

Uzhhorod to Košice to Budapest

written by Marcus | 13 November, 2014



30th October to 6th November

Our route so far has largely been dictated by a handful of pins in a map to mark places we definitely want to go through but linked together based on advice and recommendations from people we've met and information we've gained along the way. The next 'pin' to aim for after Uzhhorod was Budapest which gave us the option of heading down to Chop then straight into Hungary or travel east into Slovakia first. While in Lublin, Michal had warned us about the western region of Slovakia as it was full of gypsies and they could cause trouble in the villages. He'd also told us that Hungary was very flat so would make for faster riding. However on this occasion we chose not to heed this advice and decided to have a few days braving the gypsies and hills before crossing into Hungary so

we planned to head due east into Slovakia.

Before leaving Uzhhorod we have a couple of things to sort out. First thing is to work out how to pay the hotel up in the mountains. Natalia had laughed when we'd told her about the fact we were told to pay later and said it was not uncommon in rural Ukraine for that to happen. In the post office we try to send cash by recorded delivery but are told it will be cheaper to pay the money straight onto the hotel's credit card which we could do at a machine round the corner. We find the machine, punch in the card number and feed in the cash, all very easy. Of course the hotel would have no idea who the money had come from but we had the peace of mind that we hadn't done a runner.

The next task is to get the bearings on the rear hub of the bike tightened up. I'd spotted it was a bit loose the previous evening so just needed a bike shop to make a small adjustment. We find Tatu Bikes not far from Natalia and Jan's flat and point out the problem to Kosya. He immediately begins shaking his head when we see how filthy the bike is but sets to work regardless. I'd expected him just to tweak a couple of nuts but before I know it he's got the whole hub stripped down right on the pavement in front of the shop. The bearings are out, new seals fitted, it's given a thorough clean and packed with fresh grease before being reassembled. We're there for over an hour to allow for a bit of chatting, a lot of shaking of heads, admiring his own self built tandem and the odd cigarette break but Kosya only charges us 90 UAH (about 4 pounds).



Tatu bikes with their hand built tandem (and our tandem)

We're then good to go and make our way down to the Slovakian border, just south of Uzhhorod. This is a pedestrian only crossing and the bike only just fits through the border control office so the guard jokes that 'vehicles are not permitted'. We're asked if we have any cigarettes or alcohol which we haven't but luckily he doesn't check the panniers as he would have found them stacked full of dairy and meat products that we are also not supposed to be taking back into the EU.



The Ukraine – Slovakia border

Once we get our contraband safely into Slovakia the difference compared to Ukraine is immediate: smooth roads, smart bus stops, sign posts that stand vertical rather than at a jaunty angle, wooden houses with neat gardens and churches that are dull not shiny. The Ladas have been replaced with Skodas but more often than not the posh VW-era models. We've also gained another hour.



What do you call a Skoda with a sunroof?

For some reason the first town we ride through has a PA system blasting out what sounds like the local radio station. We see speakers rigged up through most other towns too but never find out what they are used for. We see one or two gypsies but must be moving too fast for them to be able to cause us any problems.



A tandem riding into Slovakia



First evening in Slovakia

After a night on a football pitch we're woken by the combined sound of dogs barking and the village PA system that seems to

serve as an alarm clock for everyone who lives there. After packing up we find ourselves winching up a steep climb into the village of Slanec with a small castle perched on the hill top followed by a long sweeping descent down into Košice.



Slanec



Flower sellers, Kosice

We had arranged to meet Gejza at 12:00 by the cathedral and we all arrive at exactly the same time. By chance Gejza has worked with Natalia on some development projects between Slovakia and Ukraine so its nice to have a connection between two of our hosts. Gejza gives us a guided tour of the town centre before taking us to lunch then leaves us to our own devices for a few hours so we climb the cathedral for the now mandatory aerial view of the city.



