

UNLEASHED IN THE EAST

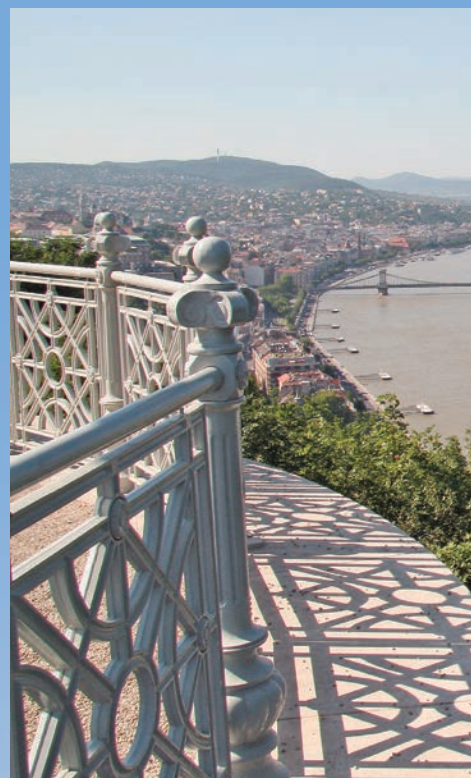
Adriatic Moto Tours' Czech-Hungary Tour

BY BILL STERMER | PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR AND ADRIATIC MOTO TOURS

Recently, an ancient wooden wheel and axle were discovered near Ljubljana, Slovenia, which carbon dating revealed to be 5,200 years old. Now on display at a local museum, the Kolo Wheel is evidence that transportation has been a major concern and preoccupation in this region since the beginning. This display was a fitting sendoff for Adriatic Moto Tours' Czech-Hungary Tour, an organized motorcycle tour of Eastern Europe that I enjoyed in June of 2013. The tour includes parts of the former Soviet bloc

that most Americans rarely visit, and thus offers a change of pace and viewpoint for many travelers.

Though billed as the Czech-Hungary Tour, the jaunt includes much more. Adriatic Moto Tours is based in Ljubljana, Slovenia, where the tour began and ended, and also took us through parts of Austria, Slovakia and Poland. This two-week guided motorcycle tour group included our two guides, Matej (who owns the company) and Dusan, along with van driver Luka. The 14 participants hailed from Australia,





Upper left: The Danube may not be blue, but Budapest is a beautiful sight from any angle. Far left: These dancers—part of a troupe—charmed us with their athletic moves in Krakow, Poland. Near left: The Parliament building in Budapest glitters like a jewel on the Danube River. Top: After dinner at the Krumlovsky Mlyn in Cesky Krumlov, Czech Republic, we enjoyed the motorcycle collection on the upper floor. Above: Austria, near the Hungarian border, was a riding delight. Below: Our group pauses to exult as we enjoy a gorgeous day in Eastern Europe.





Tour members take a welcome break in Salzburg, Austria.

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Brazil, Ecuador and the U.S., and we received an excellent guidebook several weeks beforehand detailing the route, hotels, phone numbers and what to see, so everything was comfortably understood well ahead of time.

We flew into Ljubljana and our first hotel, the Kmečki Hram, was quite comfortable and just a 15-minute cab ride from downtown. Several members of our group joined up to explore the Old Town and the castle of this very Italianate city with its curving, narrow streets against a backdrop of the hills and castle. Our first dinner was at a restaurant offering a front-row view of a dance event at the castle.

After a night's rest, we picked up our bikes for a brief familiarization ride. Most participants were on BMWs, and I had chosen the R 1200 GS for its torque and fine suspension over what I expected to be questionable roads. The next day our tour began with a ride to Graz, Austria, a sensual experience on excellent backroads. Here were flat fields backed by jagged blue mountains, snow caught in their teeth, little streams beside the road, huge rolls of hay in the fields like big cinnamon buns, an onion-domed church on a distant hill, and everywhere those chalet-style homes in pastel colors scattered like colorful Legos on the hillsides, their balcony flower boxes a riot of color.

Each morning we had a map briefing

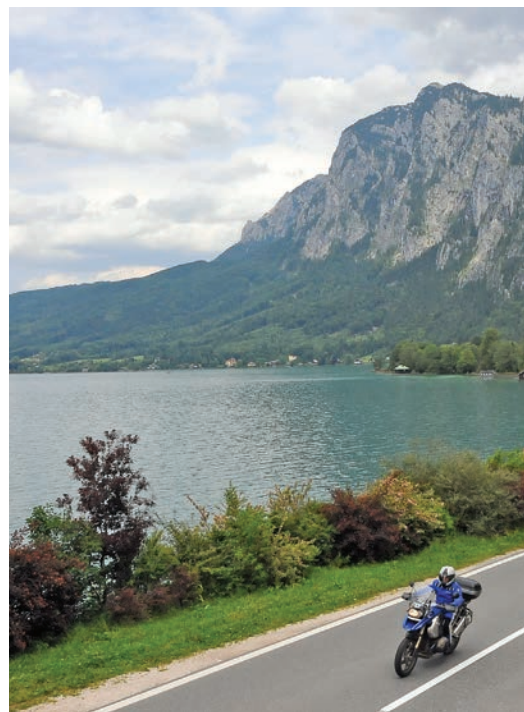
before saddling up to discuss where we were going, what attractions to watch for, and where we would stop for coffee and lunch. We rode in a group, and the bikes were equipped with GPS.

