

# The conquest of Europe: 2006

BMW's 500-hp M6 proved to be a suitably epic travelling companion on a whirlwind tour of Europe's best roads  
Story and photography by Johnny Lucas



THIS IS THE TRIP Napoleon would have done if he could have. Sadly, the Emperor never had it so good. When he was busy conquering Europe he had to sleep in tents.

If you've read the previous issue of DRIVEN (yes, you're supposed to read the magazine, not just look at the pictures) you know that our travel features are going to be about trips you can actually do. So my mission in going to Germany, France, Switzerland and Italy (in the hottest BMW I have ever seen) was to come back with a trip experience that is going to be great for readers to do next year. Hard work for sure, and I expect zero sympathy for my efforts.

## Germany

The best driving was the B500. It's the back road through the deep dark Black Forest into Baden-Baden. More curves than all the swimsuit models in the world, nicely paved and wide enough (this is Germany not Italy after all) and not much traffic. We drove the road, and arrived at our hotel just in time to impress the valets with the M6 and tear downstairs for a massage.

Baden-Baden, we discovered, isn't bad at all. I expected a stodgy town with octogenarians soaking themselves in the hot springs. Which is exactly what the town has been known for ever since the waters, it is said, are to have cured Roman Emperor Caracalla's arthritis in the third century AD. The water contains a fair bit of natural lithium, so maybe he just felt better about things. Baden-Baden is relaxed, interesting, historic and pretty with great restaurants and music.

## France

Having been brought up on movies about the Second World War, the idea of crossing from Germany to France without even stopping for a passport check continues to amaze me. If a pessimist tells you that the world is getting worse, just give him the freedom to drive, at his own speed and in his own time, between Italy, Germany and France - and the argument is over. It's hard not to feel good about the world and yourself while driving through Europe and all its history knowing that your biggest concern is going to be choosing between a spa service or a wine.

Burgundy is the province of France that produces the best, but not the cheapest, wine and has escaped the tourist trap trend that has afflicted other regions such as Provence. Burgundy has been protected by the fact that the land is worth more for growing grapes than for motels or urban sprawl. The roads are fine, of course, and the wine towns are so close that you can walk or bike through them easily; Nuits-St.-George, Savigny-Les-Beaune, Pommard, Mersault, Puligny-Montrachet, Rully.

Beaune is a nice, small city, but the best of Burgundy is its villages, hilltop chateaux, serene abbeys and idiosyncratic villages. Like its wine, Burgundy does not have the "biggest" anything. When we were there we spent a day driving the small roads, dropped in at an ancient, hidden, peaceful Cistercian abbey and an historic chateau. We had about 300 equally good other choices.



**The Italian error**

What we did here was a mistake. Not the going to Italy part of it, Italy is wonderful. How we got there was wrong. Beaune to Bellagio is possible in a day's drive, but just barely. We aggravated the situation by not taking the shortest route through the Alps (Mont Blanc Tunnel) and then we made it worse by asking Helmtraud for the shortest route to Bellagio (our Italian destination). We should have asked Helmtraud for the fastest route.

**Helmtraud**

Allow me to introduce Helmtraud. This is the name we gave the guidance system of the car. If you've ever been spooked by a vehicle that is able to tell you

in a soft voice "the door is ajar," you will fall victim to Helmtraud's charms.

Through the miracle of GPS, the car always knew exactly where we were. When you tell it where you want to go, it asks if you want the shortest route, the fastest, if you're okay with ferries and toll roads and then it draws you a map with a handy red line on it. That's just the beginning. Helmtraud then speaks to you in a soft measured tone saying "Turn left at the next intersection," "Take the third exit on the roundabout." At first she spoke only German, but the obliging girl changed to English when we found the right control.

I'm really going to hear about this violation of political correctness for my next comment, but she was also the perfect woman. When you did not follow her instructions – what did she do? She got over it immediately. Without any



rancour in her tone, she adjusted the route and gave alternate instructions. When we drove off in the direction opposite to what she suggested, she just calmly told us to “make a legal U-turn.” No hint that we were disappointing her or that we had done anything wrong – she just didn’t have it in her to do that. I think of her fondly still.

We knew she needed a name and a friend in France suggested that we do the honour of naming the guidance system “Helmtraud” after his 80-year-old mother. She was born German, spent most of her life in France, is a natural aristocrat and citizen of the world. I’m not expecting BMW to come out with the “Helmtraud M6” anytime soon, but the name of the guidance system became our fairly inappropriate name for the car.

