




The Normandy Landings

Putting our money where our mouth is we take on the Normandy trails with a Triumph Tiger 800XC...

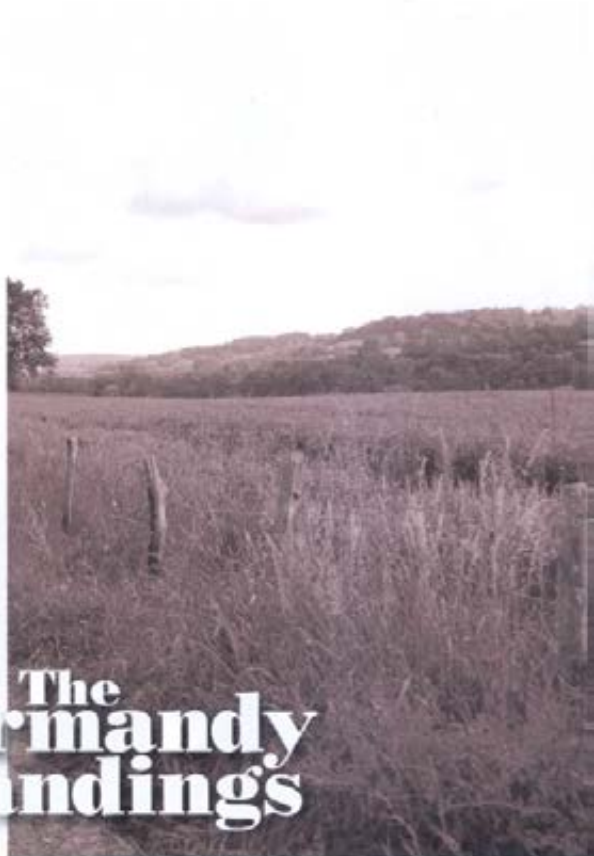
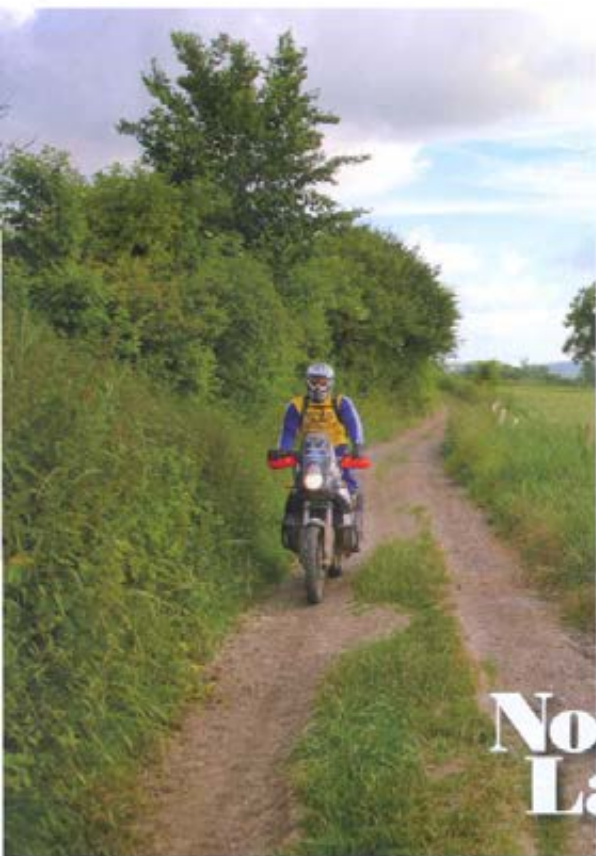


'I HATE TO say it mate, but there is a certain irony about you being on an Adventure Bike and having to ask a couple of road bikers the way' said one of the guys on a VFR I met at the péage. Hmmmm, well if I'd had more than three hours broken sleep the night before and wasn't running horribly late I might have seen the irony of the situation and even found it amusing. But I am running very late and then discover I have ended up a good 45 minutes further south than I need to be, which doesn't amuse me in the slightest.

My phone which I thought had been charging on the ferry overnight hadn't at all, and after negotiating the morning traffic through Ouistreham and Caen, there is an ominous silence from my digital navigator as my phone dies just as I need it the most. My backup consists of a hastily printed Google map with no road names or numbers, which is about as useful as an iPhone with no battery...



Story & Pics: Alex Waters



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I swallow my pride and ask to borrow a road map from the two English bikers also heading South and scribble some crucial notes on the back of my useless printout. It is 6.30am and I am not in the mood for messing around with maps - I just need to get to my destination ASAP! I am on my way to meet up with TBM columnist, Dakar guru and boss of Sport Adventure (not necessarily in that order) Chris Evans, who runs one of the longest established trail riding outfits in France - and the only one to use roadbooks.

