

# Eastern Europe with picture postcard views

Stephen 'Dangerous' Davies reports on how a bunch of OAFS (Old Australian Farts) tour Europe

Photographs Rozle Verhovc

**W**e are a bunch of OAFS (Old Australian Farts) namely, Frank, Jim, Smithy, Happy, Scotty and me; mostly Ulyssians, from different parts of the country.

Without a lot of help from Virgin Atlantic who got us to Hong Kong, dumped us and lost the luggage containing my bike gear, we got to Ljubljana, Slovenia. Slovenia is a sweet country, wedged between Italy, Croatia and Austria and as pretty as a picture having, in 1991, escaped the mess called Yugoslavia. Ljubljana is a sunny, compact, civilized city, worth going to even if you just stay for lunch.

But we weren't just about lunch. We were about motorcycling as much of Eastern Europe as we

could, facilitated by Adriatic MotoTours ([www.AdriaticMotoTours.com](http://www.AdriaticMotoTours.com)) from whom we had hired a bunch of bikes, mostly BMW R1200 GS's and a couple of Suzuki DL650's, and led by guide, mentor, translator, intellectual and good bloke in the form of Rozle Verhovc.

We swept out of Ljubljana, over the Jezersko Pass and into Austria heading for Graz. If Slovenia wins the 'pretty as a picture' award, then Austria wins the tidy country award. Even the cows have their arses wiped here. The roads are oh so good! Austria was an early part of the thrill, as we swooped around the hills and the mountains.

We noticed a difference riding in Europe. The roads

are good, but that, by itself, isn't the difference. In parts, the roads are challenging. There are few police however, and those that you see are not primarily revenue raisers. There are not lots of confusing signs, or constantly variable speed limits. The point is they expect you to hoot along. Particularly, they expect that you will take responsibility for your own driving, or riding. There is an assumption that, unlike in Australia, you are an adult. Personal responsibility and mutual respect are part of the road culture. If you come up behind a car, and are on a big bike, the driver will move over to give you space. It's good. I'll bet this culture results in a lower road toll.

We arrived in Graz, hometown of Arnold

Schwarzenegger. Graz is a neat university town, once trashed by Napoleon, since regained and tidied up by the Hapsburgs. Graz is dominated by a hill called the Schlossberg, accessed by a funicular called the Schlossbergbahn at Schlossbergplatz.

After 5 days lost and a herculean fight with Virgin Atlantic, my luggage turned up at Graz. It looked like Napoleon, to the 1812 Overture, had given my luggage a real going over.

We rode back into the mountains of Austria into the driving rain. The police diverted us due to local flooding, but still we managed to find ourselves in Hungary and spent the night at Tihany, on Lake Balaton, the largest lake in central Europe. Happy,



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being an expert chose the Hungarian wine after a sampling of local beer.

We meandered on to Budapest, which sits astride that wonderful river, the Danube. Buda is the hilly part, and Pest the flat part across the river. Until 1873, Buda and Pest were separate towns. We hung around for a couple of days, walking, generally exploring and finding evidence of the Hapsburgs.

The Castle District dominates Buda, with its 14th century buildings, rebuilt in the baroque style 400 years later. We six, three cockroaches and three cane toads, in the aptly named Pest, watched a State of Origin Rugby League match, live, in a beautifully sleazy bar. There was blood spilled in Budapest that day, as we explained the

game to the locals through live demonstrations.

On the road again, we ambled through the narrow roads and summer fields that are central and eastern Europe. I had a surrealistic view of the upper bodies of the riders in front floating at speed and incredible colour over the sea of daffodils and daisies and pasture.

We went to Visegrad and the fantastic castle that overlooks the Danube then ferried over the river into Slovakia. We spent a wonderful day in the sunshine along lightly trafficked roads on to the dramatic mountain range that is the High Tatras, and the curiously named village of Stary Smokovec. The High Tatras are Slovakia's main tourist attraction. You wouldn't have thought it while we were there, with no crowds

## “... motorcycling as much of Eastern Europe as we could ...”

whatsoever. In the morning I went for a jog up the hill, at once exhausting and breathtaking, with fabulous views and cool air amongst a carpet of flowers. We took the decision to go to Auschwitz Concentration Camp in Poland by mini-bus, rather than ride. The road was dull and crowded.