Kosice Cathedral



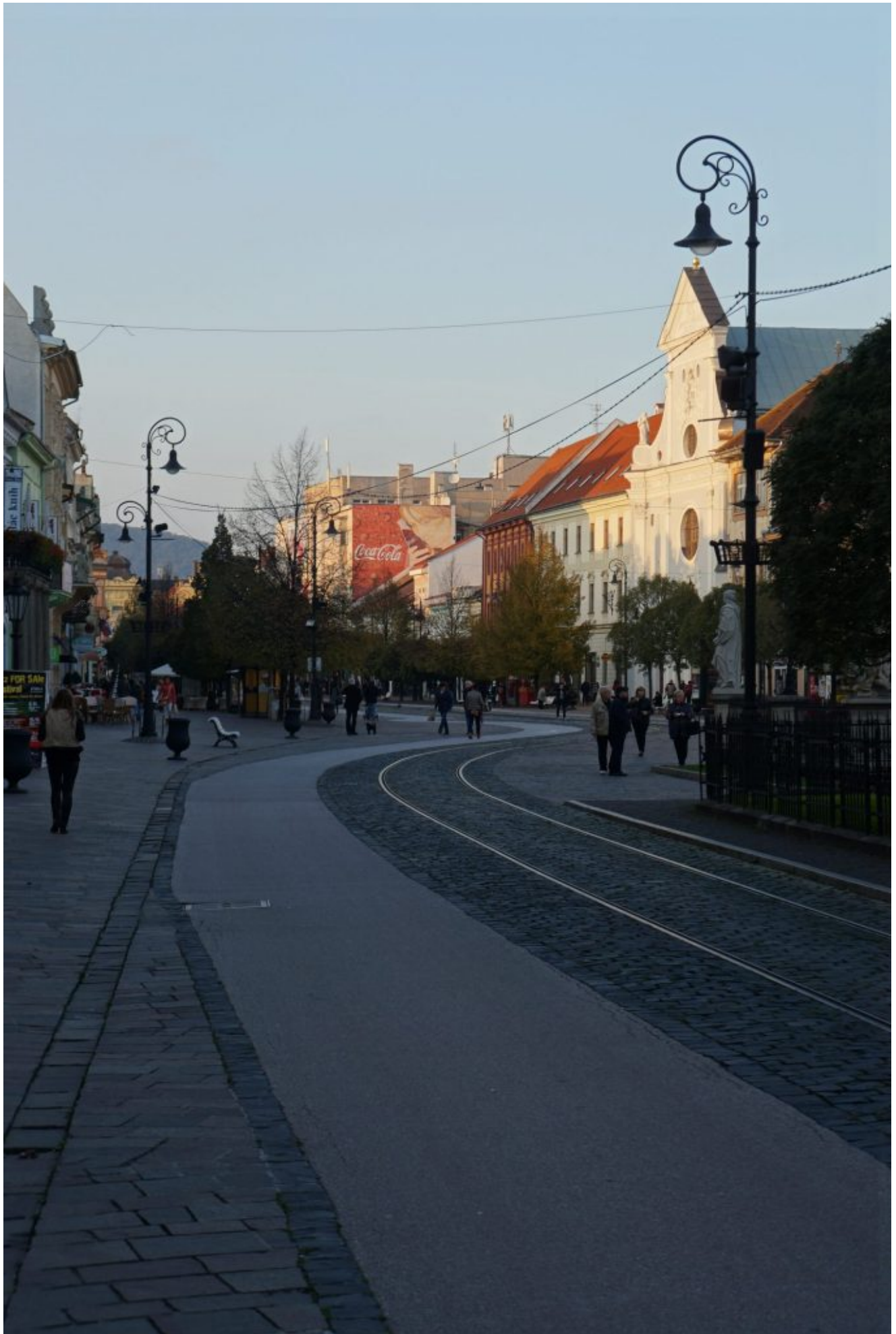
Kosice Cathedral



Kosice



Kosice



Kosice

Our accommodation for the evening is slightly unusual as we won't be staying in Gejza's flat. Instead we ride out of the city with him just as it's getting dark and 10km up into the nearby forest to a small cabin. It's halloween and as we ride Gejza tells us about the 5 wolves that live further up the valley and Lynx that was once seen near another cabin. Once we arrive the first job is to get the stove fired up to warm the place up a bit then we get some tea brewing and roast sausages on the fire by headtorch-light while Gejza tells us a bit about the history of Slovakia and Košice.



Halloween ride with Gejza



Roasting bangers



Cabin essentials

We survive the night without any spooky goings on or unwanted visitors and before thanking Gejza for letting us stay I manage to spill a whole pot of porridge into his hat. We had hoped to see wild boar on our way out of the forest but they

must be in hiding.



Our cabin in the woods





Room with a view



Gazr

We head back out of Košice onto a road that takes us along the

south of the country that Gejza promises will show us some interesting features. The first is a huge statue of an angel that we find in the village of Haj. From a distance it looks like it has been carved from stone and its carrying a few war wounds with various bullet holes and a broken wing. But up close it becomes clear that its just fibreglass and is in fact a prop from the film Behind Enemy Lines. The film was about the Balkans war but was made in Slovakia and the statue was left behind for the village to use as a tourist attraction. It sits next to a cemetery with each and every grave covered in brightly coloured flowers and candles. This is all part All Saints Day, a national holiday where it's traditional to visit the graves of relatives, place flowers and light a candle. Unfortunately we don't get to pass any cemeteries at night but they are supposed to look very special being lit by hundreds of candles.