I will be riding the 'Big Traillie' tour in Normandy on a Triumph Tiger XC I have only picked up from Hinckley the day before, mercifully shod with some knobbly-ish rubber. I get back on the road and get my head down - the inline triple purring away contentedly as the speed increases...

I finally arrive in the town of Gacé, the base for all SA

trips in Normandy. All activity is based around the Hotel de l'Etoile d'Or, a rustic, no-frills establishment but tolerant of punters with mud splattered gear. It is a solid base camp to go riding from with a barn/garage conveniently situated next door for overnight security and running repairs. Chris later mentions he has tried other - smarter - hotels in the area, but a lot of proprietors don't take too kindly to a large group of dirt bikers tramping around their lobby in filthy Tech8s, nor the inevitable rise in volume whilst discussing the day's exploits after a couple of 'pressions' in the evening.

The Triumph is immediately converted into 'Sport-Adventure mode' with the addition of a roadbook holder and removal of mirrors and rubber footpeg cleats. Looking around, I realise the XC is in some heavyweight company: there's a couple of fully kitted out 990s and a shiny 1190 and a few larger capacity EXCs. I sense a



couple of raised eyebrows under helmets as I pull up on the shiny Triumph, a couple of the lads are regulars on Chris' trips and know exactly what is in store, terrain-wise.

The ever-laconic Chris does not boost my confidence with the parting comment of 'I'll show you how to use the roadbook tomorrow, but I imagine you'll be too busy trying to stay on that bloody thing today to even give it a thought!'

I've hardly had time to say 'Bonjour' to the other guys who have come out to ride (who all sensibly arrived the night before) before engines are firing up and we are off into the fabulous Normandy countryside. The roadbook takes you on a 150km loop of the roads and trails around Gacé. And they are plentiful. A nice mix of terrain; with everything from wide fire roads to incredibly narrow and overgrown single track to keep you on your

toes. I am mildly concerned about the Tiger's off road prowess even with vaguely knobby tyres and getting horribly cross-rutted on the second (and surprisingly wet) trail of the day does nothing to dispel these concerns.

Although it is mid summertime a lot of the trails we are riding on lie under a dense canopy of trees and don't see a lot of sunlight to dry them out properly. Conversely - and to add to the challenge - most of the tracks not covered by trees have had weeks of summer sun to bake the ruts hard, so conditions in front of you change quickly and quite dramatically on occasion, along with the light.

Chris is very protective of his roadbooks. They have taken a lot of time to create and perfect, and a lot of these trails don't look to have been ridden at all since his last group was here. He makes it clear from the out-

set that the road books are on loan and are to be handed back immediately at the end of the day, 'lest they fall into enemy hands! It does add an extra element to the tour as you are out exploring the area with just you and your mates rather than being led around by someone, and it adds a certain sense of achievement when you make it home, albeit a couple or three hours late!

Chris gives everyone a briefing after breakfast and you can then split into groups (or ride on your own) depending on ability or the pace at which you want to ride... within reason! I don't think our 3pm arrival for lunch on day one is hugely appreciated by the restaurant trying to keep our confit of duck warm!

This is possibly a result of the combination of our late departure (ahem) and a few wrong turns along the way. As and when you do go wrong however, you can simply confer with your mates and backtrack to your last-known location. The roadbooks are not as intimidating as they sound and although I was mostly following a couple of knowledgeable regulars, I did start getting the hang of it on day two.

It is definitely worth giving them a go purely based on the quality of the trails they cover. Pete and Russell who I am riding with are both experienced big bike riders who come back year after year to re-explore this region of France which says a lot about the tour. And it is without doubt a great place to be on a bike, the picturesque landscapes and seemingly endless trails do not disappoint.

