

Viaggio in Ape sulle Alpi – Across the Alps by bee

“Siette matti legare”, Enzo, who is sharing the table with us, writes these words on a piece of paper when we tell him about our plans. The English translation is “You fools belong in a funny farm.” That is what he thinks about us, the ‘APE-team’. Searching for a Piaggio-APE, we do not miss a chance to tell everybody about our plan – but most of the responses we get are quite doubtful.

[alternative beginning]

Everybody’s darling in Italy – the APE. The Vespa’s three wheel sister is part of Italian street life, as common as pizza. Corina Winter und Markus Golletz brought one of these so-called bees to Germany.

Behind us on the APE’s back rests the Ténéré, in front of us a permanently increasing cover of snow on the street. I turn the throttle as far as possible – but the speedometer gauge is not moving any further. 15 km/h, and this is full speed! In any other vehicle I would regard this as unbearably slow, but driving the APE it is enormous. We are fighting with 10 HP onto the southern road to Passo Spluga, and recently the snow fall has started.

It is mid-September. A few days ago, Corina and I became the proud owners of a 20year-old APE. Created from Piaggio as the three-wheeled sister of the famous Vespa scooter. For 50 years these two well known products called Vespa (wasp) and APE (bee) have been rolling off the product lines. Busy like her natural namesake, the APE-bee is specialized to carry heavy loads on steep roads. I guess, it probably never before had a Yamaha Ténéré on its back.

The old Ténéré was the motorbike that took us to Italy to catch one of these “three legged insects”, completely sure that we would return on the back of such a industrious bee. But it turned out to be more complicated than we had expected. Piaggio Italia gave us this important advice: sunny Liguria is the Ape’s natural home. And indeed – in San Remo we found one: Model P 601 in muddy yellow. But it is love at second sight. During our first visit to the local Piaggio-Center I still hesitate. The vehicle is covered with a thick layer of dust, the seats are torn, and everything looks rundown. Will it survive the Alps? I mumble some confused words in Italian, and we leave hastily. All the following days I was not successful in finding another one, only that muddy yellow thing is waiting for us and I can’t stop thinking about her. Finally the price drops to 550 Euro and we can’t resist any longer. Now the red tape part of the adventure begins. Registration is quite difficult. Every day we visit the dealer to convince him about the urgency of our concern. We pass the time enjoying the beach or visiting rally-infected town of San Remo. During one of our visits at the dealer’s, a friendly chap offers help. He took a lot of Daimler cars to Germany and tells us about a new law that would makes the export easier. All

we need is a temporary export license-plate from the office. But the Piaggio-Center even had a better solution. The prior owner agrees to register the Ape in his name for one more month. Like this he saved us a lot of official procedure.

Loading the Ténéré is no easy job – 1,75cm space hardly provides enough for it. The mechanic hands us a bag full of greasers, wires, steel cables and sparkplugs – and off we go. Directly into the rush hour of Ventimiglia! My debut driving the APE! On the right side the throttle, on the left the hard moving four-gears and at the bottom the combination 'dual-brake-system' for all three wheels (!). After endless stop-and-go-traffic we finally discover the road to the Roya Valley and climb up to Tende tunnel. After a short while, 5 out of theoretically 10 horsepowers seem to disappear, the 218ccm two-stroke-engine is hot as hell and the noise is awesome. It would be better to take a break. Tende – the climb is getting more extreme – the APE feels as heavy as half a car – she is out of breath with 20 km/h. Meanwhile it is getting dark and, thank god, a little cooler.

As an exception, the tunnel will be closed today one hour earlier than usual. We spend our first night snuggled up close to the APE on an old unused road. That's the kind of adventure we like! The next morning, we feel uneasy passing the narrow dark tunnel. What if the APE collapses in here? Well, she doesn't but descends the down hill serpentines, moving reliably with stability and brake power.

Occasionally we need a service-stop to check the "busy bee" before we reach the Alps. What a surprise - air filter, belt and manifold parts of the cooler are ruined. Of course she is hot all the time! I look for parts in Cuneo. The first dealer is a shifty guy. After disappearing for half an hour he returns and sells me the parts he bought somewhere else for a rip-off price. I find out the next day when I meet the original dealer myself...

