much-needed improvement on previous models, but it's still not the sort of bike you leave on display. Matter of fact it's the kind of machine you leave under a tarpaulin in a poorly lit part of your garage, in case any of

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your dirt biking mates pop round unannounced.

Occasional TBM tester Justin Kingwell's choice of bike for the trip was the much underrated KTM 400EXC. The 400's undoubtedly one of the star bikes in a line-up which includes some of the finest machines on the market today. Milder-mannered than the 450 and 525, and less frantic than the new DOHC 250, the 400 earns its place in the range by dint of its sheer popularity. It was trail riders who forced KTM to reconsider the 400's position after the factory had pensioned it off early. And thank God they did, because the 400EXC is the perfect trail buddy.

Changes for '07 are limited to a new two-piece clutch cover, black rims and a new design of

wave discs, but otherwise the KTM remains a thoroughly well rounded package and the best looking brand in the marketplace.

The 400's motor is fairly unstressed, yet it can tramp along at a decent clip where required and the provision of sufficient torque rather than overwhelming amounts, enables the 400 rider to find grip - even in tricky conditions. A comfortable and adjustable riding position (which needs setting up in the forward position to get the best from it), fully adjustable suspension and build quality second-to-none ensures that the KTM 400EXC will always find a buyer second-hand.

Dep Ed Barni's choice of wheels was typical of his biggest-is-best mentality. With more grunt than a German porn star, the new BMW G650Xchallenge is marketed as a big trailie and we were going to find out if it could keep that promise.

Newly launched, the Xchallenge is powered by an updated version of BMW's fuel-injected F650 lump, with a robust chassis, USD Marzocchi front forks and an unconventional BMW/Conti-built air shock. It's no lightweight, but unlike Beemers of yore, the Xchallenge is well up to the, erm... challenge and carries few unwanted peripherals - though we did remove the weird numberplate holder just in case.

The bike is basically a straight-up big trailie - ruggedly built for the job. It sports just five gears (though once you've sampled its ponderous gearbox you'll be thankful of that), and a riding position which is all-day comfortable. In particular the excellent seat and narrowness of the machine should be picked out for praise as should the bike's fine suspension which - once correctly set-up (on the rear) using the air-pump stored beneath the seat - offers a magic carpet ride.

There wasn't much to complain about the way the BMW went about its business - yes it was heavy, but it was also torquey, quiet and extremely rapid, and it found grip where frequently the others didn't. It blew a main fuse fairly early on in the first day (quickly changed with the on-board spare) and the QD seat had to be secured with tape, but given what we put it through, the BMW acquitted itself well and impressed everyone who rode it.

Evans Sent

We'd booked ourselves onto one of Chris Evans' three-day trailriding trips in the Lozere region of southern France (where they run the epic Trefle Lozerien enduro). The idea was we'd be able to rigorously test the tackle we'd brought along whilst enjoying the hospitality of French regional cuisine and at the same time, experience first-

hand Chris's legendary sense of humour (legend has it that it *does* actually exist).

Thanks to his contacts with the Lozere Moto Club, Chris has plotted three days of awesome trail riding in this picturesque and very rural region interspersed by lunch stops where you get to sample traditional local cuisine. The route - which is navigated by roadbook - is fairly technical in places and incredibly long.

You spend all day in the saddle covering approx 200km per day - the majority of which is on rocky terrain. With stream crossings, dozens of technical stony climbs, rock-steps (both up and down), narrow ledges, switchback passes, a few miles of easy piste, ruts, steep descents, fast-flowing single-track and one or two big hazards to negotiate, it's not for the faint-hearted, though it's all rideable and great fun.

In fact we were looking forward to the trip so much that when the alternator belt flew out from underneath our van - taking the tensioner pulley with it - we pressed on regardless. With no alternator, no air-conditioning and no power-steering I was starting to get a sweat on (not to mention arm-pump) before I'd even set foot on a dirtbike.

Day one dawned bright and sunny and with more than 100 miles of going ahead of us we were really looking forward to the day. As usual we swapped bikes between us in order to get a feel for each other's machines, and to see if we'd really made the right choice.

With lunch taken high up on a veranda overlooking a beautiful blue lake, it gave us chance to compare notes and argue the toss about who'd got their bike choice right. Day two saw us stick to our assigned bike and stick another 250km under the wheels - including a visit to the aptly named Ba-tard Rocks.