The Flying Tiger

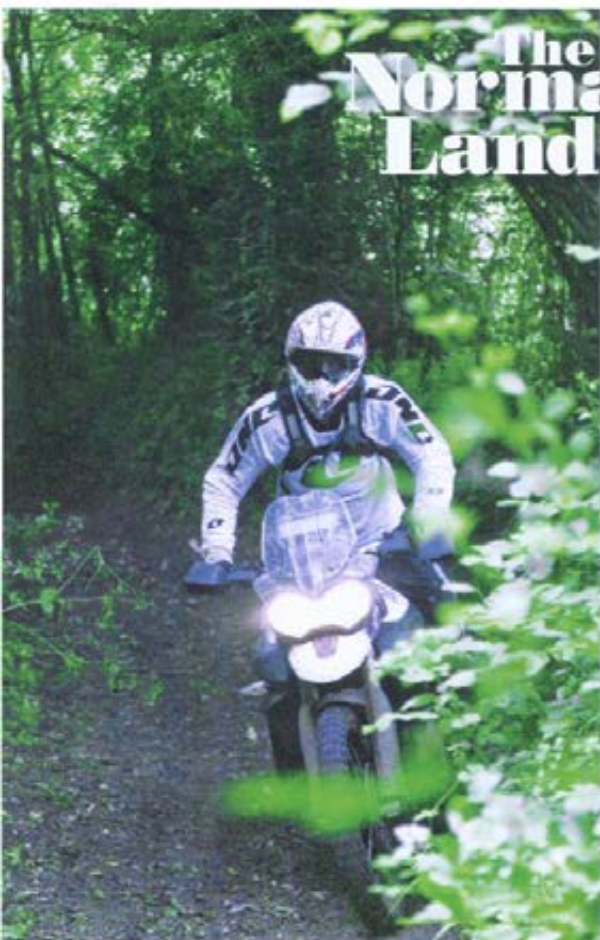
Rewind 24 hours or so and I am riding the Tiger back to London from the Triumph HQ in Hinckley. I must confess I am mildly concerned about how it is going to perform off tarmac. With a set of knobbles kindly fitted by the workshop, the XC version is



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weaving around a bit on the road which is to be expected I guess.

At first the whole package feels a bit road-biased for a true adventure bike. The bars are set back for seated riding and the foot controls feel a bit close to the engine casings to be MX boot friendly. Plus the 800cc inline Triple also feels more suited to road riding with its tall gearing and surfeit of power. But as I was to discover, the Triumph has another side to it which you don't at first discover... that of a really capable adventure bike.

It certainly seems to be a more compact, lighter package than our F800 long-termer - its closest rival on and off the road. Back at TBM towers what I really want to do is rotate the bars forward and levers up. However

after trying to undo the two different sizes(?) of bolts to loosen off the bars, I am met with what feels like a combination of factory torque settings and Loctite.

I need to get weaving to catch my ferry, so I settle for adjusting the levers for an easier reach in the standing position and make a mental note to remove the rubber footpeg cleats on arrival.

The silky smooth triple devours the motorway miles down to Portsmouth with ease and I would like to ride it on a set of road tyres another time to see just how well it handles the bends. It doesn't have anything like the fuel range of the F800 Adv with its oversized tank, but returns a just-about-respectable 45mpg after being flogged down the autoroute the next morning.



Crouching Tiger, Hidden Logs

After getting cross rutted on only the second foray off the grey stuff and wishing I had made time for another coffee before setting off, I re-focus and carry on into the unknown following Pete who is taking charge of proceedings up front. Half an hour later I realise that I might have been a little hasty to judge the Tiger. It feels surprisingly good in the standing position (unadjusted bars aside). The ridged tank I had convinced myself was going to catch my knees when stood up was fine; the clutch is light enough and the foot controls infinitely more accessible without the rubber cleats.

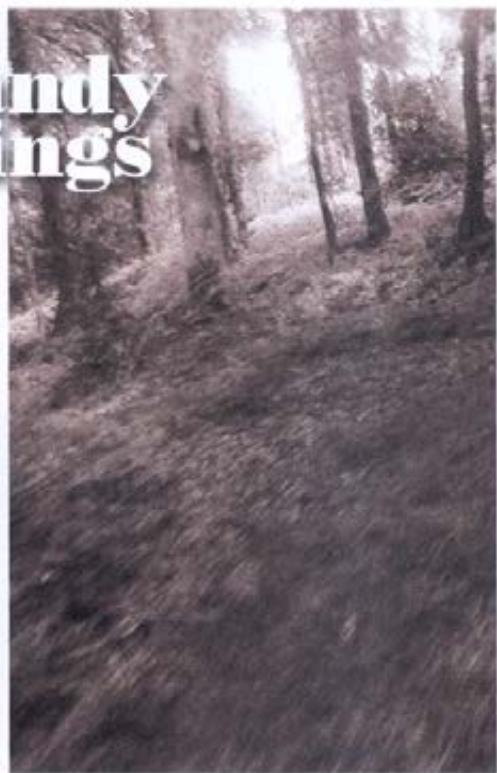
What I also appreciate is that it doesn't feel like the big 800cc lump that it is, and certainly feels less top

heavy than some other big 'off road bikes'. The Showa suspension that had felt a little softly damped at times on the road, soaks up the bumps and ruts with aplomb. But the biggest surprise by far, is how well the engine is suited to this kind of riding. You are never going to be able to crack the throttle and lighten the front end as you would on an enduro bike, but the Tiger's predictable power delivery makes it ideal for big trailie riding.

