



Going in HOT

Eastern Europe
shows its delights...
even at 39 degrees

WORDS/PHOTOS THE BEAR

ANY OF THE great comedians will tell you that it's all in the timing. As I passed the lone barn in upcountry Hungary at about 90km/h, the first dog just managed to clear the front wheel of my 821 Monster with its canine backside as it crossed the road in front of me. The nose of the second one almost touched my engine casing. I later calculated that the distance between the pair would have been about a foot and a half. Just enough to fit the bike through. At the time I was too busy just trying to get my heart to stop from exploding to do much calculating.

Eastern Europe is not predictable the way the western part of the continent is. It's kind of relaxed like the countries along the Mediterranean, but more so. The people here have only recently become part of the 'modern world' – you can see that because there are almost no old cars. Most people didn't have cars before the Iron Curtain came down in 1989, and it's taken a while to build up wealth. Considering that, the standard of driving is not too bad at all – and the standard of courtesy on the road is high. It is quite normal for cars and trucks, and even buses, to move to the right side of the road and turn on their right-hand blinker if they see that the road ahead is clear.

There is remarkably little roadkill; domestic animals don't have the same sort of road sense that their relatives in the West have acquired

1. Is a Ducati 821 Monster the ideal bike for a three and a half thousand kilometre tour of Eastern Europe's somewhat variable roads, in mid-30s temperatures? Well, err, no. But if life hands (or foots) you blisters, make callouses...

2. Susi heeds the warning to avoid the black hose – it is diesel just about anywhere in the world. She's Swiss but worked in Melbourne for a couple of years, hence the T-shirt. On Edelweiss tours you fill your own bike.



over the decades, but they don't show up deceased at the side of the road the way one of my doggy mates very easily could have. But to be fair, I probably shouldn't have been doing 90 to start with. I just wanted the air flow to cool me down.

I'm just going to go on about the heat here for a while, so I won't have to keep mentioning it in the story. It was hot; the temperature reached 39 degrees out on the road. Worse than that, I was equipped for cool to cold weather. I made a miscalculation when I packed for the tour: after checking the climate rather than the weather figures on the interwebs, I expected a cool ride. I certainly didn't expect the heatwave I got when I packed my trusty Klim suit.

I've worn the Klim Kodiak suit (how could I resist a suit named after a bear?) on several rides now and have

always been happy with its effectiveness and practicality. Unfortunately, even its ten zip-open vents were overwhelmed by this heatwave. Mind you, I wasn't the only one to be sweaty at the end of the day. Several of our group looked as if they'd had a shower when it came to the end of the day – inside their suits. I just rode with the jacket open, and that helped a bit. So did dousing my T-shirt with water at every opportunity.

My favourite one-line joke is: "What did you think of the play apart from that, Mrs Lincoln?" What did I think of the Edelweiss Eastern European Delights tour... apart from that heat?

I'll leave the summary for the end of the story, but here's something to prepare you for what's coming: communism was not good for Eastern Europe's living standards,

but it was good for preserving many existing buildings and streetscapes. Towns here have central squares, for example, and where in the West the temptation would have been to replace some of the square's buildings with new ones, in the East many of the existing buildings were restored – or at least left alone – and the streetscape preserved because it was cheaper. Mind you, the outskirts of the towns are often littered with truly awful blocks of communist-era walk-up flats.

So you can expect towns just as pretty as they were before WW2; since the fall of the Curtain, local authorities have kept up the look and even improved it with pedestrian zones. As Edelweiss mentions in the tour brochure, it is a good time to go and see all this before the place is drowned in the same tourist

wave that's obliterated much of the charm of Western towns and cities. It's a genuine pleasure to walk with the locals through the squares and streets of these places in the evenings, even apart from the amazing ice cream stands and small pubs offering their wares.

That walk is almost a metaphor for the New East, certainly on this tour. Edelweiss mostly selects hotels in or near the centre of the old parts of towns, so you can take that relaxed walk and immerse yourself in a bit of history while sipping the excellent beer or wine.