These gigantic mammalian-shaped Granite outcrops come just after a stream crossing and (for us) required a certain amount of pushing and pulling to get the bikes up and over it. It can be circumnavigated if so required, however we had no intention of bypassing it, and at the end of a long day in the saddle it proved a dramatic climax to the day's riding as we grunted (and pushed) the big Beemer across it then enjoyed the views of the setting sun from the top.

Day three was - for me at least - the best of all. With more in the way of technical trails, and some stunning single-track to enjoy. With yet more differing terrain to cover, it was clear that each of the bikes was getting a workout in varied conditions, but which would be best. As we sat down in the bar on the final day we had one last chance to argue the case for each of our bikes before committing our thoughts to print. Here then is what we each reckoned...

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Si Melber:

The Gas Gas EC200 is the best bike because...

Small and light is always right. Right? Okay I'm here to make the case for the Gas Gas EC200 and it's a very easy job indeed. Fact is, when you're out on the trail you want a bike which handles. End of...

Aside from the fact that the Gasser is by far the lightest bike here which makes it a joy to flick-flack along twisty French single-track, it's also blessed with the best suspension and brakes. These features alone elevate it to the status of number one amongst this triumvirate in my opinion.

You want more? No problem...

The Gasser's got the 'zingiest' engine, the best power-to-weight ratio and is by far the most dynamic of the bikes here. You can change direction at will, pick any line you want and either trickle your way over loose-surface washouts or blast it out of natural beauty with the wheel in the air.

On stony descents the Gasser is king with a lack of all-up weight and class-leading brakes the EC200 never feels anything other than totally secure - it'll pass anything on the brakes. And when you're jumping across washouts or drainage ditches all you need do is pre-compress the suspension and the Gasser simply floats 'em.

It can clamber up stony climbs with the power-valve closed and the engine burbling along



Gasser's styling is improved for '07 though you don't want to look too closely at some of the detailing. It is, however, a joy to ride...

just out of the powerband, lightly skipping over the rocks in a way that only two-strokes can. Then when you require that instant hit, just nail the throttle and the EC responds in a manner best described as electrifying. I was a little worried before this test that 200ccs wouldn't be enough to stick with the other two bikes on the faster blasts, but I needn't have worried, a dip of the clutch is all that's needed to clear the Gasser's throat and away she goes.

With its six-speed gearbox there's plenty of performance for the road sections, and with its broad pegs, natural riding position and near perfect balance the Gasser goes where you want it to go, and never gets outta' shape.

Yes of course the KTM 400EXC is a thoroughly competent motorcycle and a good trail all-rounder to boot. But it feels much more of a handful to pilot on the rocky lanes of France. Naturally it's beautifully built and the engine is a dream to use, but alongside the svelte little Gasser it feels just a bit too lardy by comparison. And the brakes are a bit like a Scouse postie - you never know when they're going to turn up and do some work.

The BMW is an altogether different proposition. It's big, fast, big, heavy and very big. It too is beautifully put together, though it lacks the KTM's attention to detail and the Gasser's minimalist competition-oriented design.

Yes it's fun in a scary way - bit like fiddling your tax return - but it's just too much like hard work to be a serious proposition.

Nope, to me a trail bike has to be more than just good fun, it has to be exciting and preferably very easy to ride. I can easily overlook the fact that the Gasser looks like it's been assembled by prototype Spanish robots - during their lunch hour - that the EC's seat is harder than the underlying French terrain, and that the whole bike looks like an advert for the Screw-Fix catalogue. I can forgive it all this because of the way it makes me feel. ➔

Second Opinion: James B

Gas Gas' EC200 makes an ultra-fine race bike but for me it simply didn't work on these trails. Yes, the suspension's great. Yes, the nimble chassis allows you to place it exactly where you want it, and yes, it'll clamber over almost any terrain. Almost! But when a day on the bike lasts ten hours, having to change gear every 0.3 of a second is more stressful than a round-the-world trip with a fidgety toddler - 'Are we there yet?' I wondered the very same thing every time I slung a leg over the EC...



Stand up on the broad pegs, lean well forwards with your head and shoulders over the bars and the Gasser will take you just about anywhere you want to go...

