



# Who would have predicted that our couple of days in Slovenia would be the highlight of a 17-day Alpine tour?

By Alan Singer # 74483

**W**e were planning a self-guided tour of the Alps for the fall of 2005. There were eight of us, all members of BMW Owners of Northeast Florida. Each of us took a role in the preparation. I was the “bike wrangler,” charged with finding the rental motorcycles. I contacted the usual sources in Germany and Switzerland, and put together a spreadsheet comparing bikes, features and prices. That might sound like overkill, but to get apples to apples with differing currencies, insurance, mileage allowances, etc., technology definitely helps. I’d pretty much settled on a company when a flyer appeared in our club’s mailbox from a tour operator in Slovenia.

Adriatic MotoTours was a recent startup that was offering very attractive terms. A few confirming e-mails with Matej Malovrh, the young Slovenian entrepreneur, convinced me that he was not only genuine, but wanted very much to make us happy doing business with him. I presented my findings to the group, which quite naturally, had a few misgivings relative to this new company and to possible travel arrangement issues. In the end we decided to rent from him. Our circumnavigation of the Alps would begin and end Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Traveling to Ljubljana proved no problem at all. Adria Air, the Slovenian national carrier, flies shiny new jets from all the European capitals. Incidentally, their service is exceptional.

Speaking of exceptional service, Matej was there to greet us as we arrived on three separate flights and a train. Ferrying us and all of our gear to the hotel he had arranged for us was surely not as easy as he made it look. The delightful

Mini Hotel sits on a hill overlooking the ancient walled town of Skofja Loka. It is a beautiful setting, quite Alpine, and like the rentals a good deal cheaper. We were to find that just about everything here was a bargain in comparison to Western Europe.



*Skofja Loka is situated along a small river, this is the view approaching from the Mini Hotel.*

After a light dinner with Matej and his fiancée Martina, and a walking tour of the historic district, we retired our jetlagged bodies. In the morning Matej, his brother and Martina had all six of our bikes in the parking lot. Papers were signed for our two-week journey through the Alps.

Upon our return, Matej had booked us into one of Ljubljana’s finest hotels. Our travel bags and other belongings were waiting for us.

The next day we discovered the charm of this lovely city of 300,000. More than 1,000 years old and reputedly located on the site where Jason (of the Argonauts) slew the dragon, Ljubljana is a diverse and cosmopolitan city. Following a day of sightseeing, shopping everywhere from the open air market to the modern upscale department stores, and a fine farewell dinner, we left for home having had a fine adventure.

A few months later I received Matej’s 2006 brochure. There was our group! In full color posed in front of the Mini Hotel just prior to heading out. I looked through the brochure and spotted a short one-week tour of the Balkans. I cautiously mentioned to my co-pilot Terri that we might be able to do this spring tour. She jumped right on it. I wrote to Matej telling him we were interested in the tour. He surprised me by writing

back that he and Martina were about to be married and would be coming to the US their honeymoon. Our friends the Robinsons, Alpine tour crewmembers both, hosted the newlyweds and also threw a big party to introduce them to our BMWNEF friends.

During the festivities I mentioned our plans to take the short tour. As if by magic we suddenly had a full tour of ten on seven bikes. We did ask Matej to move the date up a week to late April in order

# Adriatic

to make all our schedules line up. That would have some ramifications as will be seen.

Flying over through Frankfurt, we arrived on Friday afternoon to find Matej waiting to transport us again to the Mini Hotel. There we met the Smiths, Hiday and Stevensons who had arrived on an earlier flight. Within minutes Matej was

off again to pick up the Robinsons, our final couple. It was a lovely spring afternoon, and seeking to keep jet lag at bay, we walked down the hill and strolled through town.