Upon leaving Graz the next day, we rode east to Hungary for a stay at Tihany on Lake Balaton. Our hotel was across the road from the lake, which is the largest in Central Europe. From our hotel we could see people fishing and swimming. Gee, some of the women here wear very brief bathing suits...not that that's a bad thing.

Formal borders are a thing of the past in Eastern Europe, and we crossed from country to country with barely a nod. The route to Budapest led through the Hungarian countryside, which was relatively flat and the roads turned bumpy; here I was glad to have chosen the GS with its long-travel, adjustable suspension. Various bikes are available for rental, and all were well maintained.

Budapest was spectacular and our hotel was located on the Buda side of the Danube, right across from the lavish Parliament building that was finished in 1902 and boasts something over 600 rooms. Once situated in our rooms, we were treated to a three-hour guided bus tour of the city; often when we arrived in a new city, a bus or walking tour was on the program.

Above Budapest looms the statue of a heroic woman standing on a column with her arms upraised, holding a palm leaf. The Russians erected it in 1947 to





Above: In Austria, castles are a common sight. **Below left:** Mountains, lakes, great roads and great people characterized the Czech-Hungary Tour.

celebrate their victory, and they refer to it as “The Statue of Liberty.” Gee, how original.... Our local guide referred to it wryly as “The Statue of Occupation.” We spent a rest day in Budapest on foot enjoying the restaurants, the markets, dodging the bicycles and taking a scenic cruise on the Danube.

Our next destination was Stary Smokovec, Slovakia, a ski town in the High Tatras. High mountains ring it, this day with clouds around their peaks. As we walked down the hill from our hotel it suddenly began hailing, but we soon were ensconced in a local pub for a welcome brew and conversation. Our group was wonderfully cohesive, and we enjoyed our social dinners each evening.

A highlight of Friday’s ride was a stop at the Wieliczka Salt Mine. When I was

a child, my parents used to joke that if my sister and I didn’t behave, we’d be sent to work in the salt mines. Well, apparently my checkered past had caught up with me. I was initially skeptical that a three-hour tour of a salt mine would be very entertaining, but far underground here (the tour requires a good bit of walking) were enormous rooms full of carvings and monuments, one room complete with chandeliers, and also a dining hall.

On to Krakow, Poland, a country I expected to be a bit poorer and slower-paced than the others. Granted, we came upon two horse-drawn carts hauling hay within the first few miles, but beyond that Poland seemed as alive and prosperous as the other East European nations. That evening as we dined, a troupe of



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dancers appeared, two men on clarinet and accordion, with two couples in a frenzy of local traditional dance.

For our rest day here, the guides strongly suggested a trip to the site of the former Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Though obviously a somber experience, the tour filled in and gave credence to what we have heard about all our lives. Our local guide spoke excellent English and we saw it all, from the gallows and pockmarked wall where prisoners were shot, to the gas chambers and ovens.

Sunday we rode from Krakow to Olomouc, in the Czech Republic, and encountered our first rainy day. But at least it broke the heat and humidity of the first week, and was not unpleasant. Next came Prague, a truly magical city. We were escorted on a three-hour walking tour—which reminds me, this is not a tour for the faint of heart or the faint of leg. Riding days were about 150–200 miles, though there was usually a shorter alternate

● From Ljubljana, Adriatic Moto Tours runs 10 tours in Eastern and Western Europe. Prices for the 2013 Czech-Hungary Tour ranged from 3,700 Euros (about \$4,884) for a solo rider renting a Suzuki V-Strom 650, to 5,250 Euros (\$6,930) for a BMW K 1600 GT. Add 2,730 Euros (\$3,600) for a passenger.

● For more information: visit adriaticmototours.com, email info@adriaticmototours.com or call +386 31 345 445 (GMT + 1h).

route should the weather turn bad.

