

Belgrade to Prizren (via Romania and Bulgaria)

written by Marcus | 27 November, 2014



It's a well known fact among the travelling community that countries that are portrayed as being hostile or having a bad reputation are often the ones that are the most interesting to visit and indeed are usually the most welcoming. Serbia has been a good case in point. Yes it was a Serb who triggered the first world war, and the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and with Kosovo more recently may give the impression that it's a country that should be avoided, but what happens at a national or political level doesn't seem to reflect the attitude of the general population. Before we arrived we'd been told stories by other cyclists of how they had been welcomed into peoples' homes and helped numerous times throughout their trip. Also Martina and Dani who we'd met in

Croatia, and by rights should have a very good reason to dislike Serbia, had told us it was a great country to travel through. All of this was enough for us to know we would be OK and should be in for a memorable experience, which was certainly the case not long after leaving Belgrade.



Interesting Belgrade architecture

15th to 24th November 2014

We head out of Belgrade to pick up the EuroVelo 6 north of the

Danube. This is one of the most popular EuroVelo routes and starts on the Atlantic coast in France and finishes at the mouth of the Danube on the coast of the Black Sea in Romania.



Following the Euro Velo 6 signs

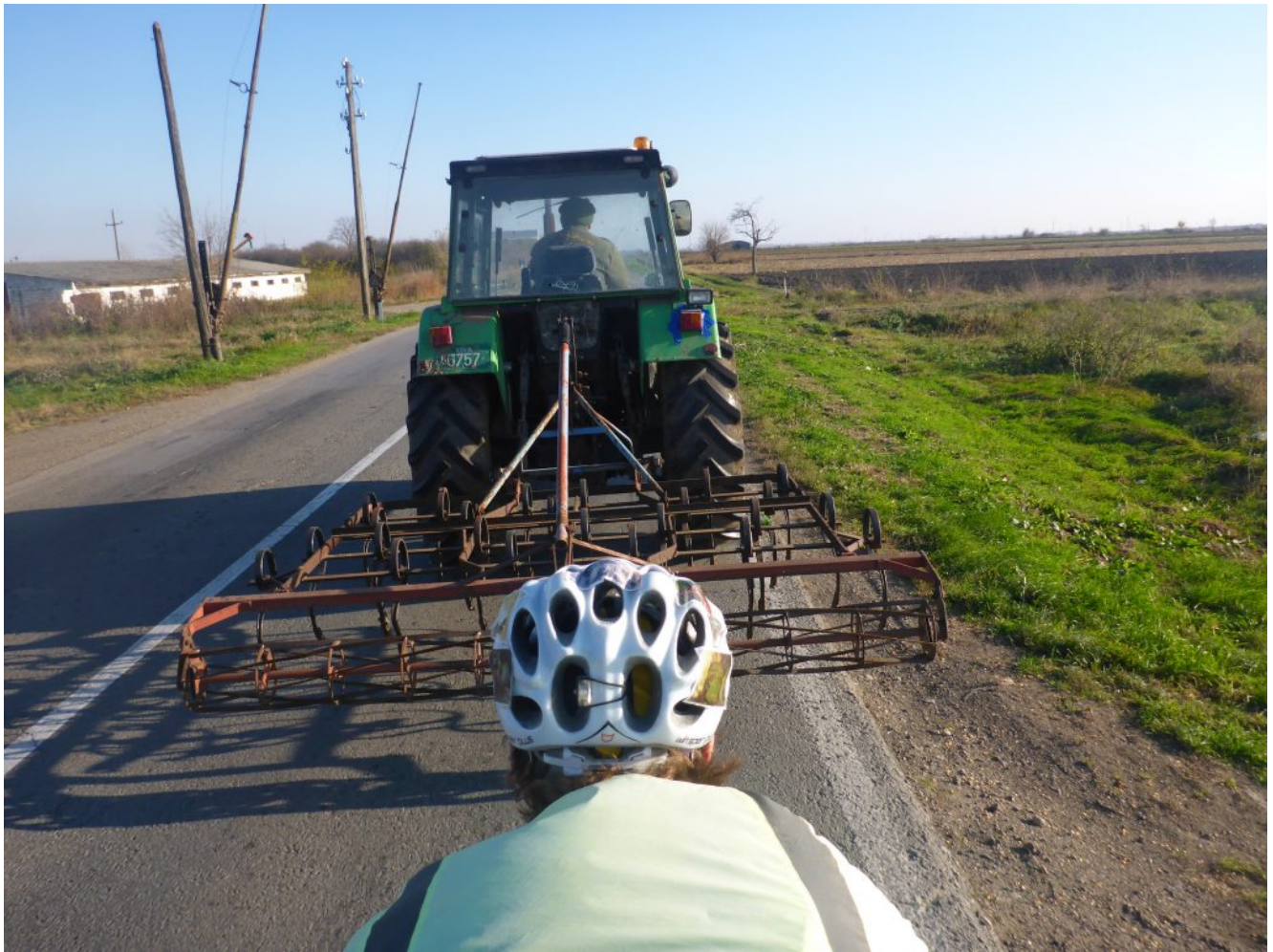
After crossing the river an EV6 sign warns us that we have 10km on a rough path along a dam ahead which turns out to be narrow and bumpy which is always a troublesome combination, but today we have a gusty headwind too. We abandon the path after a few km and drop onto the main road that runs parallel to the dam and is much smoother. We still have the wind to contend with which feels just as strong as those tough days back in Lithuania, but thankfully not as cold.



