

*St Bart's*  
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*Trips*

*2 Meeting my Guardian Angel*

*by*

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In my first of a series of accounts of adventures on a motorbike, I explained how necessity turned into a passion for motorcycling. By 1994, I regarded myself as a seasoned motorcyclist, comfortable with travelling long distances and encountering wonderful people and places. I doubted I would ever repeat the experiences of my first long-distance trip but life's rich pattern can throw up some of the most unexpected situations you could never predict or foresee.

Since 1991, I had taken the courageous but possibly foolish decision to strike out on my own, away from the corporate, salaried comfort-blanket. Everything seemed to be going well. My first act of entrepreneurship, the development of a large pub estate, had grown from a one room office over-looking Lower Marsh Market just outside Waterloo Station to grander offices on the south side of the Thames in plain view of Tower Bridge. Within two years, the pub estate spread over the South East of England and South Wales totalled, some 400 outlets with my mates in the brewery industry wanting me to take more.

One of our pubs in Brighton we occasionally had to close for a day's filming. It was the outside view of the pub used in the comedy series 'Only Fools and Horses'. Oddly, this would be the second time I would brush with a comedy icon. In one of their series, there was a classic scene of a glass chandelier smashing to the ground after

confusion as to which one was to be lowered for cleaning. I believe the idea stemmed from an actual event a decade before when one of our Courtaulds engineers found a raised lump in the middle of his hotel bedroom in Russia. Rolling back the carpet, he discovered a metal rod rising up through the floorboards to which were attached two screw nuts the top one of which being the locking nut. Being an engineer and forever stubbing his toes on the offending mound, he decided from his tool box to undo the nuts so the rod was as flush with the floor as he could make it. Before he went to bed, he set to work. Unfortunately, he slightly overdid the adjustment a 'tidge' and the rod disappeared leaving the nut in his spanner. There was the sound of an almighty crash from the floor below. Realising to his horror his mistake, he quickly put his tools away and jumped into bed. Within 5 minutes, the manager burst into his room with him pretending to be asleep. Yes, you have guessed it, the rod was attached to a similar glass chandelier. You couldn't make it up could you!

Growing to an eventual estate of some 2,000 outlets seemed now in easy reach over the next 3 to 5 years. But then the wheels came off. I discovered to my horror our bank was acting in bad faith (perhaps a sign of things to come) and was trying to take our business over to serve entirely their own corporate greed. They wanted to grow much faster than for the good of the company to

serve their voracious appetite for fees and commissions. I had to leave, sell my shares and start afresh. If this wasn't enough, my mother passed away suddenly at just 71, literally dropping dead at the top of her stairs at home.

The whole family was utterly devastated. Our parents had brought us up with strong Christian values and sacrificed everything so that we could better ourselves. It was time to turn to that antidote again. It was Sue who suggested "Go on, take a break. Find somewhere to go and relax."

I had been to other motorcycle Grand Prix's but never too far from the UK. Why not try and check-out Southern Europe I asked myself and mix with some of the Latin bikers for a change. By chance, a casual conversation with a business associate said why not try Jerez. His company had received an open invitation from a sherry house so he suggested "you could act as our sort of ambassador. You will just have to pay a day's visit round their premises, enjoy a free meal and obviously taste the product." Well that clinched it and after suggesting I might want to stay at a hotel, they recommended, one in Punta Santa Maria. I was ready to go.

I had been by car several times from the UK to South West France and the Bordeaux Region. So, keeping to my internal disciplines of

proper breaks, I targeted as usual to get to the south of Paris on the first day and then over the French Spanish Border by the second day. The total trip was to be around 1500 miles to Jerez so I needed to average 500 miles a day on the bike. The toll roads in France are superb for a biker, except for the delays for the constant paying of tolls at each section, fumbling around your pockets for your money while still trying to hold up your heavy machine. It is almost as quick travelling free on the 'route nationale', especially as there is no contingent risk of lorries, caravans or traffic jams holding you up when on a bike. It also gives you a break from the constant monotony of travelling at 80 miles an hour.

Everything was going well and, by late afternoon, I was on the outskirts of Jean de Luz and ready to find my next hotel across the Spanish border.

The next day, the journey really started as the true Spain and its people was to be revealed. The weather was superb and soon Spain showed herself in all her beauty. All those Brits flying direct from Birmingham and the like to their escape in the Costa's don't realise what they are missing here on the ground.

First, you pass through gentle, grass-laced hills, a little like rural Derbyshire and then you are travelling on vast open plains, flat as a

pancake as far as the eye can see, but at its rim blue-tinged mountains. As you travel through the centre of Spain passing Burgos, you do not realise how high you are gradually climbing until suddenly it feels you are driving over the edge of an escarpment and dive down to the valley below plunging towards, at times, huge lakes. Soon you are on your way towards Seville and the scent of the orange trees.