I would agree with Barni's opinion when we last tested the bike (TBM191) that it is a bit too prone to stalling in the more technical going and the gearing is a too tall for serious off road work, but that's easily remedied. I am however enjoying myself more and more as the morning progresses following Pete and Russell, who



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are making it all look a bit easy on their 990s.

I realise how much more carefully you have to choose and then commit to your lines on a big bike, which is all the more rewarding when you get it right, and potentially quite interesting if you get it wrong! You simply don't have that last minute get-out-clause you have on an agile 110kg enduro bike. Bigger bikes take longer to react to the rider's inputs and you will be eating dirt quicker than you can shout 'Merde!' inside your lid as I found out on a couple of occasions...

The first incident was a submerged log in the middle of one of the larger puddles we came across, which took control of the front and violently spun the bars in my hands, dumping me unceremoniously in the middle of the water feature before I even knew what was happening! Once I had stopped myself from drowning there is the not-so-small task of picking up a 200+kg bike that is made considerably easier with the help of another rider Simon 'Daisy' Day - cheers for that mate!

The second was at the end of the first day on an in-

nocuous looking section of trail. Not a rut in sight (that was the problem). Fuelled by the thought of a cold Kronenbourg after nearly 12 hours in the saddle I was taken with an enthusiastic turn of speed that didn't quite match the conditions. Suddenly the front wheel's heading in a completely different direction than required and this time I go down fairly hard and end up on the deck seeing stars and wondering where it all went wrong...

It is frustrating to come off on the home straight after having negotiated far more technical going earlier in the day, but it serves as a reminder that you can never switch off on a big bike, just because its beer o'clock!

I have JB's words of wisdom ringing in my ears 'big bikes make easy trails more interesting'. The Tiger would almost certainly have benefited from a proper knobby front tyre (rather than the block-pattern type it had) and I could have done with a couple of hours more sleep the night before... But neither of these offs have in any way dampened my enthusiasm for the day's rid-



ing nor the bike. Both have surpassed my expectations and it has been a thoroughly enjoyable day.

Big Bike Country

If you ride a big trailie or are thinking about getting one I would heartily recommend a trip out to Normandy to see Chris. The trails on offer are perfect to test out what the bigger bikes (and their riders!) are capable of. There were a few sections where I think the Triumph and me were on the limit of what we could do but the whole experience was a lot of fun, I only wish I could have done the whole three days, but I had to return to the office for an impending deadline.

The plucky Tiger took everything I threw at it we both came away relatively unscathed bar a couple of re-shaped levers. The only real criticism I have off the road is the gearbox which doesn't like changing up or down through the ratios as quickly as I sometimes needed it to. If you try and stamp down through the cogs in quick succession it simply wasn't having it. Whether this is an

inherent trait of the Tiger or just this particular bike I don't know, but in some ways it fits the ethos of big bike riding: choose your lines and gears early and you will be smiling to the bottom of the next descent!

So after 600 miles in three days, 200 or so of those on trails of one sort or another, the Tiger has been an excellent travelling companion. Comfortable and smooth on the road and quietly confident off the beaten track, Triumph have really come up trumps with their XC.

Despite not having been significantly updated since we tested it back in 2011 and a lack of gizmos compared to the competition, but in some ways the Tiger is all the better for it. Many of the bikes in this sector have become so laden with technology you wonder if they haven't missed the point of an off-roader.

But with the Trumpet it's quite refreshing to simply fire it up and ride. It hasn't missed a beat despite being mercilessly thrashed all the way to Normandy and back, and dumped on its side in a huge puddle once it got there. Surely that's what these bikes are all about?



If you accept the proviso that all these bikes are - to some degree - compromised by their 'jack of all trades' nature, then the XC is a strong contender in the mid-weight adventure class. With some bigger footpegs, a change of bars and some proper knobbles it would be an even better proposition. As it stands it's way better than you'd imagine...

Thanks to:

Chris Evans at Sport-Adventure 0033 662 487190

www.sport-adventure.com

Andrea Friggi at Triumph UK

www.triumph.co.uk

Christopher Jones at Brittany Ferries

www.brittany-ferries.co.uk/guides/motorbike-touring

All the lads out riding in Normandy - especially Pete, Russell and Daisy!



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