Later we all gathered and drove over to a small restaurant in a nearby town. Slovenia seems to be a blend of Austrian and northern Italian culture served up with a Balkan accent. This shows in their cuisine. Pizza is omnipresent. Certainly there are excellent meats and seafood,

restaurants posh and otherwise, but it's pizza that's in the heart of the people. And what pizza; you'll find a minimum of fifty varieties at every shop. For a large group the best way to go is to share a half dozen different pies, so that's what we did. Pretty soon our jet lag was in full bloom. It was back to the hotel and in bed before ten.

Our tour was to officially begin on Sunday, but we had plans for Saturday. Up early and into Ljubljana to visit the BMW dealer, a combined Bimmer-Beemer shop. We got our first look at the F800 and R1200S, several months before their US intro. Then it was on to a large multi-line dealership. Matej has a relationship here and we were able to negotiate some very good discounts on riding gear, helmets and accessories.

Next stop, the bikes. At AMTour's garage we were able to select our bikes and fit our preferred luggage combination. Most of the fleet is composed of BMWs, however there are a few other bikes of interest as well including some that are not available over here. Matej uses Givi bags and they can be mounted as either top or side cases, with or without tankbags. Now that we had the bikes there was only one thing to do. Eat. We rode over to a small café for a quick bite. Most of us wanted an afternoon ride, while a few others wished to return to Skoja Loka. No problem, Martina drove the ladies to the hotel and Matej led the rest of us up into the hills. Soon we were in Julian Alps, riding some nicely twisty roads. We stopped at a small lakeside park for a drink and photo op. Matej explained there was a very nice pass road up to and over the Austrian border, but

if we went there we'd probably be late for dinner. Of course we took the ride. Despite the sunny, pleasant weather there was snow at the top of the pass. We rode down the Austrian side for a bit before returning and heading back to that late dinner. This 125km ride was a very nice warm-up for the tour.

Plitvicka Jezera is probably Croatia's most renowned national park; it is a UN designated nature site composed of hundreds of waterfalls, miles of trails around and through them, and boat crossing of several large lakes. Matej explained that we could take the fast way there and have lots of exploration time, or we could take the scenic route but have less time at the park. We opted for Plan C, get up really early, ride the scenic route and still have time for the park. This would set the tone for the balance of the tour. We always opted for more.

On the road at 8 a.m., we skipped rapidly around Ljubljana and found ourselves on tight, hilly roads leading through southern Slovenia and across the Croatian border. A word here about border crossings: Slovenia is a full-fledged member of the European Union. Croatia is in the process of joining. Bosnia and Serbia remain independent. This makes the currency situation a little tricky, much like Europe was pre-EU, but the borders are really no problem. Crossings here are about the same as from a EU country into Switzerland, much less stressful than, for instance, returning to the US from Canada.

In this portion of Croatia we did see some evidence of shelling left from the wars of the 90's. We would pass a few small farm villages, all prosperous, then see one that was bombed out, apparently the victim of ethnic cleansing from one side or another. During the course of our tour Matej spent a bit of time each day explaining the history of the region and of the various struggles leading up to each country's independence. It was very sad to see such destruction amid the natural beauty.

The roads, though a little bumpy through here were beautiful for riding, especially for those mounted on GS models. We arrived at Plitvicka shortly after lunch. Our hotel was located right in the park and just yards from the start of the hiking trails. Looking like a large 1960's Howard Johnson, it was clearly a Tito-era tourist hotel. But the rooms, the



Top: Matej (left) discussing route alternatives with (L to R) Millie Stevenson, Chris Hiday, the Smiths, Bettye and Dennis. Middle: Slovenia – Austria border (Rob Hiday). Bottom: Slovenia – Austria border (Jim Stevenson).





*Clockwise from top: While most of the castle in Skofja Loka has been replaced, remnants of the original structure remain. Skofja Loka old town as seen approaching from the main road. Our group just across the Croatian border from Slovenia. Roadside stop, checking out the view of the Red Lake.*





*Clockwise from top: Lake and park in the Julian Alps, near the Austrian border north of Ljubljana. Roman cemetery in Bosnian town of Grad Stolac. Lovely little reflective lake in the farming region of Croatia. Our group at the Blue Lake. Picnicking at the Blue Lake park.*





# Adriatic

service and the food were just fine, far better than the initial appearance suggested. During this tour we would stay in four different places, each vastly different, all more than satisfactory and interesting in their own right.