As it was May, the weather was very warm but not unbearably hot. In those days, the traffic was very light and many occasions you were travelling alone. It may take an hour before you see another car or lorry.

This was what motorcyclists dream about the world over, the freedom, the stunning scenery and because you are on a bike, the approachability of people. Young toddlers come up to admire the bike followed by their father. Shortly this is followed by the mother, grandparents and friends. They ask where you are from and where you are going. Not meeting many Brits on bikes, they often offer a coffee and a chat so they can practise their English.

A trick I learnt early on is that if you were lost and wanted to find a hotel don't ask the older generation as the youngest love to practise their English and get to know about your adventure. I often

wondered if it was the reverse what would happen to a Spanish Rider in say Milton Keynes, hopefully the same friendly attitude ?

I was now 150 miles from my destination, travelling through a semi-desert with cork trees and cacti. Just like a cowboy in the John Wayne movies but riding on a steel steed. I had already travelled 1350 miles but hadn't realised severe fatigue was setting in, and in my fragile mental state of mind, my confidence was ebbing away. It was one thing to be 150 miles away from my destination but I was really 300 miles from returning home I thought to myself.

I was riding alone, along a relatively narrow road thinking can I really make it ? If I drifted into the dirt at any time to the side of the road, it would be very easy to come off and no help available for hours. I am miles away from any medical back-up. I remember a couple telling me of falling off their bike due to the same latent tiredness, the rider breaking his leg and his wife unconscious. Help didn't arrive for two hours.

To this day, I do not understand what was going on, perhaps my lack of sleep at home or a grief throwback. For me, I am normally quite positive under the most severe challenges and pressures, but somehow black thoughts were swirling around my head.

I do remember slowing down from around 55mph to approximately 35mph thinking of a place to perhaps turnaround before I over committed myself. Suddenly, a great stork appeared from nowhere flying parallel with me just 10 feet off the ground and just beyond arms reach. It was slowly flapping its wings, easily keeping pace with me. As I looked in its direction, I found it was staring straight back at me. Whenever I turned away to check my direction and look back again it continued to stare. This lasted for several minutes, almost, I had the feeling it was telling me "Come on. You're OK. We can make this. There's nothing to worry about. You're going to be alright." We must have travelled together for about 3 to 5 miles locked in a transfixed state. The black clouds in my mind began to clear. I saw I'd been silly and then the bird gradually veered off into the distance.

I remember stopping at a café at the next village and couldn't stop my hand shaking as I drank my coffee so strange was the experience. At the time, I could not rationalise it. Later, I believed that day I had met my guardian angel.

Now, I had a fresh spirit and when I was getting within 50 miles of Punt Santa Maria more bikers were joining me from Spain, Portugal, Italy, Holland, Germany, but no Brits. The brand-new roads financed by the EU were in abundance and had been routed to avoid the

centres of the old small villages acting as by-passes. Whole villages would turn out to see the bikers parade by their town on their fantastic machines. A favourite game was for villagers to hold out their hands and for bikers to give 'high fives' passing as fast as they could. Often this entailed travelling at over 100 mph with the police looking on benignly. As you approached, the cheer would go up encouraging you to speed up.

Is there a lesson for us in the UK ? Of course, we have rules and laws to protect everyone but where a population allows young men to let their hair down at minimal risk, shouldn't we sometimes just back off a bit and join in their sheer joy and exuberance ? Answers on a postcard in no more than 150 words please. I had to join in but on a gentle bend I found the rear wheel stepping out. I thought to myself take it a bit steadier Ronnie, remember your age.

Punta Santa Maria is located some 30kms from the race track closer to the coastline. Around 6pm, I found the hotel easily and was a little taken back by its opulence. It turned out it was converted from a monastery but with beautiful stone work, marble and wrought iron stairs and gates. I learnt later it was regularly used by the King of Spain, Juan Carlos, on summer visits.

Entering the hotel, it seemed three coaches had arrived at the same time with 60-80 people thronging the reception area ready for booking in except these people were all bikers or part of the Grand Prix teams from Honda, Suzuki and Yamaha. I hadn't reserved a room thinking foolishly that arriving on a Thursday I would be OK. If I couldn't get a room here, I would have to try somewhere else possibly even a B&B the hotel might recommend.

Shortly after me, a bunch of Portuguese bikers arrived and their leader, complete with a pony tail and looking like a pirate, struck up a conversation. When he learnt I hadn't reserved a room over the weekend, he informed me "You won't find any accommodation within 50 kms. Didn't I know there'd be 250,000 bikes here for the festival?" He then said, "what's your name", and said no more. Later he came back and asked for my passport. Apparently, he told the receptionist he had telexed ahead some four months ago, saying a rider was coming from England and would they reserve me a single room. The Spanish with their world-renowned efficiency couldn't find the mysterious telex. Somehow, he persuaded them to put me in an attic room for the length of my stay. I never knew who he was but he certainly had some influence. Had my guardian angel struck again?