We left Vienna, split into two groups of seven or eight riders because it was quite a big tour, and headed north on small back roads through Austria's 'wine quarter', the country's best-known but far from the only wine-growing district. This gave me

a chance to familiarize myself with my bike for the tour – a Ducati 821 Monster I named Godzilla Jnr for its ability to inspire terror. Mine. A Monster is not a good choice for the often awful roads in Eastern Europe. Why was I riding it? Well, the paying customers get their choice of bike, while invited, non-paying guests get what's left in the stable... not that I'm complaining. Much.

The border to the Czech Republic has been pretty much obliterated; both it and Austria are part of the Schengen Zone (see box). There have been other times when much of Europe has lacked borders, and we reached the cause of one of those times in the afternoon. The site of the battle of Austerlitz is marked by a smallish memorial and a slightly larger museum, a remarkably minimal but nevertheless respectful approach to

There'll be peace in the valley...
the late evening mountains from
our hotel in Admont, Austria.



Look down, look down, that lonesome road... traffic in Eastern Europe, here in Slovakia, is still remarkably light and most car, truck and bus drivers are remarkably courteous, showing you their right blinker if they see that the road ahead is clear for you to overtake. Many even pull over as far as they can to the right.

commemorating the battle that gave Napoleon control of Europe.

Road quality declined somewhat but we didn't have far to go after Austerlitz. Our hotel in Kromeriz was in a modernized old building on the town square which had air conditioning and a bar – which did not have beer. Another bar, next door, did and I hardly need to tell you about the outstanding quality of the Czech brew. On most nights we ate in the hotel, but this night we ate at a restaurant across the square which –

When they close up shop in the Czech Republic, they close up shop. These doors in Kromeriz have probably been there for several hundred years, and I bet they worked a treat all that time.



yes – had beer as well as excellent local food. On tour, Edelweiss picks up the bill for dinner. Not the beer, though.

Small roads became even smaller and even less trafficked as we headed for the next, once again almost invisible border in a small mountain range. For some reason I had an image of an industrialised and polluted country in my mind when I thought of Slovakia. Couldn't have been more wrong; while Slovakia does have some of the most polluted cities in Europe, we didn't come near any of them. Instead, we found ourselves riding through magnificent evergreen forest on narrow and admittedly pretty ordinary tarred roads. Eventually we stopped in the small village of Cicmany, well off the beaten track, where decorations that seemed oddly reminiscent of mathematical formulas but are actually embroidery patterns cover the wooden buildings.

Just down the road, at Bojnice, we stopped to take a look at a castle which was first mentioned in records

1. Allegedly the inhabitants of this small village began painting their houses like this to protect the wood. Can't quite see how that would work. I suspect instead that it's more likely that they were trying to encourage tourists to stop for photo, and you can see the proof of that theory right here!

2. Just one horsepower, but cheap to run. Horses are still in common use as draft animals in Romania, but it's interesting to see that the carts have replaced their iron-rimmed, wooden-spoked wheels with surplus car and truck wheels. The rubber meets the road even in the remotest places.

3. Kathryn and John from Collegeville in the US head out on their 1250 GS. The big BMWs are the preferred bike not only from Edelweiss but also with other riders; many of them on this trip were from Poland.





Road works, here in Romania, are a common holdup in Eastern Europe as the various countries catch up to the road quality of the West. It can be a bit annoying, but it's easy to understand why it's necessary.



in 1113 and has since seen more remodeling than a Kardashian. Currently it has a French look, and is quite magnificent. The food at a restaurant in its forecourt was good too. Slovak cooks tend to adjust Garfield's "deep fry that sucker" to "char grill that zelenac" with outstanding success. They make a mean soup, too, and they have not yet reached the level of sophistication that feeds tourists rubbish, like the West.

Another castle served for our accommodation that night, and

Listen up... the Edelweiss morning briefings are intended to not only prepare riders for the day's route, but also to offer the possibility of taking alternative roads. In my experience, most if not all riders go with the guides. After all, their knowledge is one of the things you pay for.