Gas Gas EC200 Trail Report

We're impressed by...

- Tractable, unbustable 6-speed motor
- Great brakes
- Neutral handling
- Plush suspension
- Clear tank

We'd change...

- Solid seat
- Cheap 'n' nasty handguards
- Multi-style fasteners
- Leaky carb
- Bar bend

Spanner-time

Let's hope your tool-box is well-stocked as in addition to 8mm, 12mm and 15mm T-bars you'll need Allen-keys for the clutch perch, a cross-

headed screwdriver for the seat and rad panels, and now a Torx tool for the fork guards. Eeek!

The right hand peg still clouts the brake lever in the up-position and requires a spot of grinding, whilst air filter and transmission oil are easy to replace. Most of all the seat foam wants swapping for something more comfortable - like a plank of wood. We're still not convinced by the Gasser's poor quality mouldings and leaky carb, but at least it all hung together perfectly...

Second Opinion: Justin K

Okay, I admit, the Goat, sorry Gasser is outstanding when it comes to tricky trails. It weighs less than a wet sock and refused to indulge my terrible riding style with even a modestly scary moment. It braked with almost Sherco-like confidence and ran off like a scalded cat when you twisted the super-light throttle. The build was a bit minimalist and the lights were naff, but I could at least appreciate the racing potential of the bike. I did however dislike the seat that was too low and tazy too hard. Riding position was, in typical Gasser fashion, spot on and the suspension was awesome. Lack of top end speed was slightly un-cool, but overall I am willing to admit that it wasn't too bad...

Justin Kingwell:

The KTM 400EXC is the best bike because...

...It has the perfect attributes of what you need on a trip like this: weight *and* power. The Gasser may be as nimble and light as a mountain goat, but it smells like one too and who wants to have to concentrate on what gear you need when you have 1000 foot drop under your outside footpeg?

The 400 had power everywhere and refused to stall even when I was three gears out and in a panic trying to negotiate a serious potential accident masquerading as a French mountain trail.

I liked the way it effortlessly popped naff-off wheelies in Melber's face with the simple dip of the clutch and the way it doggedly refused to

let go of the rope behind the Barnacle and his Teutonic Cruise Missile on the fire-roads. I liked the way I could slip the clutch into, out of and through whatever obstacle came rushing out of no-where at me, to save my bacon, every time. I only wish it had had mirrors on, just to see the Gasser as a spec behind me on the road...

Handling and suspension? Only when you've survived a flat-in-third-opposite-lock-on-both-sides-feet-off-pegs-wonder-when-the-air-ambulance-is-going-to-land-type of death slide on a leaf-covered corner with solid trees awaiting to test your bone density and metabolic recovery, can you really appreciate the way this bike holds onto the trail.

Point it at *any* kind of rocky, rutted, stopped, slippery or off-camber trail going up or down and it simply laughs it off.





The only reason that I needed to look where I was going, was to avoid snake-biting the tubes. With a set of moustaches, you could read a book whilst riding this bike! And lifting the front end over puddles to soak the following riders with a mega-tsunami of cold water was even more fun than I imagined.

Comfort - Ha! I didn't see Si sitting down too much and whilst the KTM wasn't exactly the Parker Knoll Beemer, my bum hardly noticed the firm, but correct height and well designed seat with handy lift points... Bar clamp position was adjustable backwards and forwards and even though I would have liked another inch on the risers, it was just about perfect. **Fuel** - Travelling well over 100 miles off-road each day made me realise why I like four-strokes so much. Despite doing my level best to cane the KTM as hard as was humanly possible, it merely sipped the juice and the oil level never changed.

Slightly Un-Cool stuff - **Brakes**: KTM brakes are like the mother-in law. You can't avoid them and they cause you much distress. I refused to have anything to do with them. The front was merely acceptable after I wound the span adjuster right out to stop it trapping my fingers and the rear was like poking a stick through the spokes. Man, I wish KTM would let someone other than the cleaning lady spec their brakes. Is this some kind of Austrian April Fool's Joke that has lasted seven years? The fuel cap cross-threads really easily and leaks fuel. Not good for fast fill ups at a race or when rushing to bag the best spot for lunch! And the kill switch can only be reached by ET!