Unlike most tour company operators, Matej prefers to offer evening dining outside of the hotel. This is clearly more difficult to organize but results in his guests getting a much better flavor (oops) for the locale. This evening he arranged for dinner at a restaurant specializing in roasting meats in the dining room on an open fire. Most of the group went there and reported having an excellent dinner. A couple of us decided to try the hotel's dining room. We were warned to not order the daily menu, but rather to order *ala Carte*. Duly warned we ordered the trout and found it delicious. Happy diners all around.

As we rode south the next morning, and during a coffee stop, we kidded Matej that on a beautiful day like today Edelweiss would provide a picnic for their tour participants. We were on our way to Dubrovnik, but with a shorter term goal of stopping at a park that contains what is reputed to be the deepest lake in Croatia. As we entered the town at the park entrance, Matej suddenly pulled over to the side. He quickly gathered a couple of the ladies to join him at the Konsum supermarket. A few minutes later they returned laden with fresh bread, meats, cookies, drinks and fruit. The picnic was on! We found a shaded, grassy spot on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Blue Lake. Whipping out our ever-ready Leatherman tools (don't leave home without it), we cut the sausage, sliced the bread, diced the fruit and prepared a sylvan feast.

After lunch we discussed the various routes available to us on the way to Dubrovnik. It was unanimously decided that we wanted to take the longest route (no surprise there) and spend half a day in Bosnia. Riding along shortly after crossing the border we saw two armed policemen stopping traffic. Oh, oh. But no problem, Matej said he knew them, they had ticketed him for speeding on his last tour! He told them we were Americans and that was good enough for the cops, they didn't even ask for papers. A few yards away there was an ancient



*This shot shows how the famous wall is built directly upon the bedrock on which the city sits. Above: Bosnian waterfall, worth the dirt road approach.*



# Adriatic

Roman cemetery. We spent some time there, looking at the decorated stones and considering the breadth of the Roman Empire. Nearby was the only graffiti I saw in Bosnia; on a town limits sign was sprayed "Never Again '93", a reference to the war that tore this lovely country apart.

We finally arrived in Dubrovnik around 7:30 p.m., just as dusk was falling. The Hotel Ivka, a modern multi-story affair with underground parking was in the heart of the modern part of the city. As sometimes happens, we got split up and four people missed the parking garage. Thanks to cell phones, the lost were found and all was well. A local Italian restaurant kept their kitchen open

the old waterfront city of Herceg Novi before returning to Dubrovnik in time for breakfast.

The rest of the day was spent enjoying the charms and beauty of this ancient, historically revered city-state. Now fully restored after the shelling it received from Serbian forces in the 90's, Dubrovnik is once again the most beautiful city in all of Europe. We wandered alleyways that contained all manner of craft shops and cafes, marvelled at the cathedrals and museums, and climbed the amazing walls that surround it all. We lunched at a delightful café we had spotted from atop the wall. Our seafarer, Dennis Smith, negotiated with a tour boat operator and we spent an hour gliding about the waters off the city aboard the old wooden vessel we dubbed the SS Minnow. That evening we returned to the old town for dinner,

are hills and mountains looking quite Spanish, even some planted in olives and grapes. On the left there is the incredible blue of the Adriatic Sea dotted with bright green islands just offshore. Did I mention there's virtually no traffic? What a road. We passed through the Bosnian free zone of Neum and stopped soon after for coffee at a café overlooking the sea.