1



3



2

unusually it was out in the countryside in Liptovsky Hradok. No sign of the eponymous smelly Liptov cheese. The

1. There are good roads even in Slovakia, but as you can see in this photo, we rode a lot of not-so-good ones. I'm not complaining; they led through wonderful scenery. I had always thought of Slovakia as an industrial wasteland and was pleasantly surprised to find extensive forests.

2. It's been thirty years now since Communism took its leave from Eastern Europe, and religion has returned to take its place more completely than anywhere else in the world except maybe Latin America.

3. Dracula might not find this platter to his taste, but everyone else surely does. The food available on the tour, even at absolute tourist stops like Bram Castle, was excellent and interesting. Remarkably affordable, too. Eastern Europe is still reasonably priced – but get in soon!

basic castle – little more than a tower – is being restored, and the hotel is in a separate, newer wing. I loved the full set of shiny armor that guarded the reception, and enjoyed a few drinks on the peaceful terrace with my fellow-tourers.

Next day was a wonderful opportunity to ride along the lower reaches of the High Tatra mountains though ski resorts and seemingly endless forest. It's easy to get carried away with the 'wildness' of this country; in fact it's all forestry, trees planted to be chopped down. But you see little sign of that apart from occasional log trucks which barrel along the same way they do in Australia and everywhere else. We just nipped into Poland for half an hour to follow a scenic road along the border. Overnight was in Kovice where our hotel was right on the main pedestrian zone, a green strip of land that includes a park with the most amazing fountains, played in time with a barrel organ.

I mean seriously, fountains played in

Plastic versus cardboard

One of The Bear's Existential Philosophy propositions states that certain things exist to be useful, while others exist merely to exist.

Australian motorcycle riders' licenses are in the first group, while International Driving Permits are in the second. I have been told again and again that I needed a Permit for one ride or another, and it has never mattered. My plastic license with its photo of me and the clear indication that I am entitled to ride a motorcycle has always proven to be adequate.

No-one has ever asked for the grey cardboard Permit, on the other hand. I have therefore concluded that I do not need one. Now I am going against some pretty serious advice to the contrary, so I'm not going to suggest that you not get a Permit when someone tells you to. It's your call. But I'm over it.



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The boys do a bit of overnight repair work at our hotel in Predeal, Romania. From left, they are Matthias, James and Pierre – Austrian, Australian and Belgian. No, I told you – no Belgian jokes! They are pretty well equipped to take care of small matters as they arise.

time with a barrel organ. Amazement, as Effie would say.

We collected yet another country with a quick dash across the north-eastern ‘panhandle’ of Hungary and sampled our first ATM in a small



1. A stop at an ATM to acquire some Hungarian forints. While the euro has conquered many countries in Europe, there are still outliers which continue to use their old currency. Fortunately, almost everyone these days takes cards. And isn't it amazing to think that a servo in a small village in the Transylvanian mountains can communicate with your bank in Australia almost instantly!

2. When the Romanians fortify their churches, they damn well fortify their churches! Looking more like a medium-sized castle, this mediaeval church looms over the small town in has served for many decades.





And heere's... a typical stretch of road in the mountains. No, it wasn't all like this by far; EU money has meant that many roads are up to western standard. But if you want to ride the back roads, as we did, you have to take what you can get.



On the approach to the pass. There are waterfalls everywhere in the mountains, and many people drive up here to fill containers with the pure water to take home. Makes you wonder about the quality of the tap water – but nobody on the tour got a bug.

village near the border. I never cease to be amazed by the convenience of these things; not only will they communicate with your bank in Australia almost instantly to give you local money, but they'll provide instructions in English.

Our destination was Romania, the country in which we would be spending most of our time on this ride. Entering Romania is like crossing a real border; the country is not part of the Schengen Zone. Our guide James was concerned that some of us, including me, did not

have International Driving Permits; apparently a bloke on a tour in the preceding year had been given grief about this by Romanian border guards.

As it turned out, they weren't even interested in seeing licenses. They just took the passports of all the people from outside Europe, kept them for a quarter of an hour and then returned them.