#### Italian “roads”

Helmtraud’s shortest road to Bellagio happened to be not a motorway, but a twisted, narrow, contorted, narrow, mountainous, badly maintained, narrow, excuse for a very narrow highway.

How narrow was it? The M6 is not a slight little car, it’s 2,043 mm wide and I swear this was more than half the width of the road. This BMW has a handy little button that pulls in its side mirrors the way a cat pulls in its ears just before it swats the dog. I used this button often.

My companion tells me that the road is scenic, I wouldn’t know. On one side there was a rush of oncoming Italian drivers, all of whom seem to have recently graduated from the Kamikaze school of driving, and on the other side either a wall or a precipice – those, and the fear of scratching up this brand new beast, monopolized my attention. My advice on how to drive that road is this: don’t.

#### Ahh, Italy

But it was worth it to get to Bellagio. We stayed in the Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni which is on the site of the summer villa of Pliny the Younger. Being a Roman Emperor he must have had his choice of real estate. I’m not quite sure how a hotel gets to be a Grand Hotel, it might have something to do with the fact that the ceiling in our room was about three stories high.

Generations of poets have been coming to the Italian Lakes to swoon over the natural beauty of the place. Rich Italians and movie stars have villas on the shore. Europeans making the Grand Tour stopped here for a season to walk in the footsteps of every one else who had come to appreciate the lakes, the food, the wine, the views and the air.





**Switzerland**

In Switzerland we again disobeyed Helmtraud who had suggested a tunnel under the Alps. We went instead with the advice of my Swiss friend, Nick, who recommended we take the high road: the old cobblestone route over the St. Gotthard pass. This road made the B500 look like the autobahn. Not the sort of road the M6 is made for, but what an experience to climb steeply with every turn and come out into long views and alpine meadows.

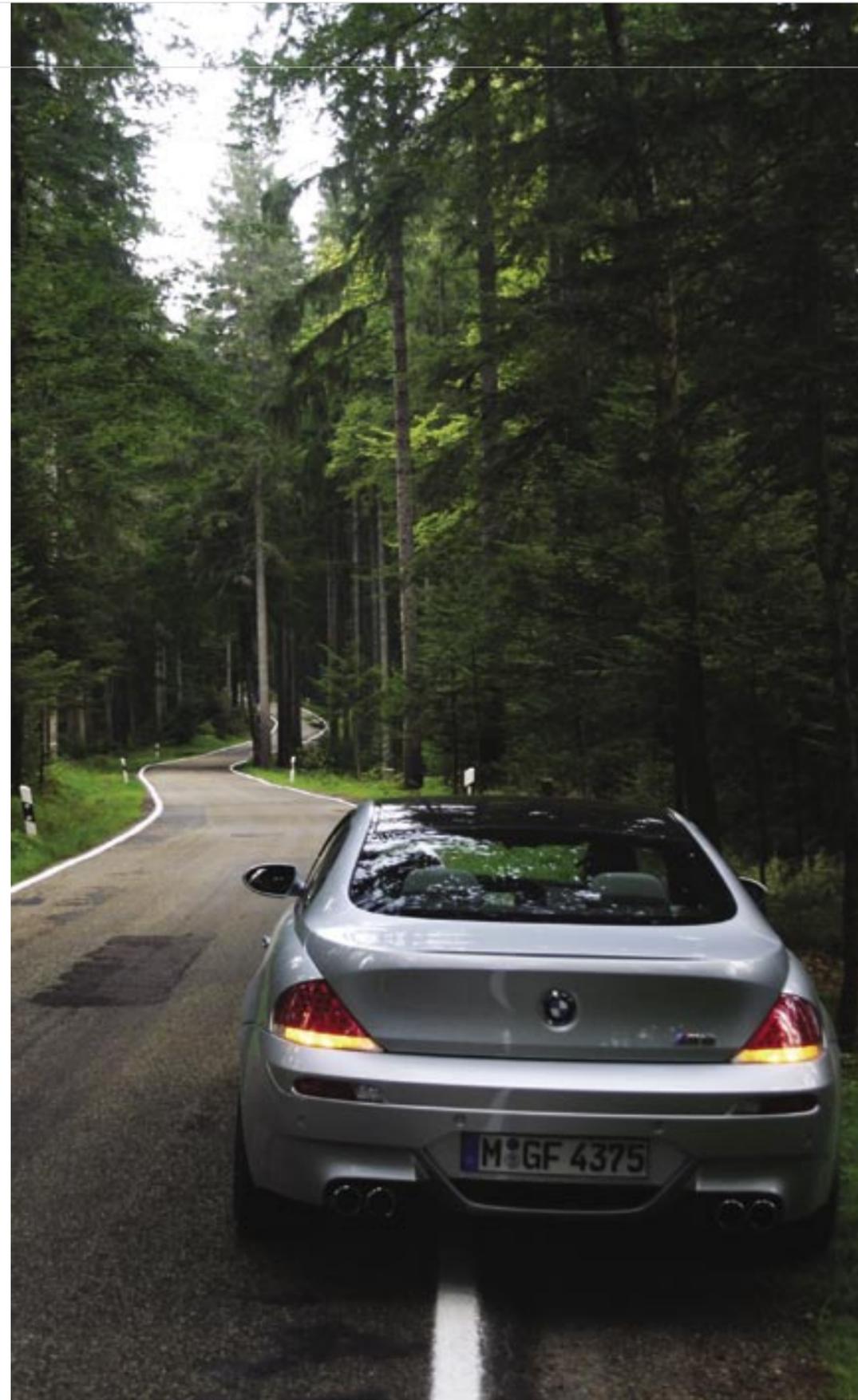
I didn't check out the great hotels I'd like to stay at on my next trip along this route, instead I spent time with my friends Nick & Liza and enjoyed a traditional raclette dinner with them.