Angel from Behind Enemy Lines



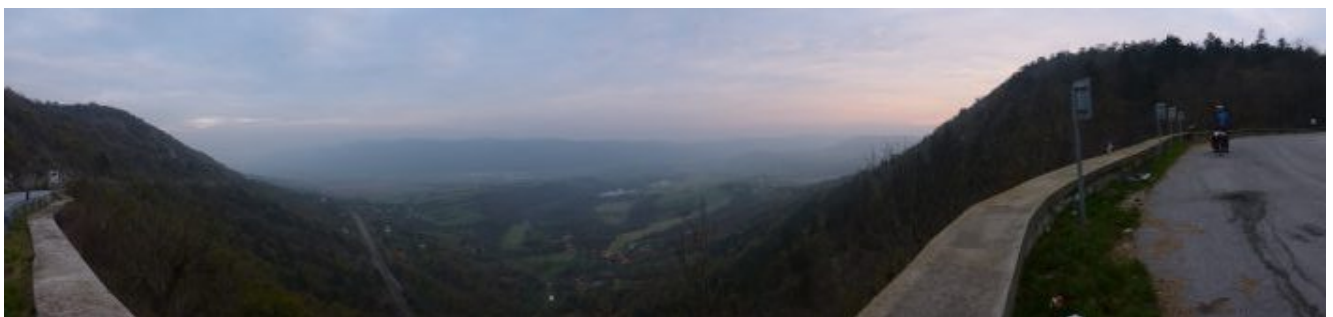
Decorated graves for All Hallows Day

Just outside Haj is a small castle perched on top of a hill and we also pass Zádielska gorge, sliced into the range of hills that we have been skirting round. Up until then the road had been flat and fast but now it starts to rise up so we stop at a petrol station to compose our selves for the climb up ahead. While parking the bike a man asks us where we're heading and when we point at the road ahead he warns us about the big hill. I disappear to the loo and when I get back he has two double espressos lined up to 'help power us up the hill'. I've barely got time to thank him before he waves goodbye and good luck and drives off. Meanwhile Kirsty has been chatted to another curious passer-by who needs some convincing that it's actually possible to cycle as far as we plan to and also warns us of the epic climb that we are at the foot of.



Castle at Hej

In the end the hill is fairly long and fairly steep but rewards us with a good view and long stretch of freewheeling into Rožňava and out the other side where we camp by the side of a small brook and fail to get a fire started for the first time (the wood was too green).



View from the big climb before Roznava

Slovakia and Hungary are peppered with caves and caverns so Gejza had suggested we visit one or two recommending Aggletek as it was just over the border and would make for a nice route into Hungary. Gejza is a keen caver and had spent some time

crawling through some of the holes in Burrington Combe, not far from Bristol a few years ago while on a trip to the UK.



