

BEAUTIFUL, BLOODY BALKANS

THE WAR IS OVER; NATURE ABIDES

WORDS THE BEAR PHOTOS THE BEAR &
PRIMOŽ "PINEAPPLE" BRIC

Hvar is not the place for boy racer games. So what was Claudio's R 1200GSA's front wheel doing trying to get the inside line into the next corner? Not that he had a hope; I squirted the F 700 GS a little harder and leaned a lot further and the big Brazilian dropped back into my mirrors instead of my peripheral vision. By the time we left the neat little set of three corners he was far enough back so that even his overwhelming power advantage wasn't necessarily going to let him catch me before the next lot of bends. If, that is, I really got on the gas – which I did, with the little BMW's rear Metzeler squirming on the uneven tar...

What exactly is going on here? Isn't this a story about a sedate motorcycle tour through the scenic beauties (and remembered terrors) of the Balkan countryside? And what is this about Hvar, a long, thin cigar of an Adriatic island? It isn't that it's exactly known for the quality of its roads, sorry, road, is it?

It's true, it's true, I shouldn't really be writing about this. Let's get a bit more responsible.

The one major road forms a kind of spine for the island, beginning in the east after the short ferry ride from the mainland and ending in the vineyards of the west. Hvar's northern side, facing the mainland at an angle, is scoured down to the rock by the frequent strong katabatic winds that descend from the coastal range. The sheltered southern and western coasts produce high quality



Road closed in the Durmitor
Range, pretty soon...



wines, while the rest of the island is famous for its delicate sheep cheese flavoured by the herbs that grow in every nook and cranny of the limestone.

Wow! I got “nook and cranny” into a story! Been trying to do that for years...

But that road... The problem with it is that it has no runoff. None. Get a corner wrong and you're either tangled in the downhill chain link fencing held up by star pickets – a metre above the vineyards – or shedding paint, bits of bike and body parts as you scrape along the craggy uphill limestone wall on the other side of the road.

Well, actually that's not the only problem. Another one is that Croatian road engineers have not yet quite got their heads around the concepts of camber and drainage. As a result the roads feature puddles, or perhaps I should write “puddles” – they're more like lakes – up to six inches deep, when it's raining.

It was raining. Not hard. Not yet...

But perhaps I should start at the beginning, in Ljubljana. Adriatic Moto Tours picks you up from the airport, which not all tour operators do, and it's a nice touch. They also put you up in one of the best hotels in town, the Hotel Lev. I was feeling fresh enough to take a walk around the city's old quarter, and that was well worth it. Ljubljana is a lovely place.

You get a final chance to specify accessories at the Adriatic garage, where you pick up your bike. I managed to score a very handy tank bag. Our very personable guide Dušan warned us that we would be facing peak hour traffic when we left town for the first day's ride, but it was a bit like peak hour in, say, Launceston. Nothing like Sydney, that's for sure. Dušan set a brisk but by no means overly fast pace, and once we were off the motorway on our way south to the Plitvice Lakes it was easy to keep

up and to admire the countryside.

Spring is a wonderful time anywhere in Europe, but especially wherever there are deciduous trees. The brilliant, almost unbelievable green of their new leaves lights up the entire countryside. The roads in Slovenia were generally good, although that changed a bit when we crossed the border into Croatia. It's funny, actually – Dušan warned us about the quality of the roads both here and in a number of other places, but in fact they were generally better than many Australian roads... Things have changed politically since I was last in what was then Yugoslavia. It's now several countries, and you keep running into borders. Fortunately the formalities are pretty laid-back.

Our last stop before the hotel at the lakes was Slunj, which despite the rather grunty name is a pretty little place with water flowing through it in several streams. Once at Plitvice, we

checked into the hotel, changed into walking gear (instructions in the guide book suggested that we “Wear sneakers or other comfortable walking shoes”) and then caught a bus set up like a little toy train to the top of the chain of lakes. From here we walked down, following some of the well laid-out wooden and gravel trails.

I find it very hard to tell you how beautiful Plitvice Lakes are. I had seen them from the main road, and they had certainly looked intriguing with their calcium-rich water which forms travertine barriers. But that was nothing to being close up. We almost walked through some of the hundreds of waterfall which connect the lakes descending the hillside.