Having overcome that problem, I was feeling very tired and was ready to take an early night. It was then my newly found Portuguese friend asked what I was planning to do. Having said I was just going to get a quick meal and turn-in he said, "You can't do that, freshen up, get changed and join us in the town centre just half a mile down the road."

How right he turned out to be. I wandered into the town square with hundreds of other motorbike fans. Windows of houses were thrown open for the sale of cheap gin and tonics and there were barbeques and food stalls everywhere. Language was no barrier; having got to your name, you were invited to join all and sundry. Come on, Ronnie, have a drink with us, how about a steak baguette? It didn't take long to feel at peace with the world and enjoy everyone's good humour.

As the light faded, on came the bright lights and disco music. The main Spanish TV and Radio broadcasters were there interviewing people in the crowds. All the people of the town and the surrounding villages joined in the merry throng. There were all ages from babes in arms to 80-year-old grandparents.

The whole town was barred to traffic, cars and lorries, except bikers. One road was cleared of pedestrians by steel mesh barriers by the local police to allow bikers to practise great and unbelievable

stunts. There was even a grandma parading down the street on her moped between the young hotheads carrying a small dog wearing goggles in a shopping basket on the front waving to the cheering crowd.

Surely, this was humanity at its best ? No aggression, just wholesome fun to be shared with everyone, inhabitants and visitors alike. It was 2am before I ventured back to my hotel thinking isn't life wonderful and was I so pleased I had continued on as my friendly stork had encouraged me.

I had almost forgotten that I was due the next day at the sherry home of Gonzalez Byass at 11am. Jerez came onto the world scene with the huge increase in demand for its local fortified wine, sherry. The story goes that Sir Francis Drake sacked the town of Cádiz, making off with barrel of the sweet tippie. England got a taste for it, including Shakespeare, one of sherry's biggest fans.

Sherry has an ancient history, with a wine history dating back thousands of years to the Phoenicians. Even before Sir Francis Drake brought the wine back to England, other wineries had been making sherry commercially for centuries. The history of Valdespino winery in Jerez, for example, dates back to the year 1264 when the King of Spain granted one of his knights, Alonso Valdespino, 30 acres

of vineyards. More than 700 years later, Valdespino is still selling wine and is one of the oldest bodegas in the Sherry Region. Visiting the ancient bodegas (the wineries) is certainly a "must-do" for wine lovers visiting Jerez de la Frontera.

Having changed out of my motorcycle gear in their car park, I walked down a lane to the main reception. This time my name was in the book and I was expected. My sponsors (Costcutter) purchase great quantities of their various wines and so I was regarded as a special guest. The tour explained the various types of sherry including a brand that tastes of the sea! We, of course, were sampling the wine in its various stages before blending and then were escorted to the cellars for a final session of food and the finished product. We were allowed any tittle we preferred except for two specially branded barrels for King Juan Carlos and, surprisingly, Bobby Charlton. It was a great tour and I soon realised that sherry was a better product than we normally give it credit.

Arriving back at the bike, I realised I had consumed more alcohol than I had thought. I couldn't ride in this condition and decided to go to a nearby McDonalds consuming two milkshakes to try and dilute the effects. It took a good couple of hours before I was safe enough to ride back to the hotel.

Of course, it is easy to forget that the purpose of the whole visit was to watch the racing on the Saturday. The racing was to a very high standard with Michael Dohan of Australia, demonstrating in the 500cc race on his Honda, what a great rider he was. I doubt I will ever witness a rider with such mastery of his machine. Motorcyclists can recognise the fine line between winning, and in a split second, losing control and the race. Dohan was able to ride his bike 'on the edge' throughout a race - what a genius. Apart from the pleasure of watching him ply the mastery of his art, my abiding memory of that race was something else.

A Spanish rider, who close to retirement, was generally considered that he would do well to get into the top 10. I think because the King Carlos was there and there were hundreds and thousands of his countrymen, that he rode like a demon. He managed a podium place. At the winners' ceremony, the King congratulated each rider after presenting their trophies. When he came to the Spaniard, he put the trophy to one side, lifted him up in his arms and swung him round. The crowd went crazy. Perhaps a lesson for our royal family on how you can touch a nation by a simple gesture !

The return was less of an anxious affair and I enjoyed in the end the return as I did the departure. So, next time you are overtaken in

your car by a lunatic in leathers driving through the pouring rain, ask yourself, "Did you meet your guardian angel today ?"

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*Saint-Malo,*

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