**Our Waterloo**

Pathetic fallacy is that literary device by which the hero's mood is manifested in the weather. The night we returned the car to BMW central was the only really lousy day of weather we had. Helmtraud functioned perfectly in the dark and stormy night. We said our sad goodbyes in the privacy of a fortified underground parking lot - and the next day I was a pedestrian in Düsseldorf. It was wrenching to part from those 500 horses and the pinnacle of fine engineering in which they are stabled. As Napoleon discovered, it's probably too much to ask for a completely happy ending after the experience of conquering Europe.

**The eight greatest things about this trip:**

- > The walk to, and the view from, Castle Vezio, looking down all three arms of Lake Como
- > 40 km of the B500 between Freudenstaft and Baden-Baden
- > Mushroom salad at Trattoria San Giacomo in Bellagio
- > Biking in Burgundy between wine villages
- > The air in Lake Como
- > A firm massage and soaking in hot water in Baden-Baden at the end of a day's driving
- > A fine Burgundian dinner with great wine produced within walking distance
- > Hearing cowbells across an alpine meadow



# driven

## driving adventures

In association with Horizon & Co Travel, DRIVEN is offering you a version of this trip. It won't be all M6s, but there will be wheels you can love

**Day 1 >** Meet at Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio. Dinner at Trattoria San Giacomo.

**Day 2 >** Morning: pick up at the Serbelloni's wharf by private launch for a tour of Villa Balbianello. Lunch somewhere gorgeous. Tour down Lake Como to the city of Como. Pick up cars and drive into Switzerland. Overnight and dinner at a great spa hotel on the shores of Lake Lucerne.

**Day 3 >** Drive to a small, great hotel just outside Beaune (for a two-night stay).

**Day 4 >** Morning drive in the countryside. Afternoon bike ride to Rully (optional). A great Burgundian dinner in Rully and safe transportation back to our hotel.

**Day 5 >** Drive to Baden-Baden for a two-night stay. Spa treatments this day or the next.

**Day 6 >** Options in Baden-Baden include: Walking tour of town, three hour visit to ancient hot springs including sitting in lots of hot water, driving on the B500 and/or the autobahn, and more spa treatments. Dinner will be at this great spa hotel.

**Day 7 >** Morning driving if you like, and a transfer to Frankfurt or post-trip packages.

**Pre-trip Suggestions >** Arrive in Bellagio a couple of days before the rest of us and walk your feet off in the hills around the lake. Think about staying in Varenna, a quieter town across the lake.

**Post Trip Suggestions >** You're in Germany! Tour the BMW factory in Munich, drive more autobahn, check out Sigmaringen - not so far from Baden-Baden - the charming hometown of a branch of the Hohenzollern family, or go to Düsseldorf as I did.

**More DRIVEN Driving Adventures overleaf >>>**