When he was collecting passports, the Romanian border guard was puzzled that Kalanda from Colorado was riding, rather than pillioning behind her husband Gary. She told him that she liked to do her own riding, and he rolled his eyes at the rest of us as if to say, "Americans!"

Amazingly, it looked like rain on our way to our overnight stop in Oradea. We made it well before the heavens opened, but in the parking lot of the hotel the heavens opened in another way: guide Pierre produced a coolbox

filled with cans of beer to take the edge off the day's heat. Pierre, my man! It did rain a little while later, and we sat at big picture windows and watched it come down. Wow. Rain, eh.

The little bit of cooling the rain had brought was gone by morning as we set off for Transylvania. With loops of garlic around our necks, we... no, sorry. No garlic. Just credit cards. They protect you even better. Just wave yours when you see the vampire coming, and he'll produce a remote terminal. On the way south-east we rode through the Apuseni Mountains

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dog augmented by a vicious little dachshund. Nobody had any utes with vampires in them; maybe that's part of the nightlife.

Our hotel was over on the other side of a range of hills out of sight of Bran Castle, but its wrought-iron furniture fitted right in with the vampire theme. I do wonder if vampires have air conditioning, though.

The Austrian wine region of Styria has everything, even a road in the shape of a heart... this is wonderfully beautiful and rich country which produces not only wine but also all kinds of other foodstuff.

And then – came the Transfagarasan! I've long been doubtful about Top Gear's claim that this is the best motoring road

Just a reminder that this was a motorcycle tour, not just a trip around the historical and other attractions of Eastern Europe. The Monster was fun on the better roads of Austria, and to tell the truth I'd become a bit used to it after the first 3000 kilometres...

in the world, and I remain so. But I've got to say that it's far more impressive than I thought, due not to

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COUNTRIES
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DURATION
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HIGHLIGHTS

Sukothai (UNESCO World Heritage Site),
Phu Rua, Vientiane,
Vang Vieng, Luang Prabang (UNESCO World Heritage Site),
Mountains to Oudom Xai, Chiang Rai, Golden Triangle, Mekong River,
Road of 1,864 curves, Long Neck Hill Tribe, Doi Inthanon

TOUR DATE
NOV 24 - DEC 8

In the Zone

The Schengen Zone comprises 26 European countries which have abolished all passport and other types of border control at their mutual borders. It is a single jurisdiction for international travel purposes, with a common visa policy. A few countries are part of the EU but are non-Schengen states.

Anyone travelling on an Australian passport doesn't need a visa to travel to countries in the Schengen Zone for up to 90 days in any 180-day period. If you leave the Zone and return within the same 180-day period, the previous stay will count towards the 90 day maximum. If you stay more than 90 days in a 180-day period without a valid visa, you may be fined or banned from entering the Schengen Zone again. Check the interwebs for a list of the countries involved.

the barren view usually shown but to the wonderful approach roads which twist their way up with almost endless corners through coniferous forests. Spectacular riding, especially on the southern side, but don't lose concentration. I dived with a group of three BMW Z-type sports cars (3s or 4s? Who knows?) and they beat me because they didn't stop for photos.

The part of the Transfagarasan that you see in the usual photos is remarkably similar to Trollstigen in

Norway, although it lacks the rocks piled up in heaps. Are there no trolls in Romania to enjoy these?

Sibiu is a knockout. We stayed in the Hotel Continental Forum, which is more like a huge alien spacecraft that's landed on the outskirts of the old town, but which of course was comfortable and convenient. Off to one side, the old town beckoned with some beautiful old buildings and the Transylvanian Film Festival, an intriguing open-air celebration which seemed to require thousands of plastic chairs in the main square. I watched for a while as the workforce deployed these and then, exhausted from simply looking on, retired to one of the bars for a rejuvenating drink. Ah, that's better. No, no, just keep arranging those chairs...