Our Italian license plate makes our trip turning out very communicative. Truck drivers ask us for the way, because usually the radius of an APE is only 50 km from her home, and its drivers should know the area very well. Later we cover the German bike which makes our camouflage perfect. As soon as Italians understand what we are doing the reactions turn out very different. Younger people declare us to be crazy – "siette matti..." whereas the older people strongly trust into the vehicle. In Valle Pellice Ida, a nice old lady, invites us to sleep next to her chicken cage. Driving such a wonderful APE, she decides, it is impossible that we would have bad characters.

Turin is terribly messy and the traffic is pushing us to the highway (where we definitely not belong to). Between heavy trucks and shiny Alpha Romeos the APE is coughing shyly. When the motor begins to stammer, we just reach the roadside and sssshhh – that's it. A little later our baby is O.K. again – it was just too much for her and she needed a break.

We are a real eye catcher on a car park in Como: The Carabinieri are following us. Is it a crime to drive an APE? No, no, it's just they never saw people like us driving an Ape-oldtimer with an off-road motorcycle on it's back. "And where are you going? Germany? You must be mad!"

At least they wish us a nice trip. Witch we certainly have, at least, until the carburettor is getting onto our nerves, the ignition starts to cough, but Mister Ferrari from Piaggio Genova gives us first aid via telephone. It's nothing serious, he says, it will takes a Piaggio-Center maximum 10 minutes to fix it.

In Chiavenna, close to the Passo Spluga, we found a garage, expecting us with lots of old APE-Motors, APE vehicles and two greasy stained men inside of it: father and son, the specialists! We are in paradise! The carburettor problem is solved in minutes and, full of sympathy for our export of the "Italian way of life" to Germany, they hand out us some APE-parts for free – grazie, Italia!

Not far from the garage the Passo-Spluga-Sign says "aperto" (open), we have got a full tank, and last night the first snow was falling – so what are we waiting for? Off we go! At night, half way up, it feels freezing cold. But we have no choice; we want to reach the top. In the second gear, the bee tries her best to climb up the mountain. After some chill-out stops we achieve the alpine snow, the APE is boiling hot and gets a cover of snow to cool her down a bit. In the icy driver-cabin, we enjoy our last cappuccino in Italy. When we cross the border, the Italian customs officers are not really interested in us, they throw a quick glance out of the window, let us pass and return back to their table-soccer game. We reach the Swiss custom-officer. A little bit confused he also wishes us a nice trip. From now on it's getting really cold. The northern side of the Alps is covered with masses of snow, but luckily the streets are O.K. What a surprise: downhill the APE is much faster, up to 50km/h! Chur is passing by like a blurred picture. At the Austrian border, some difficulties are expecting us. The customs officer is irritated by the motorbike we have on the APE. What are we going to do with it? Do we have permission? Close to a nervous break down, we finally we manage to "re-import" our own bike and go ahead!

Towards the end of September we reach German ground, 800 km from Hanover, our final destination! The breaks feel like rally-stops. Quickly surrounded by curious passengers we have to answer the following questions over and over again: why, where to, how long did it take! Or: "How fast can you drive?", "Do both of you really fit into the small cabin?" And further we go through southern Germany, passing vineyards at the river Neckar. Children and young people are waving, foreign workers suggest a pizza advertisement onto the APE, and, "Madonna, did you really travel all the way from Italy with this old thing?" A restaurant owner gesticulates enthusiastically from his terrace, but the traffic light switches to green and with the familiar noise we leave the village. Travelling for 14 days and passing about 1.600 km, we are almost home...

Headings [for pictures]:

At the first stop in the Alps, the filter, belt and manifold are wrecked

The Passo Spluga, full power - but not more than 15 km/h. It is unbelievable!

In front of the Tende tunnel we feel a little uneasy – what if the APE collapses in there?

Informazioni in Internet:

www.markusgolletz.de/ape/htm oppure www.alpenape.de.vu

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