Cool stuff - It is the best looking bike by far and had French women giving it the once over. It is well designed and put together. It sounds

Second Opinion: Si M

Okay, I'll come right out and say it... the KTM is undoubtedly a great bike. A fine trailie and a practical racer too, but for me it lacks a little edginess - a certain je ne sais quoi? And whereas the Gasser is finely focussed and the Beemer is a real challenge to pilot in the tricky stuff, the KTM is simply a little bit - oh I don't know... anodyne, maybe? Nevertheless it's a much more practical dirtbike than either of the other two and far more popular than they'll ever be, and that must count for a lot. It's also one of those bikes that anyone can ride and its abilities grow along with your confidence. The thinking man's dirtbike then....

KTM 400EXC: The ultimate allrounder? (tupperware roadbook reader not standard!)



awesome and the lights work. It made me look 1000 times better than I actually am! And that makes it the best bike in this test...

KTM 400EXC Trail Report

We're impressed by...

- Lovely flexible engine
- Riding position
- Style/design/build quality
- Ease of use
- Integrity of components

We'd change...

- Brembo brakes
- Awkward filler cap
- Nasty switchgear

Spanner-time

It's clear that KTM had the home mechanic in mind when they designed the bike and specified items like fasteners. Most of the bolts are 6mm, 8mm, and 10mm with a few 13mm items. Air filter access is quick and easy through a tear-off side-panel, though oil changes are slightly more involved because of the number of filters involved. We'd want to fit a bashplate and some handguards (as they don't come as stock), and a stronger stand bolt, but working on this bike should be relatively straightforward!

KTM 400EXC

Price:	£5445
Engine:	389cc, four-valve, SOHC four-stroke
Weight:	119.5kg (claimed, wet)
Contact:	KTM UK, 01280 709500

Second Opinion: James B

The KTM looks to be wearing the sensible hat here as it was probably the best all-rounder. The motor makes plenty of power. It's got decent ergos, and the chassis is fine, if a little flighty at times. But where's the fun in riding something sensible?

Having previously had a long-term 400 I knew that it would prove a cinch to pilot on the trails (though I must say, I prefer the thumping bottom-end of the 450 Katosh for its more involving ride). Luckily for the KTM its saving grace was the fact that it was by far the easiest bike to get sideways out of fireroad corners. So whilst it was still undoubtedly wearing the sensible hat, at least it was at a jaunty angle...

2010...
GREAT!



James Barnicoat:

The BMW 6650X challenge is the best bike because...

... It's the only true trailie in this test and a bloody competent one at that. Call the EC200 a trail bike? Don't make me laugh. It's a peaky competition machine that's about as civilised as a Mogadishu traffic warden. And

the 400EXC? Well it may be more of an all-rounder than the little Spanish bike but it hasn't got 'Ready to Race' plastered across the owner's manual for nothing.

You want stability? You've got it. At 156kg (not to mention running relaxed geometry) *absolutely* nothing taxed the Bimmer. The ultra-light Gas Gas, on the other hand, would change direction if you blinked too hard and the KTM probably covered twice the miles of

French 'n' Saunters



If you've never ridden off-road in France before then you're missing out on something very special indeed. Not only can you experience some simply mind-blowing terrain, riding fully legal trails often in great weather, but the locals are more often than not happy to see you too. With a friendly wave and a cheery 'bonjour' as you pass by - most people seem to be passionate about motorcycles 'en France'.

As you'd expect, you can't just load up your bikes, head across the Channel and disappear up the first muddy lane you come across. The French are understandably quite protective of their trail network and local knowledge, not to mention a grasp of the language, goes a long way. So by far the easiest way to get your continental kicks is to join an organised tour, such as that run by our very own cantankerous

columnist Chris Evans and his Sport Adventure outfit.

For our test we joined Sport Adventure's Lozere tour. Located in the beautiful Massif Centrale, the three-day ride uses the rural town of Mende as its base, heading out into what is the heart of French enduro country and one of the least populated areas of France.

On Chris' tours you use your own bike and kit (so you'll need a way of getting it over to France), with half-board accommodation and back-up included in the price. And so early one Spring morning TBM joined 13 other riders and assorted enduro tackle outside the hotel, where Chris introduced the group to Duke (the trail opener from the local Moto Club Lozerien) and support van driver, the

BMW looks the business and survived the three days unscathed...