Our group dined together that night; evening meals on ride days are included in the cost. The guide and van driver, the redoubtable Primož (nicknamed ‘Pineapple’ by an American traveller on

a previous ride, because he couldn't pronounce the name) ate with our mixed group of 13. This included George and Gertruida from South Africa, Mark and Amy as well as Philippe from the US, Hector and Sergio from Mexico, Claudio and Claudia plus Marcio and daughter Ana from Brazil and Peter and me from Australia. Despite our different backgrounds and languages we were all to get on well.

On the way back to our hotel, Peter and I stopped to have a drink in the bar (well, two – drinks, not bars) and got chatting to the barmaid. This was our first real encounter with the devastating civil war; she told us about arriving here as a refugee from over the border in Bosnia, a little girl with only her mother and brother but almost no possessions. “We had nowhere even to lie down to sleep,” she said.

We crossed that border early next morning on our way to Sarajevo, where

**1. Lakes and streams are everywhere.
2. Bear above Dubrovnik – good pose, eh?
3. I'll have... meat for lunch, I think.**



we would learn a lot more of the story of that war. But it's actually hard to dwell on the subject when you're riding through beautiful mountain scenery, and encountering history at every revolution of your wheels. About a hundred kilometres down the road from our overnight stop, we turned off into the forest to go and see the train from which Tito ran the guerrilla campaign in World War II. It's weird to see three small and badly neglected carriages and what looks like a toy locomotive, stuck in the forest. Riding out we found a reminder of more recent hostilities: signs in the roadside trees warning of land mines.

History is so thick in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina,

that you almost feel you have to push your way through it. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand here started WWI; we stood on the exact spot where it happened. Sarajevo is a major religious centre for Catholic and Orthodox Christians, Muslims and Jews. That didn't stop the horrendous siege that held the city in its iron grip for more than four years. The city was also an administrative centre for both the Ottoman Turks and the Austrians.

Our hotel was terrific, right on the wall of the old town – which now holds restaurants and markets – and across the road from the Hotel Europe, the best place in town. The Russian embassy held an afternoon gathering there, and I've never seen so many bad suits in my life.

On our first rest day, we took a tour of Sarajevo that included some of the highlights, if you can call them that, of the siege. You get to sample a few metres of the tunnel dug under the UN-held airport, to connect the city with the rest of Bosnia. That was fascinating. So was finding out about things like the Sarajevo Roses – gouges in the pavement that mark spots where three or more people were killed by a mortar or cannon shell.

Peter, Philippe and I were having a beer at an outdoor café when I decided that I wanted to take one of the glasses home. I asked about a price, which sent the waiters into a huddle with the manager, accompanied by much gesturing and muttering. I finally said "I'll give you two Euros" and had the glass packed in a plastic bag, in seconds. We had dinner that night in the beer hall attached to the brewery, an excellent choice.

Despite its cruel history, Sarajevo is a cheerful place. We were pretty cheerful, too, after sampling the various brews including an excellent brown ale.



- 4. Dušan's morning briefing was always interesting and useful.
- 5. Sorry about the fuzzy shot, but I wanted to show you the Kotor road.
- 6. The Kotor road again, just one of the many hairpin bends.



Heading for Mostar the following day we had no less beautiful countryside (you can take this as a given in the Balkans, really) but we also needed to keep our eyes on the road a bit more to dodge fallen rocks, as well as flipping up tinted visors in the unlit road tunnels. No big deal, but you don't want to hit a rock and dent your wheel rim; that's one of the few things that the (included) insurance doesn't cover. We also had lovely weather, which made our stop at the Sutjeska WWII monument even more poignant. It was here that Tito's partisans broke the German occupation, and the monument is appropriately brutal.

Lunch was wonderful. We turned off the main route to Blagaj, where an Ottoman (no, not that kind of ottoman) monastery hugs the 200 metre rock wall next to the gap through which the river Buna springs from the mountainside. After crossing the river by a narrow stone pedestrian bridge, we had an outstanding seafood lunch right by the water. Mostar might have been an anticlimax after that, but in fact the town with its famous bridge offers pleasant walks in the Turkish quarter through little alleys and some relatively interesting souvenir shops.