The ride from Sibiu to Timisoara includes the Tansalpina, a road that returns south over the same mountain range that the Transfagarasan crosses. In its own way it is more enjoyable because it's less known and therefore less busy. Most of the time. We tackled it on a Sunday, one of the few mistakes that Edelweiss made on this trip. The road was busy, to the point that southbound traffic in the tunnel leading to the pass was stationary. There weren't many vehicles coming the other way so I simply overtook half a kilometre's worth of underground traffic jam in one go. Easy when you know how.

The thing is, nobody minded. I got thumbs up all along.

Our hotel in Timisoara was a beauty. It was just the place we needed to relax after the moderately stressful

days we had had. A quadrangle around a garden and a pool, the hotel offered the opportunity to just sit, chat and relax. Edelweiss does have a touch for selecting hotels. Perhaps we should have been encouraged to sample the town's centre, a beautiful experience by all reports, but what we wanted was a break – and this was the perfect place for that.

And then Hungary loomed, to the north and west. It is a country that, how do I put this, does not offer much in the way of riding joy to motorcyclists. I mean, the food's great, the people are nice... but the countryside (at least down here in the south) is flat, corners tend to be right angles and the road surface on secondary roads is terrible. You can just ride more slowly, of course, but that just means you're looking at the flat lands for even longer. Our overnight stay in Pecs was fun, with dinner in the open air of the pedestrian precinct. This is a university town, so the population tends to be young and fun.

The countryside became hilly in the morning, and after we crossed the river Drava and the border into our last country of the ride, Slovenia, we found ourselves in the foothills of a range of hills. We followed them and the Drava almost all day, which meant enjoyable riding. We also had the pleasure of anticipating a thunderstorm (see how your priorities change when conditions change?) to relieve the heat. It struck after we had reached the relative safety of our overnight hotel's rooftop terrace in Maribor where we could watch it lash its rain across the



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Drava. Then the canvas roof of the terrace failed and we got an even closer look at the deluge.

Once upon a time Maribor was a typical border city, making the most of its location between Austria and the then Yugoslavia and becoming wealthy in the process. It's one place that didn't benefit from the collapse of the Iron Curtain, but the entrepreneurial spirit was strong and these days it's a kind of bigger Queanbeyan.

It was like a reward for coping with Hungary when we crossed the border into Austria in the morning. This part of the country is called Styria and is known for its wines and Arnold Schwarzenegger, not necessarily in that order. The riding on the tiny back roads we used was wonderful, but you needed to have your wits about you as they twisted around the many vine-bearing hills. I'm used to seeing grape vines planted in rows at right angles to the slope of the hills, but in Styria the rows run up and down the slope. Can someone

explain the difference?

Did you know that his father disapproved of young Arnold's interest in bodybuilding? Just as well that his mother differed with the old man; imagine if the Terminator had been played by Tom Cruise. The Arnold Schwarzenegger museum in the suburbs of Graz offers an unpretentious display of the man's early life and a heap of stuff from his movies, including a TV set that plays shorts. That's about the only high tech bit of the museum; like me, most of the others found it oddly charming.

We spent the rest of that day and almost all of the next simply enjoying the Austrian roads and alpine scenery. Godzilla Jr finally came into its own. Our hotel in the small mountain town of Admont had remarkable views of the mountains, and in the morning we got to ride them. Perfect. We stopped for a tour of the Erzberg iron ore mine, where we checked out the route of the annual dirt bike Erzberg Rodeo. And then we were

back in Vienna. Our guide Matthias was a local and took us on a tour of the back roads in the suburbs, which saved us the hour that the other group spent sitting in traffic.

This tour is remarkable for variety it offers – apart from the riding there are scenic, political, architectural, philosophical and historical sides to it. I could easily go back and spend more time in each of the places we visited, because there is so much more to see and understand. Eastern Europe is a treasure chest. We only just got to open the clasps. With more time, it could yield understanding that would dazzle us for years. It's a magic land, the source of far more of our myths than just Dracula. Take a look if you can. I'm pretty sure that like Arnie "I'll be baack..."

(The Bear took part in the Edelweiss Bike Travel 'Eastern European Delights' tour at the invitation of the company. He paid his own incidental expenses.) 🐻



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