Foggy morning in Slovakia

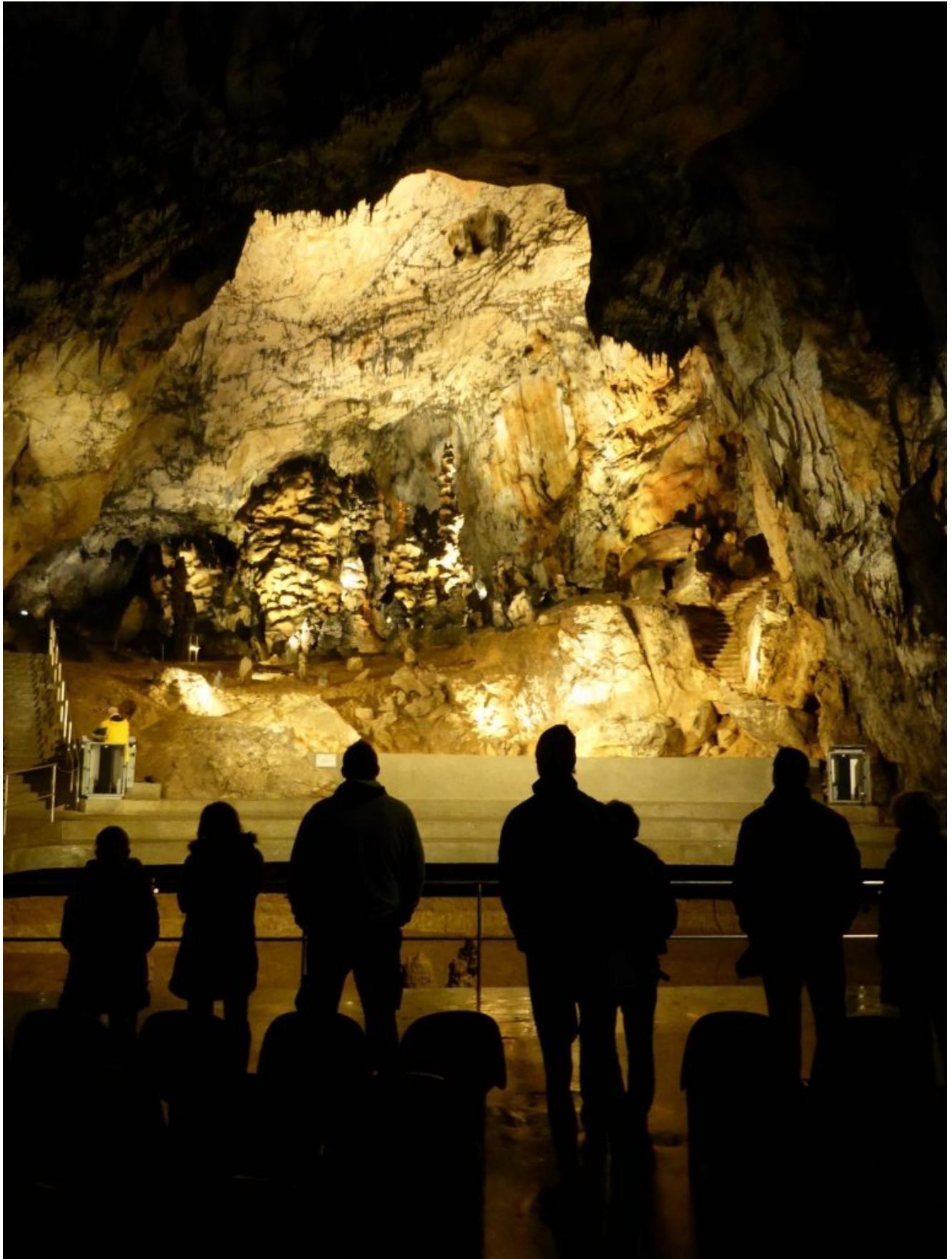


Plesivec, Slovakia

After climbing out of Slovakia over a few more hills we expect to see the vast Hungarian plain laid out in front of us as Michal had promised but it looks decidedly lumpy. It must be an optical illusion. We have to wait until 11am for the tour of the cave at Aggletek but its worth the wait as we're led through a section of the 25km long network complete with huge drip stones in the shape of various characters and creatures and also an enormous underground concert hall. With more planning we could have booked the *extreme* tour that would have included 'wallowing in water' and exploring a 1km tunnel that passes under the border. That may have to wait for another trip, perhaps when we can be joined by fellow members of the Las Vegas Institute of Spelunking.



Aggtelek Caves



Aggtelek Caves



Underground concert hall



Bat cave

Before leaving Aggletek we chat to a family who are also visiting the cave and they warn us that our destination that

day of Ózd is 'a town full of dodgy people' and in fact a Japanese cycle tourist had had his bike stolen there recently. We take note of the warning and ride up and down several hills that have us suspecting that Hungary isn't all flat after all, but it is very pretty. Arriving in Ózd we spot quite a few people who could be classed as looking 'dodgy' but it's 4:30 and already getting dark. So we're faced with a dilemma: continue riding out the other side of the town but risk not finding anywhere suitable to pitch the tent, or camp in a park hoping that under the cover of darkness we'll go unnoticed by anyone, particularly the dodgy people. We opt for the latter and again survive the night without any spooky goings on or unwanted visitors except in the morning when an old man wanders over to try and speak to us but when he realises I don't understand Hungarian he stops to watch me make breakfast before wondering off again. The porridge topping of choice is now condensed milk that is sold in a handy toothpaste sized tube.



0zd



Parklife, Ozd

There are two roads that lead west out of Ozd and despite following signs to the place we want to go we end up on the wrong one. But this turns out to be a good thing as it's a much quieter road and more picturesque than the one we had planned to take, and not much further. Picturesque inevitably means hillier and at the point where the trip computer tells us we've climbed to over 500m we're now 100% certain that Michal was incorrect and Hungary isn't entirely flat. We pass through lots of run down villages and industrial towns with huge factories at their centre and pipes running on bridges over the streets. This is one of the poorer regions of Hungary and unemployment is very high but the prime minister has made sure that each village has its own football pitch as he's a huge fan of the game.



Goose farm





Climbing in the flatlands of Hungary



The night before we get to Budapest we find a small lake to camp next to in the village of Palotás. At one point a large rat joins us next to the fire before being shooed away so we make sure all our food is safely zipped up inside the tent when we go to bed. As we settle down under the quilt an unhappy Hungarian man arrives and tells us we shouldn't be camping there. This is somewhat inconvenient as to move now would take ages and we have no idea where else we could go but we manage to convince him that we'll be gone in the morning so he lets us stay. When I open the tent to say thank you he seems much friendlier, shakes my hand, introduces himself as Timor and wishes us a good night.



Collecting wood for the fire

It's a leisurely ride into Budapest the next day and on our way we spot a Decathlon store so of course have to call in and have a browse. That morning we'd had to pack tent while it was sopping wet after a heavy overnight dew so while we eat lunch outside the store we pitch the tent to let it dry in the sunshine. Luckily no-one comes to try and buy it from us but we wonder if any Decathlon customers now think they stock Hilleberg tents.

