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Big Guns

Usually, when given a choice of weapon, I reach for a big gun. Being an American, I like big stuff, powerful stuff. I am thrilled by torque and the power to move things. It puts a smile on my face when I turn the switch and stuff happens. I like Big Twins and V8's. I dig motion and sound. I think I gravitated to the electric bass as an instrument because I like rumble and woof. Like you, I am all over shake, rattle, and roll. I favor Big Twins, I like strokers. Although I appreciate all marques of two-wheelers, H-D's are the only machines for me.

But as I am learning (and this was just recently affirmed) it's not always best to reach for the tried and true big gun. Sometimes it is best to step back, take a deep breath, and come at things afresh. As I have heard it said, "Ya need to open your mind."

Standing in front of the Hotel Diamond at the base of the Swiss Alps with the Pirelli Night Dragon marketing team and a posse of international journalists, getting ready to go for a four-hour burn on a variety of rented Harleys through what I knew to be, "alien Alpine roads, towns, and terrain," I forced myself to think outside the box.

I am not a competitive rider (although I take pride in my "skills"). I am not a fast rider (although I do ride at a good clip). I am a travelling rider. I like to go places and see stuff. So here I am, 830 AM, at the base of the most beautiful set of mountains I've ever seen, with roads that have a reputation of biting the unsuspecting. It's 85-degrees, 90% humidity (sounds like Florida right?), and I am standing in front of a collection of bikes—Sportsters, Softails, Dynas—churning the question: What gun do I reach for? Smoke came out my ears, I sh*t thee not.

Naturally, I hung my helmet from the handlebar of a cool, *changed up tin* TC Dyna – a rubbermount Big Twin just like my most favored of steeds, the FXR. As it turns out I had scooped Giuseppe Roncen's bike, the editor of *LOWRIDE*, an Italian V-Twin magazine. Sorry! If that had happened at home I could have seen a brouhaha ensuing, but Giuseppe was cool. Now what to do?

Pirelli Communication Manager Kevin Allen pointed to a few Sportsters, a Fat-Boy and a Dyna. So I gave it some more thought, and grabbed an 883. Yep, I

grabbed a Sportster, the smallest of the Sportsters to boot. "You really want a Sportster?" I was asked.

I honestly couldn't remember the last time I had ridden an 883, but I knew it was to prove a smart move. You see, your correspondent steveb had taken a good look at the road/route map the Pirelli team had thoughtfully provided this group in advance, and noticed there wasn't a straight line in the route. It looked like we were going to be riding a corkscrew. I was already sweating like a beast at this early hour and wanted to keep small and nimble. For the first time in recent memory, I didn't reach for a big gun, and I will say this, it was the smartest thing I'd done in a long time.

Pure objective utility guided my decision. I thought; here I am stuck in the middle of a pack of moto-folks whose skills are unknown, riding on alien terrain that I know will be unlike most anything I've done before. What gun do I need for this fight?

I knew the roads would be tight, I knew the turns would be extreme, I knew I'd be steeply climbing high, and I knew I'd be coming down into ancient and narrow little towns fast. I didn't see any highway on the route so I knew it wouldn't be a high-speed drone. I figured handling was job one. I wanted a machine I could push around. Engine braking also factored in; keeping a small, tight profile was paramount and the sticky Pirelli Night Dragon performance tires were going to be critical. With this in mind, I grabbed my 883 and we rolled up thousands of feet into Roman-era mountainside towns.

Having the right tool makes most any job more enjoyable and I must say, riding the 883 was great. My first hairpin (one of dozens we encountered) reminded me that I wasn't at home and to *focus*. After that the flickability and stickability of the Pirelli-shod Sportster made it really fun. I was digging the machine, removing as much footpeg "feeler" material as was reasonably possible. As it turns out, I had my bike "borrowed" by another journalist at a photo stop, and wound up on a FatBoy for a few kilometers.

What a difference, wow. I thought I was piloting a barge. The lack of flickability compared to the Sportster and the low slung floorboards compounded by the "in the pocket" seating position insured I was grinding parts around every single turn, the wide bars requiring a good deal of coutnersteer-



Matteo Cavadini, ALEX PHOTO sas,
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ing. The amount of work and planning for each turn insured there was no way I could take my eyes off the road and gawk at the sights, I had to really work it. I had a bazooka under me when what I wanted was a sniper rifle. First stop we made I snagged my Sportster back (sorry Stefan), as I was not digging the Softail in the least.

Now keep in mind, that we were accompanied by a few folks who'd ridden their own (fully loaded) bikes from Germany, Denmark, Northern Switzerland, etc.—and they rode Softails, Dynas and all the big bikes we favor here in the USA. These folks are skilled riders, or they don't survive long as this is unforgiving terrain. They chose the big guns for these roads, and yes, they scraped and scratched and worked their way through the mountains and the crazy tight cities on the very barges I couldn't wait to get off of.

In all fairness, getting around much of Europe requires slab time so I can fully understand the need for a Big Twin. But I can also clearly see why the new breed of Sportsters will do (and have done) well here; it seems to be the right gun for this fight as it is both sport- and travel-worthy. But I have to admit it was fun to watch some of these Big Twin riders work their way through the hills. These riders know their machines and they have some serious piloting skills.

Looking back over the day, it was surprisingly fun to fall for the Sportster and it was good to be in the seat of this machine. Rediscovering this iconic, fun bike and its responsive, torquey powerplant made riding the Swiss Alps even sweeter. As we rode through the ancient small towns and villages, I couldn't help but feel like an ambassador for what is one of the very best things that represent the American spirit—Harley-Davidson. I can see why the Europeans are as nuts for it as we are. Big guns, indeed.

Ride long, hard and safely—please! **IW**
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Brian Klock is on break from his regular column this issue as Klock Werks re-coups from the flooding they recently experienced. Look for Brian back in print next issue.