We were heading for the island of Hvar, considered one of the ten most beautiful islands in the world. We arrived at the ferry terminal in time for the 1 p.m. ferry. It was time for another route choice, take this ferry out to the island and have a relaxing afternoon there or take a later ferry using the time to ride Croatia's tallest coastal mountain. This time we had a split decision. The Smiths and Stevensons opted to take the ferry. Matej led the rest of us north to Sveti Jure, the 1,800 meter mountain. Now this might not sound like much of a mountain, but believe me this puppy is every bit as tough as any Alpine mountain I've climbed. Narrow and tight, with gravel in all the wrong places and the usual lack of guardrails, it's a challenge. About halfway up we realized that at our pace we would not make the top and get back in time for the ferry. We stopped at the only place on the road, a small self-sufficient little inn. Matej went on solo riding to the top. While awaiting his return we were served ham and cheese sandwiches with all three components prepared on-site.

With a high-speed blast of the coastal sweepers we all just made it back in time for the 3:45 p.m. ferry loading. The ferry ride was about forty minutes and took us to the eastern end of the island. Our accommodations were in the eponymous town of Hvar about 80 km west. This might be the oddest road I've ever ridden. It is a narrow, sometimes bumpy, concrete road, fairly flat but quite winding. The odd part is that it is alternately built into the side of adjacent hillsides and built up on rock piles. For nearly its entire length it runs along the sea and there is not the least hint of a guardrail. I've no idea what happens if two larger vehicle meet.

We were now to see the consequences of our having rescheduled the trip earlier than planned. Because tourist season had not yet begun, Matej's hotel of choice was unavailable, so we were staying at a B&B located right on the sea. This was good, as we would soon see. On the negative



*Our ferry to Hvar awaits.*

for us and provided a large private room. Inasmuch as we were directly across the Adriatic from Pescara it should be no surprise they do Italian cuisine quite well.

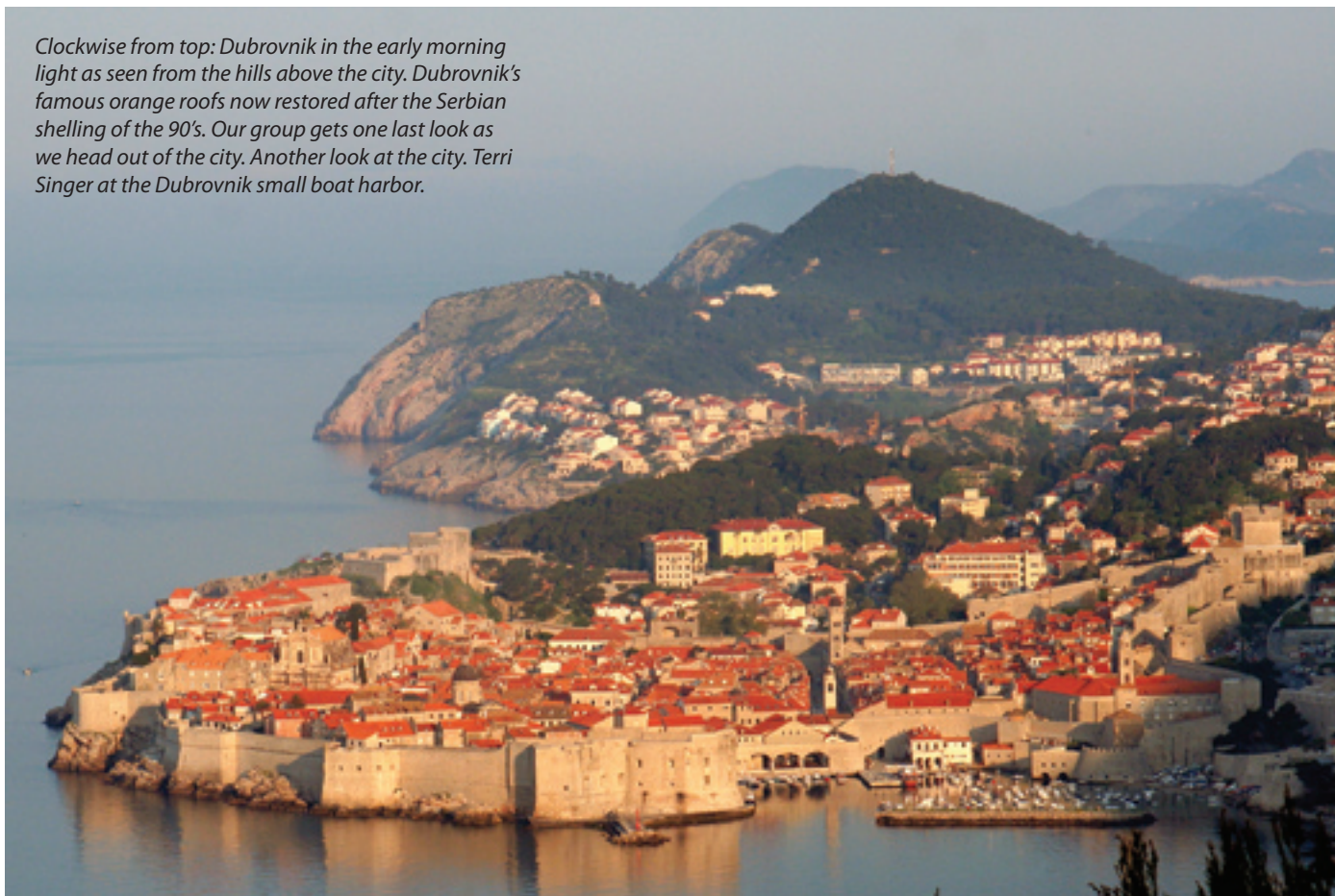
We stayed in Dubrovnik for two nights so Tuesday was a free day. I wanted to go to Montenegro, to look around a bit and to add another country to the "been there" list. Not wanting to miss the Dubrovnik experience, I pretty much left at dawn. This also gave me the opportunity to shoot the city from the hills above as the sun rose. I stopped at the border crossing into Serbia & Montenegro behind a bus. While I waited a woman in a white suit walked over and sprayed the tires of my GS with disinfectant. Then I was allowed to enter. I stopped briefly at