2...4...6...
GREAT!



the other two bikes as you simply couldn't keep it pointing straight.

You want grip? Oh boy! A long swingarm, slightly rearward pegs and tall-ish gearing meant despite being by far the most powerful of the three, the 650X actually had the best traction. Which allowed it to claw its way up the loose rock climbs with ease and pull quickly out of hardpack corners while the other two machines were swapping ends, and occasionally bodypanels, trying to keep up...

You want road manners, practicality and comfort? With that smooth-revving 650 lump, the best seat and the neatest road kit it made light work of the tarmac. Unlike the other two, the headlight illuminated further than the end of the front fender and it's the only bike here with the option of pillion pegs. In fact, the Challenge's that good that when our borrowed van broke down we briefly considered riding it all the way back to Blighy...

And what about build quality? Well I've gotta acknowledge the KTM here, because the Austrians know how to assemble a motorcycle. The Beemer though is also particularly well screwed together, chunky 'n' robust. And with nary a dreaded Torx fastener in sight - because

they appear to have flogged their entire stock to Gas Gas...!

Right, what else? Well it's easily the quietest of the three and, oh there's the excellent brakes too. I'll concede that the Gas Gas' lack of bulk allowed it to stop in the shortest distance though

Second Opinion: Si M

Throw away any preconceived ideas you might have about big trailies being impractical off-road because BMW's Xchallenge has arrived. Big it may be, and weighty too, but boy is it capable. Capable of tackling everything we threw at it on the Lozere trip, capable of surviving a ride like this unscathed, and best of all capable of putting a great big smile on your face. There are times when you need to be brave, and occasionally brutal to ride the Beemer, but at other times (like when the dirt gives way to tarmac) you'll be so glad you opted for a true dual-sporter. It's comfortable, quiet, and frugal and deceptively quick both on- and off-road. In short... a proper trail bike.

lovely Yasmina - a girl whose sense of humour is as wicked as her smile...!

It's only though his links with the Moto Club that Chris is able to run tours in the area and Duke rides ahead of the tour to 'open' the trails and mark out any necessary diversions. When you hear that the club not only run the massive, three-day Trefle Lozerien enduro, but also tutor the local kids on off-road riding every Wednesday afternoon as part of their school curriculum (!), you realise just how seriously they take their dirtbiking in the region.

Introductions over, Chris ran through the roadbook navigation, detailing the trickier sections of the route, any potential hazards and anywhere we were likely to go wrong. Mindful of keeping the locals 'onside', everyone also received a laminated card which we were to give to anyone who confronted us whilst out on the trail. The card explained in French that we were English and didn't speak the lingo, but if they were prepared to wait someone who did would be along shortly (Chris was acting as 'sweeper' and riding at the back of the tour). Sensible stuff.

Once the briefing was over, bumbags were stocked-up, bikes were fuelled and we were off out onto the trails...

Passing Mende's gothic cathedral, three clicks of road work saw us switchback our way up the mountain which overlooks the town, before turning onto a long, sweeping sandy track - the perfect warm-up in the cool morning air. Five minutes on, the sand gave way to more typical rocky going, and so began a great day of varied going.

Crossing the countryside between lush grassy fields, the trails were interconnected by short stony single-track climbs, with the odd interjection from a rock slab between the loose stones. Then again the terrain changed and we were out of the now blazing sunshine and into the cool sanctuary of dense woodland.

Single-track, fire-road, twin-track and back to single-track; the morning was spent flitting from lane to lane with very little road work before we eventually descended from the hills to our lakeside lunch stop. The lake is actually a reservoir, used to produce hydroelectric power, and when the valley was flooded the local residents were forced to move out (or buy scuba gear...!). The proprietor of the restaurant was one such villager, and whilst it may be a little strange to look out across a vast expanse of water where your home used to be, their new place is certainly blessed with a stunning view!

Sated, it was back to the bikes for a blast up another magnificent, twisting mountain pass and an afternoon which again saw huge variations in



French 'n' Saunters



Each morning began with a riders' briefing...

riding (and the only real wet muddy ruts of the entire tour) before eventually reaching the hotel as the sun sank below the hills. The bikes' odors had clicked up 180km!