After crossing the bridge on foot, quite an eerie experience, we ate at an outdoor restaurant with much hilarity and local wine and beer. It's terrific being surrounded by so much Islamic history – but still being able to get a drink!

While Pineapple collected our bags from outside the rooms, a service he fulfilled every morning (as well as returning the bags to our rooms before we reached our hotel in the evening) Dušan emphasised at our morning briefing that we would probably find the next border crossing, into Montenegro, a slow one and that we should watch out for cows on the road. The former turned out to be true (although it was pleasant enough) but we saw no signs of the latter, except for copious droppings.

We took a detour this day, to avoid a pass that was apparently still snowed in. "They don't clear the snow here," said a resigned Dušan. "They wait for it to melt." His caution paid off, because we rode up to the pass from the other

side just to check the snow, and found the warning well justified. Mind you, I for one didn't mind the detour – we actually ended up riding more twisty and spectacularly scenic road than we would have if we'd gone the original way!

That night we stayed in a ski resort, quiet in the off season as many of them are, and Peter and I had an opportunity to sample some more local spirits and liqueurs. There was quite a range on offer... After riding through forests of four hundred year old black pine, we stopped at the bridge over Tara Canyon, apparently the second-largest in the world after that one in America. In a display of the usual Balkan disregard for rules, we just parked in the middle of the bridge and took photos. As so often, the scenery just got better as we went along and I blessed the invention of the digital camera. If I'd had to shoot this trip on film I would have been broke before it ended.

Just before lunch we rode down into Kotor, along the modern version of the ancient mule path known as The Ladder of Cattaro. This is one of my nominees for the best bike roads in the world – it's one hairpin after another, broken by various lengths of sort-of straight road, and with constant staggering views across to the Adriatic Sea. Mind you. For maximum effect you should ride it up – not down.

More scenery on our ride up the coast to the old walled city of Dubrovnik, now with the Adriatic on one side and cliffs on the other. Our hotel was some way out of the walled town, further around the coast in a beautiful little bay. One of its attractions was an underground bar, where a natural limestone cave had been floored and fitted with electricity. Amazing.