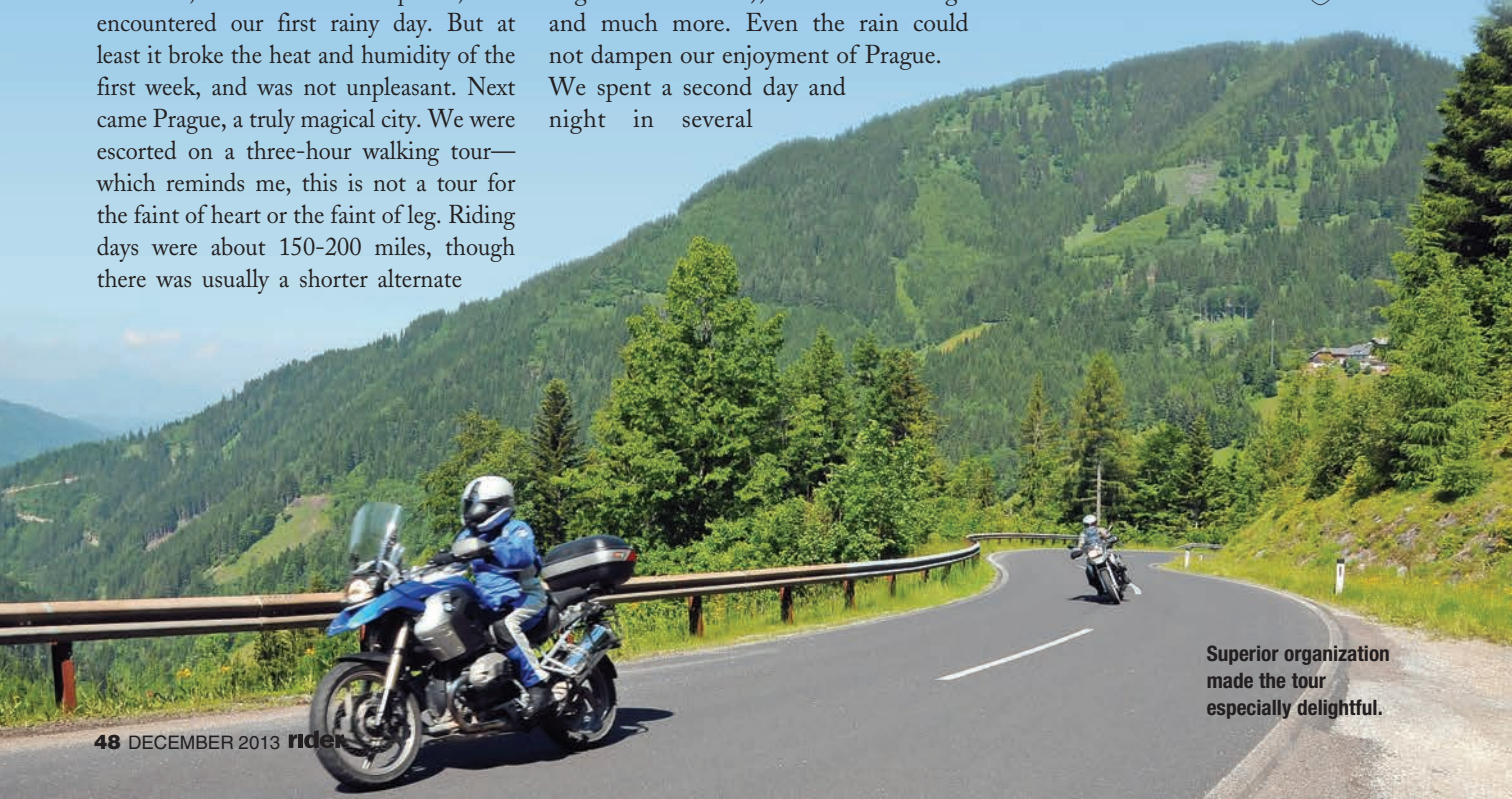
Our female guide in Prague was wonderful and kept up a steady chatter as she led us around Wenceslas Square, the castle, St. Vitus Cathedral (seventh largest in the world), the Charles Bridge and much more. Even the rain could not dampen our enjoyment of Prague. We spent a second day and night in several

cities including Prague, able to wander around at our leisure.

OK, how many of you have ever heard of Cesky Krumlov? Raise your hands. What...no? After our stay in Prague, we rode about 170 miles to this wonderful village in the Czech Republic that is built in Renaissance and Baroque styles. A castle dominates the town, and bears are kept in a pen there; it was really a treat to see them lumbering around. After dinner that night, we went upstairs in the restaurant to find a wonderful collection of about 30 old motorcycles.

The weather greatly improved for our ride to Salzburg, Austria, as the scenery changed to Alpen with rolling hills backed by dark mountains abruptly rising in the distance, snow still visible in late June. This was an exciting change, as much of Eastern Europe had reminded me of Ohio or West Virginia. We rode above the scene of a placid lake ringed by hills and a town, finally all of it in sunshine.

Our tour concluded back in Ljubljana, where our hosts treated us to a champagne toast when we turned in our bikes. It was another nice touch of many on the tour that included the guidebook, the fact that our bags were always waiting for us in our rooms at night, the quality of the food and hotels including free wireless, the guided city tours and the overall superior organization. I recommend Adriatic Moto Tours highly; the Kolo Wheel was well served. **39**



Superior organization
made the tour
especially delightful.