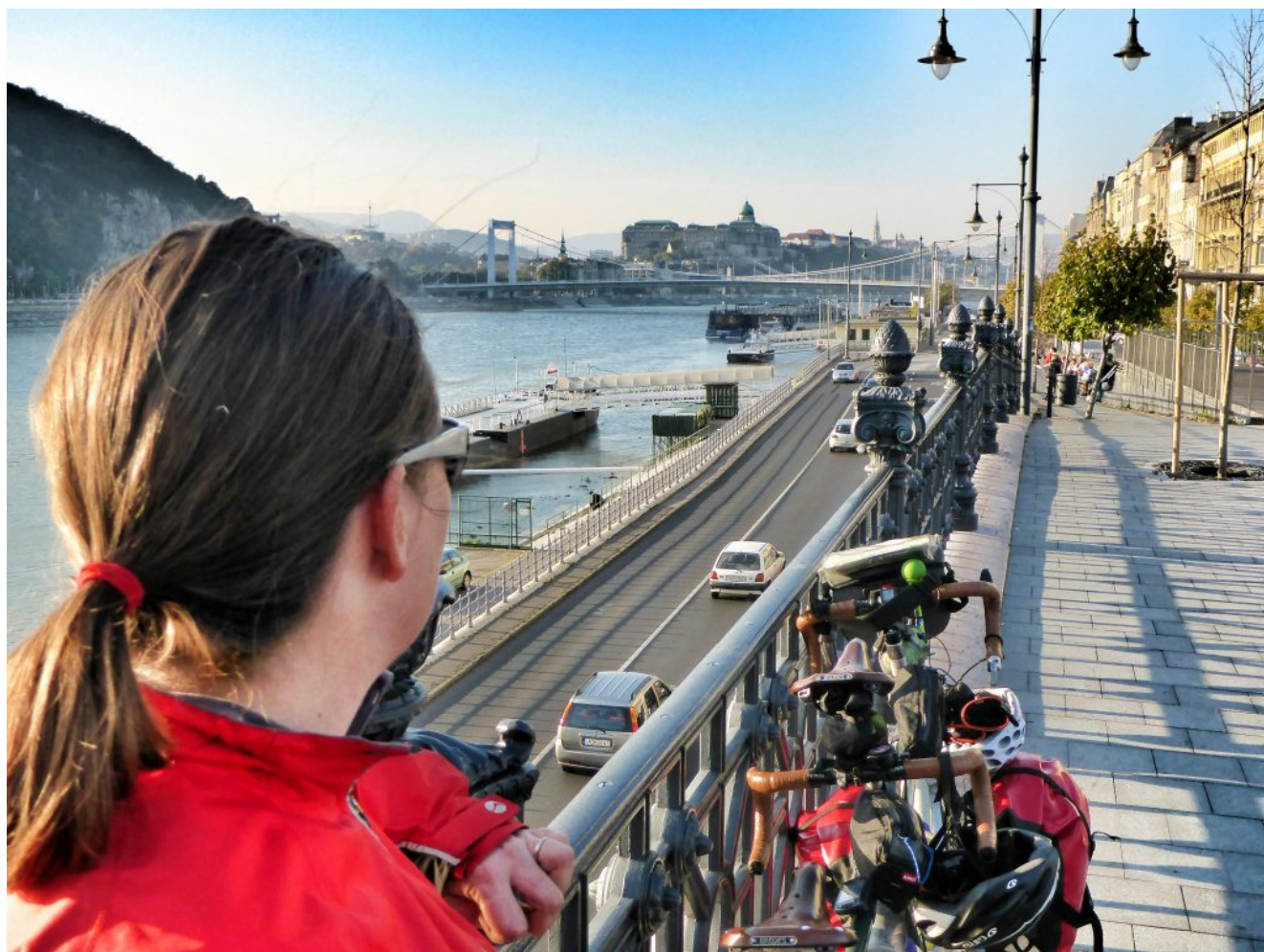


A contender for Hungary's most Hungarian man



Inevitably it's a busy road into the city centre with trams, trains, taxis and trolley buses all doing their best to get in front of us but we make it to the Danube in one piece. It's

a beautiful sight with the city of Buda on one side and Pest on the other with the river running between them and there are hundreds of ornate buildings to admire.



Arriving in Budapest



The Danube by night



Hungarian Parliament Building

We meet Povi by the river and he leads us back to his flat

where he and Eva will be hosting us. He's riding a singlespeed and it's tricky to keep up on the tandem as he threads it through the traffic. They live on Dioszegi Samuel Utca in district VIII which is the most notorious street in the most notorious district in Budapest but Povi insists that we shouldn't be worried, just don't leave the bike unattended. In fact the neighbours seem very friendly and whenever we leave the flat they seem more than happy to help but given we don't speak much Hungarian we have no idea what they are offering to sell us.



Povi and Eva's apartment block



Povi and Eva

Povi and Eva are fellow tandem riders and have recently toured through Azerbaijan so after a traditional Hungarian welcome

drink of palincă we enjoy exchanging stories. They fully understand the name of our website as this it's an international phenomenon for people to shout 'She's not pedalling on the back' at tandems. I'm sure we must have heard it hundreds of times in numerous languages already.