Matej negotiated with the concierge. We got a nice outdoor table in a quiet corner. Matej got a kickback, as I'm told is normal for tour leaders in these parts. The 110 kuna, about \$20, was enough to buy us a round of drinks after dinner.

Wednesday morning almost started with a bang as Valerie Robinson leaving the parking garage was confronted with a service vehicle approaching on the sidewalk. She nicely avoided the truck but her Honda 600 just sort of toppled over, luckily with little damage and no injury. Things would get better. Shortly after departing the metropolitan area we were riding north on one of the most beautiful roads in the world. Croatia's coastal highway is a hundred kilometers or more of smoothly paved sweepers. To the right



*Clockwise from top: Dubrovnik in the early morning light as seen from the hills above the city. Dubrovnik's famous orange roofs now restored after the Serbian shelling of the 90's. Our group gets one last look as we head out of the city. Another look at the city. Terri Singer at the Dubrovnik small boat harbor. Terri Singer at the Dubrovnik small boat harbor.*







*Clockwise from top: Dubrovnik's main street at night. View of the town from the waters edge. The feast on Hvar that our hosts "threw together." View of the mainland as our ferry departs for Hvar. Halfway up Sveti Jure, the tallest mountain in the coastal region. Nothing like I imagined, quite dry, looks more like Andalusia.*





# Adriatic

side, it had now begun to rain. Hvar is said to be one of the sunniest places in Europe; it would not be for the two days we were there.

Because of the rain there was not much interest in walking the mile to town for dinner. Our hosts offered to put together a family style meal and Matej made a run to town for wine, beer and snacks. The potluck meal turned out to be a gourmet feast of grilled beef and squid, potatoes, various vegetables and salads and more. Dessert was sweet dried figs washed down with homemade schnapps. It was probably the best meal of the trip.