At 250km, day two was set to be the longest of the tour and there were some bleary eyes as Chris ran through the day's route early that morning. The riding started with a blat up the same mountain road as day one and with the tarmac sheltered on the 'dark side' of the mountain, a chill breeze blew through our race shirts. Bursting into the warm sunlight at the top of the climb, the route again took us onto the sandy track before changing tack and heading into some wonderful stony, wooded single-track

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they weren't the best EC brakes ever - a touch too squidgy at the lever for my exacting tastes. In comparison, the Beemer's Brembos were exemplary, exhibiting the kind of power and feel you *should* get from a dirtbike brake system. To detail the KTM's spongy stoppers in the same paragraph would be bordering on an insult...

And the suspension... Wow! With the air shock properly set-up (absolutely crucial and very easy to do) and the forks set nice and firm the BMW not only soaked up some monster hits but also proved comfortable on the stony going.

So don't get hung up on the weight, or the capacity, or even the badge, because the BMW is a particularly handy, unflustered, and dare I say it, confidence-inspiring dirtbike. And easily the best of the three...

BMW 660Xchallenge Trail Report

We're impressed by...

- Traction
- Riding position
- Suspension
- Strength and integrity
- Versatility

We'd change...

- Clunky gearbox
- Bulky cat-equipped silencer
- Hard road-style grips
- Vulnerable numberplate mount
- Painted plastics
- Long levers

BMW 660Xchallenge

Price:	£5995
Engine:	652cc, four-valve, DOHC, fuel injected four-stroke
Weight:	157kg (claimed, wet)
Contact:	BMW UK, 0800 777 155

Second Opinion: Justin K

'Cor blimey', I thought, when I first swung a leg over the *huge* Beemer, 'we're never going to get this thing round'. Big heavy and expensive, but with pretty cool styling, I considered for a moment that Hannibal and his elephants probably had more chance of crossing a mountain than this thing.

Well eat my shorts, what a surprise... Given a confident (ie: aggressive, skilled and slightly mad) rider - step forward The Barnacle - the 650 simply roared up anything you pointed it at. Mousses would be absolutely essential if you were going to

make a habit of this type of riding, but the weight issue aside, this was a seriously impressive bike. Way fast on the tarmac and fire roads and a real pest to keep up with elsewhere, it definitely suited the smoother stuff, but in the right hands turned out to be a real weapon.

I needn't bore you with the excellent build quality, great design, comfy seat and frugal fuel use, so I won't. Instead I leave you with a warning - try not to laugh too loudly if you pull up alongside one of these at the start of a trail... it might be you being laughed at at the finish...

and a long, steep rocky climb. Merely a taster of what was in store...

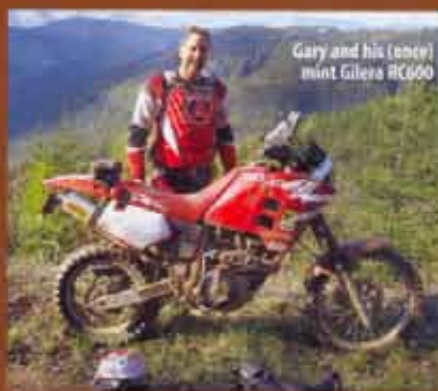
The rest of the morning's riding was packed full of tight trails and sharp elevation changes, with some truly spectacular vistas and more than a few perilous-looking plunges awaiting those not paying attention! By contrast the afternoon was much more open, with wide fire-roads allowing far greater speeds. Had our riding companion, Gary from Guildford, not suffered a fairing-smashing tumble on his mint (and arguably slightly unsuitable) Gilera RC600, it'd have proved a relaxing run-up to the final technical rock sections of the day.

Ever in good-spirits, he nonetheless joined us in a laugh and a joke as he picked splinters of Italian fibreglass out of the dust!

Topping up our tanks as the setting sun glazed the ground gold, only the 'Bastard Rocks' (detailed elsewhere) stood between us and a gentle ride back to the hotel. By the time we'd sweated our way up and over the 'Rocks' the light was really starting to fade, and with enduro headlamps flickering off the trailside pines we swept down off the mountain and back into town.