We have a few admin tasks to carry out before heading into the city the next day including some route planning, blog writing and backing up photos but primarily we need a bit of a rest. So it's after lunch before we make it to one of the Turkish baths that are common throughout Budapest. 70 million litres of geothermally heated water pours out of the ground each day so there is plenty to supply each of the bath houses. The one we visit is the oldest in the city having been built by the Ottomoan Turks in the 16th Century. A lot of bodies must have taken a dip in there over that time! For Kirsty it feels just like her home town of Bath. An all you can eat buffet finishes a short day with very full stomachs as we make sure we get our moneys worth.



Kiraly thermal bath



Budapest

To make sure we see plenty of the city Povi and Eva are kind enough to let us stay 3 nights which gives us time for a good

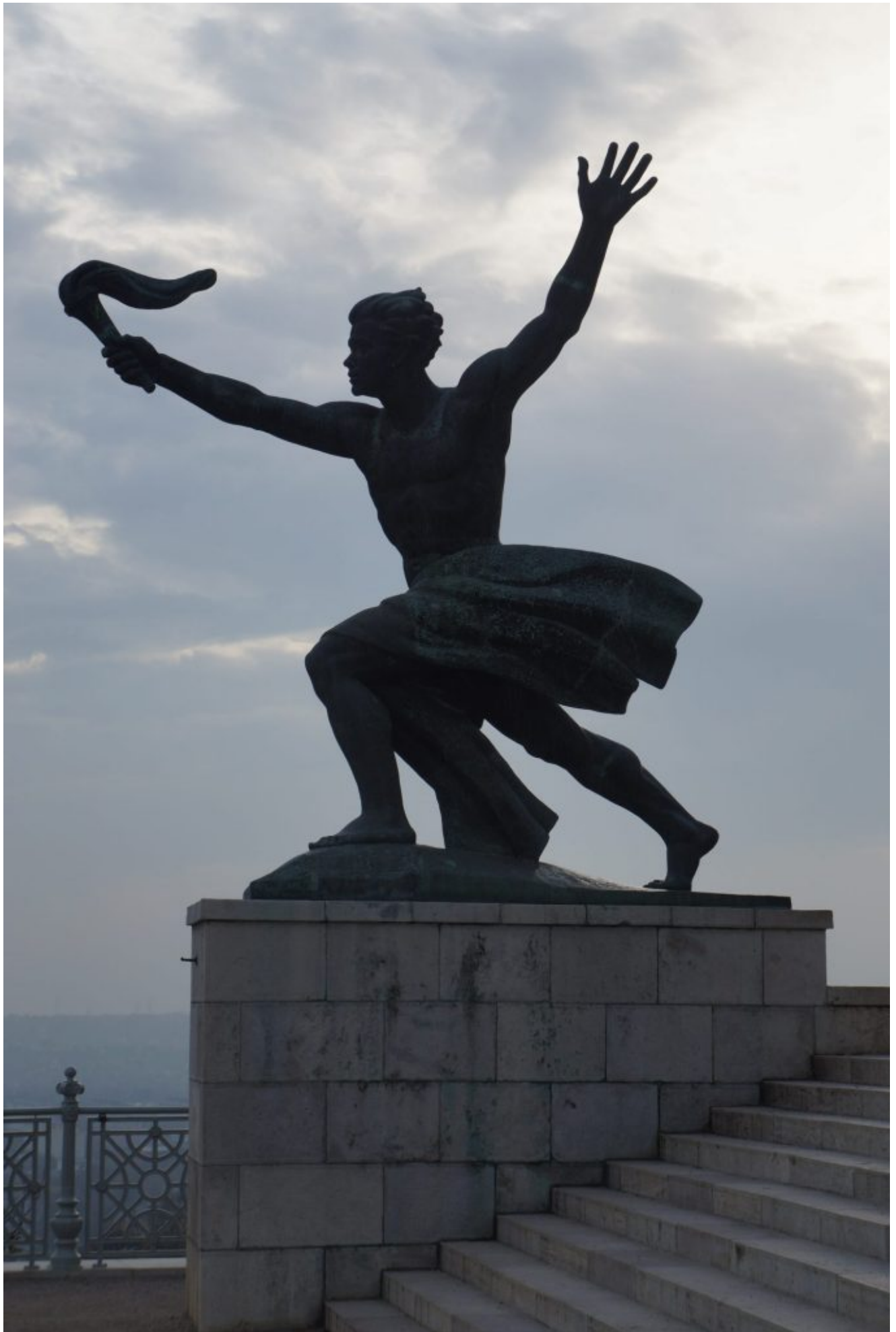
walking tour through Pest then into Buda and the castle district, a hike up to the top of the Citadel which offers a great view and we tuck into some Langos in a local market. This is a circle of fried dough the size of a plate and an inch thick with sour cream, cheese and garlic in generous quantities on top. It takes at least a day to digest and to get rid of the taste of garlic from our mouths.