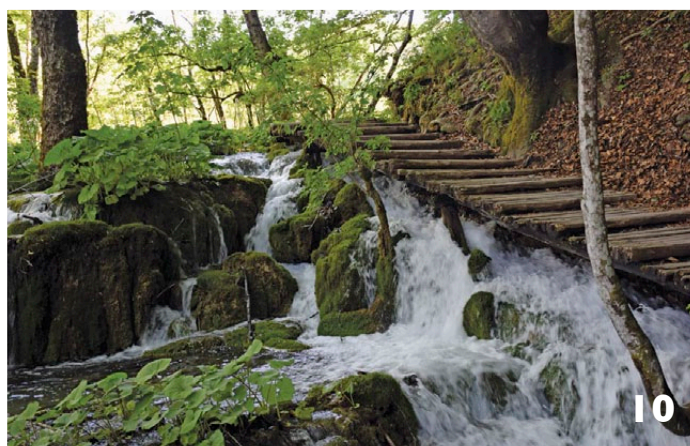
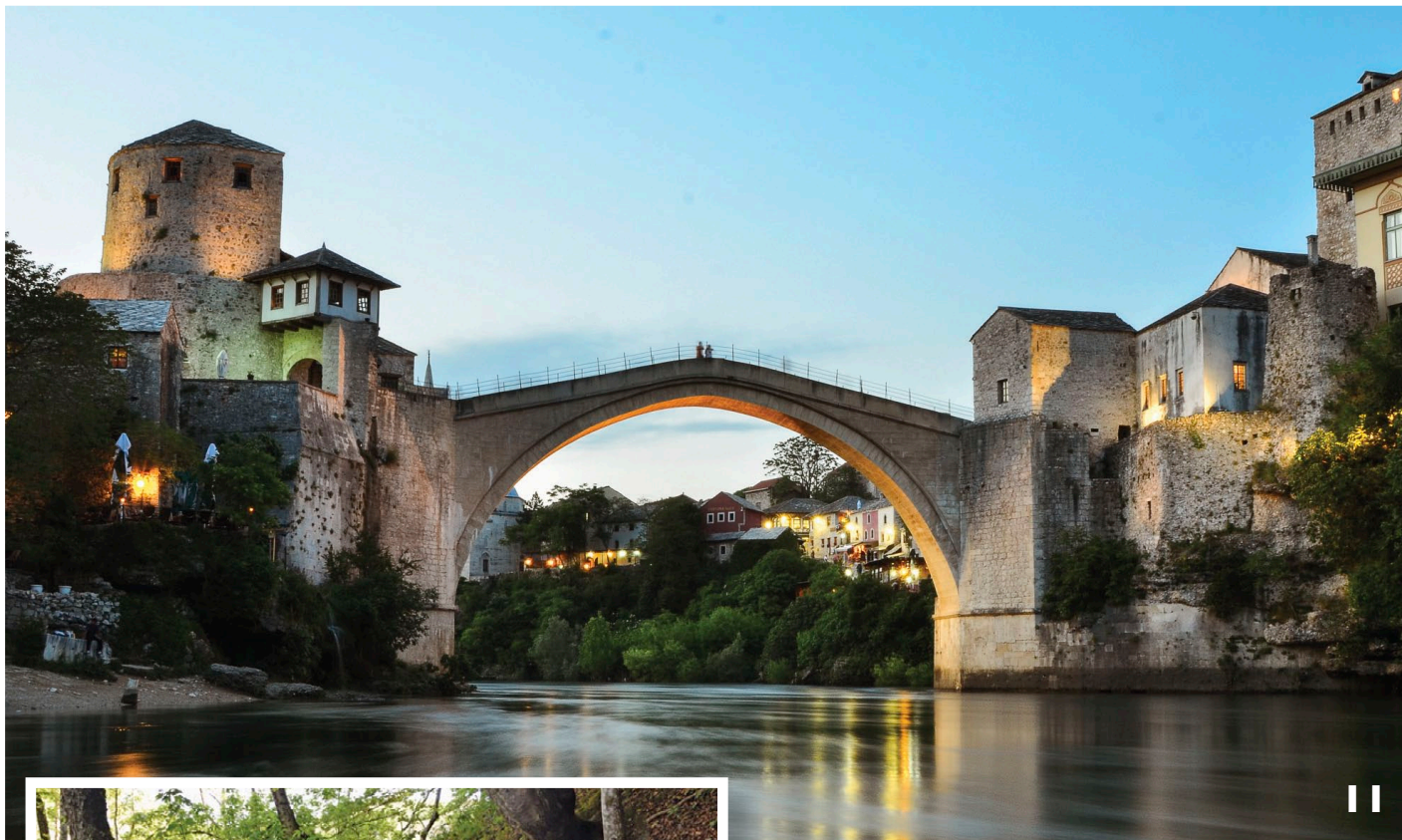


7. Philippe carves up some corners along the coast.

8. Amy digs into one of the seafood platters.

9. When you've got lots of cartridge cases, make toys out of them...





are priceless. We stopped for coffee in Mali Ston, a small town surrounded by a dizzying web of ancient stone walls, and I was treated to an explanation

of the cooking style where coals and ashes are piled onto an inverted metal bowl, which cooks the food from above. Looked delicious, but it was too early for lunch.

We had returned to Croatia on the way to Dubrovnik, but now we passed through the 14km stretch of Bosnia Herzegovina which gives that country its access to the sea. Nobody at the customs or immigration posts seemed to care about us at all.

And then we took the ferry over to Hvar. Well, we tried to. The loadmaster thought the locals were more important than a dozen bikes, so he loaded them first – and filled the ferry. Mind you, he promised to come right back for us, and he did keep his word. And that is where you came in...

When we got to the hotel at the western end of the island, after our

10. Plitvice Lakes are full of unexpected, beautiful little cameos.

11. Mostar's internationally famous bridge, rebuilt like so much of the country.



little island chase, I leaned over to Claudio as we parked our bikes.

"You have a big heart, my friend," I said and patted him on the chest. He grinned, and his diminutive wife and pillion Claudia said, "What about me?"