Because it is orderly, it takes a while for the absolute awfulness to sink in. You see the ovens, and the flotsam of the lives of those murdered piled up, the shocking photographs and the piles of hair, now gone white with age. It's grim, and the understated ordinariness of the barracks makes the experience bitter. Not just Jews, as appalling as that was, but ordinary Polish people – dissidents, Catholics, union members, teachers, local politicians, homosexuals, petty criminals or just the slandered; victims of an efficient, industrialized, human extermination on an unbelievable scale.

We returned, uncheered, to the cheerfulness of Stary Smokovec. The next day we went off in the rain through the dark forests and winding roads of the High Tatras to the Czech Republic. We continued to Olomouc, a fabulous 7th Century city circled by parkland. In the centre is a large square, Horni Namesti, surrounded by churches and fountains and tidy shops. We sat in the afternoon sun of an open-air bar, breathed in the history, ogled the local girls and became cheerful again.

The next morning we set off in glorious sunshine to Prague, via countryside castles formerly occupied by the Hapsburgs. We tracked via the neat, ancient, town of Kutna Hora, 70km from Prague. In the 13th Century, this was a mining town. Now it is a living jewel, an architectural prize of great significance.

Near Kutna Hora, is the Ossuary Chapel of All Saints, the Church of Bones. During the plague, they ran out of space to bury their parishioners so just dug up old skeletons and rearranged them to form decorations for the chapel. The, umm, furnishings, now consist of 40,000 human skeletons.

And to Prague, magnificent Prague chock-full of domes and cathedrals with gold-tipped towers, castles, museums, cobbled squares and ancient bridges over the

Vltava River. Its eclectic and exotic architectural styles; Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque; the Czechs have been busy over the past 1,000 years. They still had time to produce some very good beer. We walked our feet off exploring Prague, building up a thirst we quenched in Wenceslas Square. Prague is an experience, rather than a destination. It is a place in which you become immersed. It absorbs you, and you absorb Prague.

Out of Prague, we strayed from the green-yellow fields of central Europe into the forested mountain area of Sumava National Park. The ride goes from pleasant touring, punctuated by villages with little radar signs that instruct you on how much over the speed limit you are, to a more physical riding style. While not alpine, World Heritage listed Cesky Krumlov is a lovely leafy town with its chateau, bubbling river, castle tower and Baroque theatre. Our route, now definitely alpine and beautiful hard mountain riding, winds out of the Czech Republic, back into Austria and on to a Salzburg of Mozart, chocolate and salt mines.

From Salzburg, we mounted a raid on Germany, up to the Eagle's Nest, the Kehlstein. This was the retreat built for Hitler, inspired by Hitler's henchman Martin Bormann. It sits 1,200 metres above the surrounding valley of the Obersalzberg, one of Hitler's wartime headquarters. The road is a masterful series of switchbacks and brilliant engineering, designed by Dr Todt, the father of the autobahn. The last 124 metres are by elevator. The views are awe-inspiring. Just how much time Hitler spent on the Kehlstein is debatable. It is said that he suffered altitude sickness, and in any case feared its isolation as an assassination risk.

From Salzburg, we returned to Ljubljana on the long and winding road. We spent a day or two there. Jim, implying he was under instructions from his wife, wandered off into Europe. Scotty, too, legged it, apparently further complicating his divorce. Happy went south, persevering with his efforts to taste every wine ever produced.

Adriatic MotoTours had done a great job, but had more to do as we five, including Rozle, headed out of Ljubljana toward destinations east, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. ■

**Stephen 'Dangerous' Davies, #4771**  
**Photos: Rozle Verhovc**

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