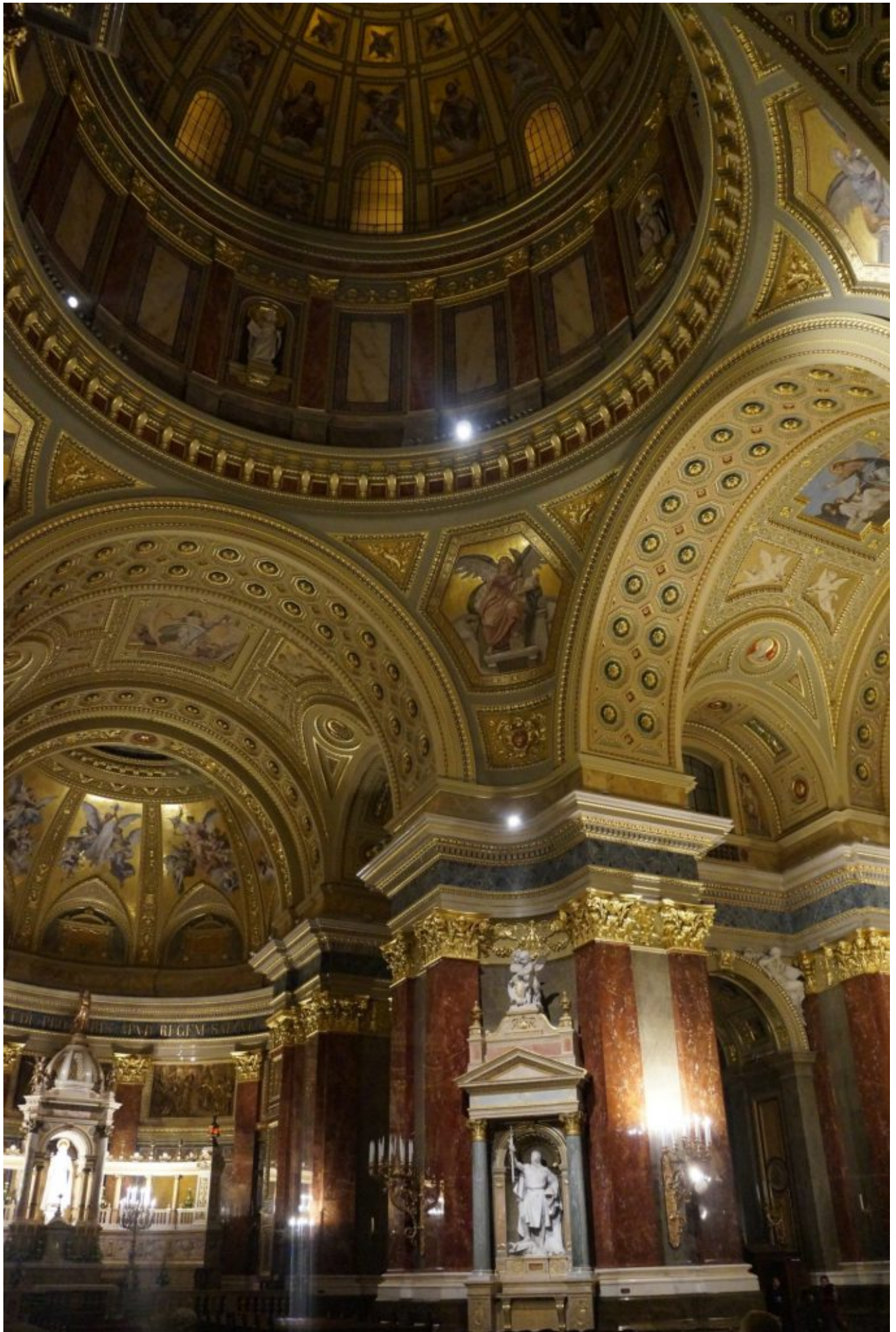
Langos!

We're fairly sure we'll come back to Budapest one day as there is such a huge amount to see and do and we've only really seen

a small fraction. This one comes highly recommended.