"You too, Claudia," I said, but refrained from patting her on the chest. The brotherhood of the road only goes so far...

Hvar was excellent, and I used the last of our rest days to ride around the place checking out old fortifications and the Španjola fortress above the town. Sadly, when I tried my usual habit of parking anywhere I damn well liked down in Hvar town I was sternly directed to the dedicated motorcycle parking, which charged. I rode off in a huff.

It was a longer ferry ride to Split in the morning, and then we mostly took small roads through remote valleys to the bridge that leads to Pag island. It's only a short bridge, but we were to find that it would pose a problem, the next day...

In the meantime the weather finally decided that it had been nice to us for long enough. Horizontal rain

The rest day in Dubrovnik went very quickly, with a walk (halfway) around the battlements, a look over the geometric web of streets and pathways, and a few quiet drinks at a small bar. It was a strange experience for me; last time I was in Dubrovnik was before it was bombed and half destroyed, and here it had been completely restored; the only difference I could see was the new roof tiles everywhere. If you ever get the chance to visit, don't miss Dubrovnik. I've been there half a dozen times now and I never get tired of it – even though it is a bit of a tourist trap. We ate just outside the walls; better food, and cheaper than inside!

And then it was off to Hvar! The road along the coast is not always the best, but it would be worth riding if it was a mule track. The views along the road, of ocean and stony mountains and sky,

accompanied us most of the way north-west to our hotel, and it was just as well that I had my BMW Comfort Shell suit on. My gloves and boots, unfortunately, did not fare quite so well – I had selected neither of them for waterproofness – so I was a little damp when we reached our hotel, a small and beautifully appointed place that had begun its life as a winery. We ate in – the weather just kept getting worse.

The next day we found that the ferries off Pag had been cancelled and even the short bridge we had crossed was closed due to the strong wind. We had to move hotels but the new one proved to be fine, and close to a small township where there was a choice of eateries. Naturally most of us chose seafood, again! I took the opportunity to do a bit of photographing.

The enforced day of leisure meant we would not be able to stay a night in Rovinj in Istria as planned. To catch our various flights we had to return to Ljubljana directly. Once again (it's amazing how this happens in the Balkans) we had the most wonderful ride through the mountains, broken by an excellent lunch of local goulash and pork medallions. Ah...

The weather was pretty good too, and I suspect that everybody would have been happy enough if Dušan had opted to keep going instead of turning into the Adriatic garage...

A stylish dinner at the castle above Ljubljana's old town concluded the ride. Beautiful country, wonderful roads, top ride, excellent guide and van driver and flawless organisation from Adriatic Moto Tours. Congratulations to all concerned, including my fellow tourers.

The Bear took Adriatic Moto Tours' Beautiful Balkans Adventure by courtesy of the company. Our next issue will feature a short piece about the gear he used. ●



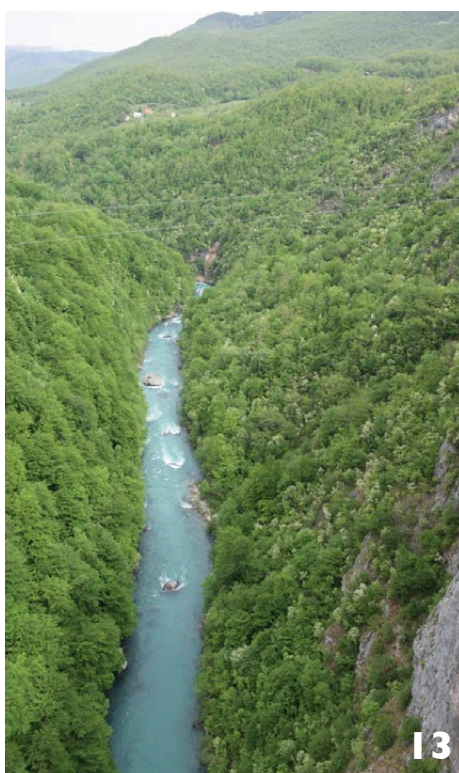
12. Turkish Town in Sarajevo, with handcrafted copper utensils.

13. The Tara River canyon.

14. My noble steed – I do like BMW F 700 GSs.



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