The rain continued in the morning so we lingered over a very nice breakfast shared with our hosts' family. After it cleared a bit we walked into town where we spent the day exploring, shopping, and of course, eating. Springtime in Hvar is very colorful, it seems as if all the flora is blooming all at once. Being off-season meant less crowding and better photo ops.

Our plan for Friday was to ride the old road across the mountain spine of the island to Stati Grad where we would catch a ferry back to the mainland. It was very disappointing to awake to another rainy morning. The mountains were very foggy; we were able only to see glimpses of what must be a beautiful island. Our ferry docked in Split, the largest city on the Dalmatian coast of Croatia. Split is a seaport and industrial city, not especially tourist oriented, so we blasted right through. The good news however, was the rain had stopped. Just on the outskirts of the city is Salona, a Roman ruins. We spent quite a bit of time walking among the old stonework. Matej meanwhile rode over to a nearby convenience store and returned with a lunch of burek, Balkan fast food. These are baked rolls filled with cheese or meat, served hot and delicious.

Eventually we reached Pag, crossing a bridge onto the island. What a strange place. The southern end of the island is positively lunar in appearance. Strong Bora winds from the coastal Velebit Mountains blow across here and have stripped all the topsoil leaving only the rocky substrata. Traveling north on the island a more normal terrain gradually appears, finally by the time we reach Pag

Town becoming lush with agriculture. Pag is famous for its hand tatted lace, for generations made by the women of the island. We stopped in town, checked out the lace museum and sipped cappuccinos alongside the picturesque little harbor.

Another 20 km brought us to the tiny village of Novalja and, just beyond up a dirt road, to Boskinac a winery and five star hotel. This amazing establishment has but a dozen rooms, all very posh, a first-class wine cellar, and a full functioning vineyard and winery. We were all looking forward to dinner, anticipating a special experience. Unfortunately, this was not to be. Inexplicably the service, which in the hotel was exemplary, was terrible in the restaurant. And when it arrived, the food was hardly worth the wait. We were very disappointed and Matej took it up with the staff. On our departure in the morning we each were presented a bottle of wine by way of apol-

flurries.

Cold and thoroughly soaked – no, we had not battened down the hatches – we stopped for lunch, warmth and an opportunity to regroup. This time the unanimous vote was for the short way Ljubljana where rooms, and hot showers, awaited us at the Grand Hotel. A couple of hours later and the tour was history. We parked the bikes in the hotel garage, grabbed our bags and headed to the hotel. Our other travel gear was waiting for us at registration. Matej and his crew would organize the return of the bikes to his storage facility.

We were all to fly out during the next day or two, but we had one more task. Dinner in the old part of the city at Sokol, a restaurant we had enjoyed on our previous visit. Matej and Martina joined us, and picked up the tab, making this a fine wrap up to an excellent tour. We



*The Roman ruins at Salona.*

ogy. It must be said that the breakfast was wonderful, so perhaps our dinner experience was an anomaly. I hope so.

As we loaded the bikes for our last day's ride, returning to Ljubljana, it began to rain lightly. The prediction was for continued rain, and it was correct. Leaving from north end of Pag, we took our final ferry ride, a short one, back to the Croatian mainland. The rain continued and grew stronger. We followed the coastline to near Rijeka then as we headed north into the hills it became colder. And colder. As we crossed the Slovenian border in the mountains of Drgomelj we began to run through snow

had seen new places, met new faces, and were going home with a new perspective and appreciation of this fascinating part of the world. Sure we had a few days of bad weather, but we had pressed our luck by moving our tour up into April, and besides it's part of the game.

We all agree that we want to go back to Eastern Europe, and to tour again with Matej. He's working on a new two-week trip that will encompass Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary all from the Ljubljana base. A half dozen of us have already signed up for next summer. See [AdriaticMotoTours.com](http://AdriaticMotoTours.com) for more information.