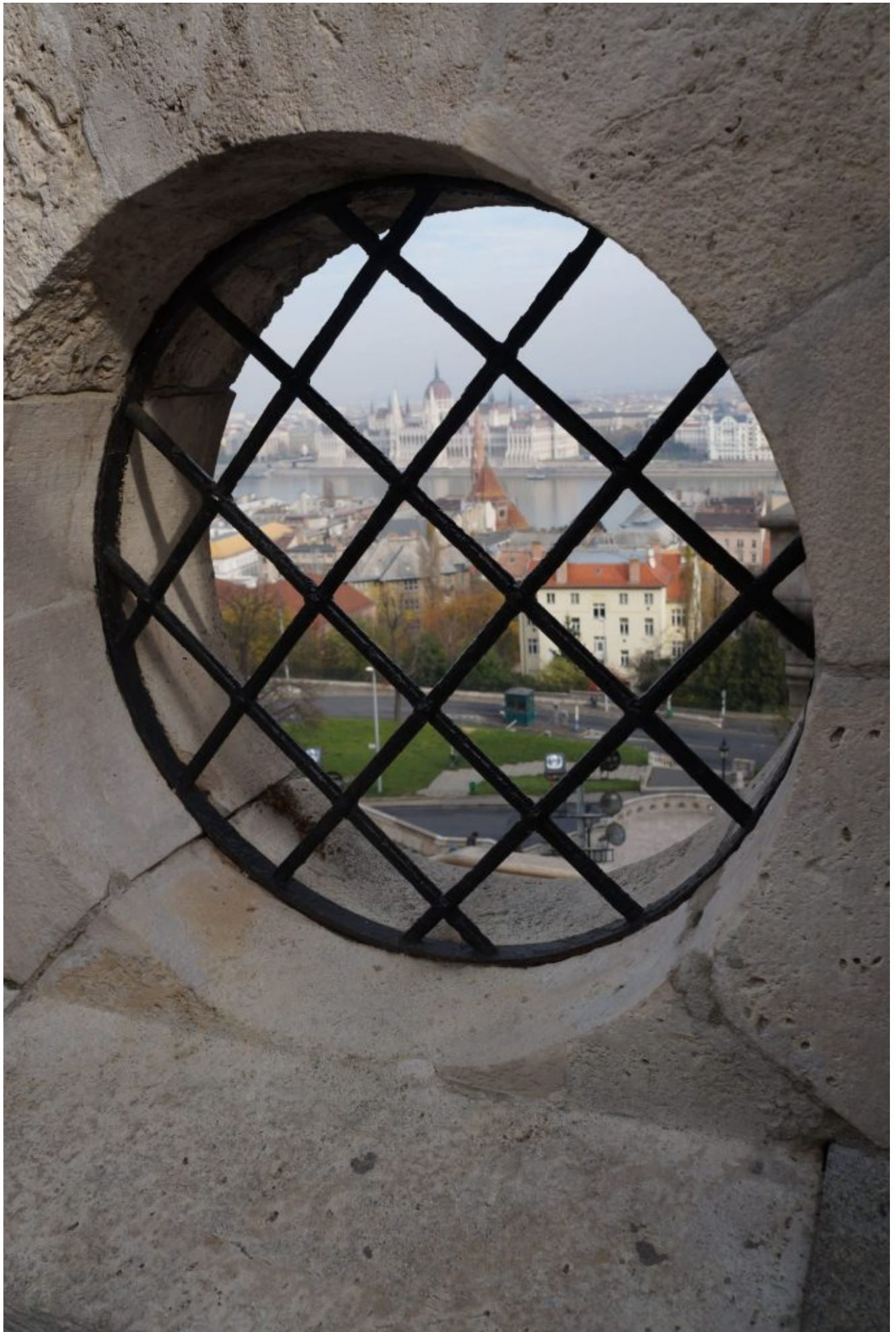


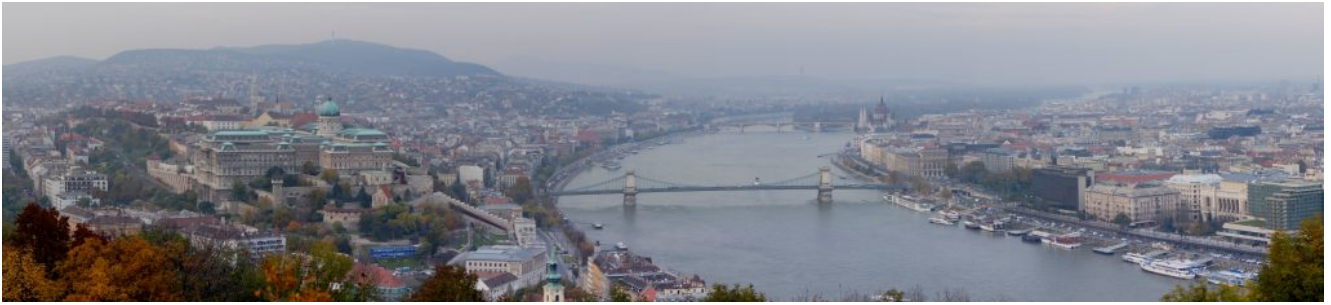












So where next? The map has so many exciting options for us from here. Within 2-3 weeks we could be in Istanbul, Athens, Rome... The next pin had been stuck into Istanbul and we'd thought we'd be there around Christmas time but we're changing our minds about this. The most popular route from Budapest is to follow the Danube but instead we're going to continue travelling south east on Povi's recommendation as he thinks this will be much more enjoyable and varied. His route takes us across to the huge Balaton lake then down to Pecs before crossing into Croatia, all too briefly, and then on to Serbia and Belgrade. So we're going into the Balkans and another interesting region with a very complicated history.



Get on up!