Using many of the tracks from the Trefle' enduro, day three's 160km route was arguably the most technical of the tour. Early fire-roads gave little indication of the riding ahead, especially the deep rocky gully which immediately followed them.

TV-sized rocks, past-full-lock corners, and a slippery wet six-foot rock-step (thankfully down rather than up) required negotiating carefully before we could climb the banked side of the trail out onto smoother going. Other notable trails included a tricky 'goat track', beset by rock-steps and loose boulders which ended with another off-camber clamber, this time up a tree-lined hillside, and yet more wonderfully flowing



Gary and his (near) mint Gilera RC600

single-track.

After a lunch-stop spent soaking up the rays (and the calories) at a picturesque tavern, the afternoon's riding took us back up into the hills on some rollercoaster sandy tracks, and down into deep wooded valleys. A stream-crossing of hellishly slippery rocks invited us to take a dip (tho' thankfully no-one accepted the offer) before the route led out into a series of grassy tracks running between remote rural villages.

After brief splash 'n' dash from the jerry cans in the support van, the final lane of the day (and the tour) was yet another cracker; a tight, winding trail through dense woodland which dropped away sharply at one side. Interspersed with small rock-steps and tiny stream crossings it proved a fine finale for the tour.

Twenty minutes later we were back at the hotel, with nothing more strenuous than a dip in the pool, some food and a cold beer ahead of us.

Without a doubt, the Sport Adventure Lozere tour is some of the finest riding you'll ever do. Technical enough to be challenging yet flowing enough to be enjoyable, stunning scenery and a relaxed atmosphere simply add to an already excellent experience. With the minimum of road-work, clear 'n' easy roadbook navigation and long days in the saddle you get a lot of riding for your money. Thoroughly recommended...

The three-day Sport Adventure Lozere tour costs £380, including two nights half-board accommodation and full back-up. For more details of all Sport Adventure tours, photos of the routes, an events calendar and booking form log onto sport-adventure.com. Chris can also be contacted on 07900 826719.

Spanner Time

While many BMW owners have traditionally chosen to enlist their bike's maintenance regime to a dealer, should owners of Xbikes plan on getting their hands dirty they'll find plenty that's good about spanning the BeeEmm. First of all the predominant fasteners used are Allen-headed bolts with a few 8mm hex-heads which makes jobs a fair bit

easier. Plus the BeeEmm comes with 6000 mile service intervals and a two year warranty!

Getting to the air-filter is a slightly more involving job as it lives beneath the dummy tank which requires removal first. But as it's a paper element it's a simple replacement job with no messy cleaning. Likewise oil changes are likely to be slightly more complicated thanks to the bike's dry-sump lubrication. The factory fitted bashplate is adequate, but the first thing we'd fit along with new grips would be some handguards.



2... 4... 6...
GREAT!

Group Hugs and Toasts: (JK writes) Mr Evans, I salute you. I can honestly say that day two of the trip was the best day that I have ever had on a motorcycle - bar none - both on- and off-road. Words like epic and awesome cannot convey the pure joy that I experienced as I battled my way across the Cévennes region and the most excellent routes that you chose. Well organised, with great company, bloody excellent food and laugh-out-loud funny evenings, this cannot be beaten. Effortless, efficient and glamorous back-up in the form of the lovely Yasmina and fine trail opening by super-hard man Duke topped off the perfect trip. In fact this trip was so good that even when I was bitten all over by large black attack-ants blown from a traditional Cévennes fine-bellows-stick by Gary in the hotel bar (don't ask!) and our Citroën Dispatch spat off its alternator belt and we had to pedal home in a Luton-backed hire van

through the night, we still couldn't be beaten down. The 17 coffees each and bulk porn supply also helped and we laughed ourselves hoarse for nearly 14 hours of solid driving, re-living our best trip in years...

Thanks are also due to: Citroën UK Ltd, The AA (indispensable), KTM UK, Gas Gas Motos and BMW GB Ltd.

And special thanks go to: Eurotunnel for helping us out in a crisis. We've crossed the channel by all sorts of means and can honestly say that the Eurotunnel is, in our experience, by far the most efficient, smoothest, and painless way of getting over to France. Prices start from £49 one-way for a car and passengers, and you can book online at eurotunnel.com. To benefit from the best deals make your reservation in advance and out of peak periods.

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