EuroVelo 6 just outside Belgrade

The road opens out onto a wide open plain with no shelter and we crawl along until the next town and try to regain some energy with a standard issue picnic lunch. Serbs eat more bread than just about any nation so there have been no shortage of bakeries to pick up fresh loaves each day.

Straight after the pitstop we get overtaken by a tractor and I call for full power from Kirsty so that we can tuck in behind it. Suddenly from slogging away at 12 km/hr we're cruising easily at 24 km/hr. But all too soon he turns off and it's like riding into a brick wall as the wind hits us again with full force.



Tractor drafting

In Gaj we decide enough is enough and call it a day. The plan is to nurse a beer in the only bar in the town then pitch our tent somewhere secluded under the cover of darkness. The bar is showing the latest football results on Ceefax so we're entertained by the Bristol Rovers – Kidderminster game (0-0 at full time).

Eventually we venture out and find a football pitch with what looks to be a club house at one end and decide this would offer some protection from the wind. We park the bike and begin taking off the bags when a small dog emerges and inevitably begins barking. The noise alerts someone from inside the building who comes out to see what's going on. It turns out it's not just a clubhouse but it's actually someone's house. We perform the 'can we pitch our tent and sleep here for one night' mime and he nods in agreement before returning inside. We've just got time to pull the tent out

when the man returns with his whole family and beckons for us to join them inside. We're shown to the football club office and he indicates that we can make our beds there. It's effectively an en suite as the changing room and showers are right alongside too. Once we've brought everything in and sorted ourselves out we're invited into their kitchen to join them for dinner. Between a mixture of broken German, French, sign language and misunderstood English and Serbian we manage to have a bit of a conversation. Stojan and Vesna live there with their sons Stojan Jr and Milas and seem to be employed to look after the football ground as well as do some coaching. Stojan Jr is learning German and welding in the hope he can start a new life in Germany which is a popular destination for young Serbs.



En-suite room in Gaj



The wonderful Nebriga family

We couldn't be more grateful for their hospitality but in return they seem genuinely delighted that they have been able

to help us. In the morning we're given a hearty breakfast, helped to load the bike then waved off by the whole family, back into the hurricane that continues to blast in from the East.



Waving goodbye to the Nebrigas

Again we have little shelter particularly on a long steady climb just before the town of Bela Crkva. Heads down, turn the pedals, moving forward slowly.



Ornate Serbian houses

Entering Bela Crkva the now familiar sight of a pack of four small black dogs assembles to welcome us into the town. Two of

them take to the pavement side and two to the road side and they give chase while barking. But as a car comes to overtake one dog panics and runs out in front of it. We're certain we're witnessing canine carnage but miraculously after a short distance the dog comes tumbling out from under the back of the car, rolls onto its feet and runs off with its friends without so much as a limp. We can't quite believe it but perhaps it was part cat and has used up one of its nine lives?



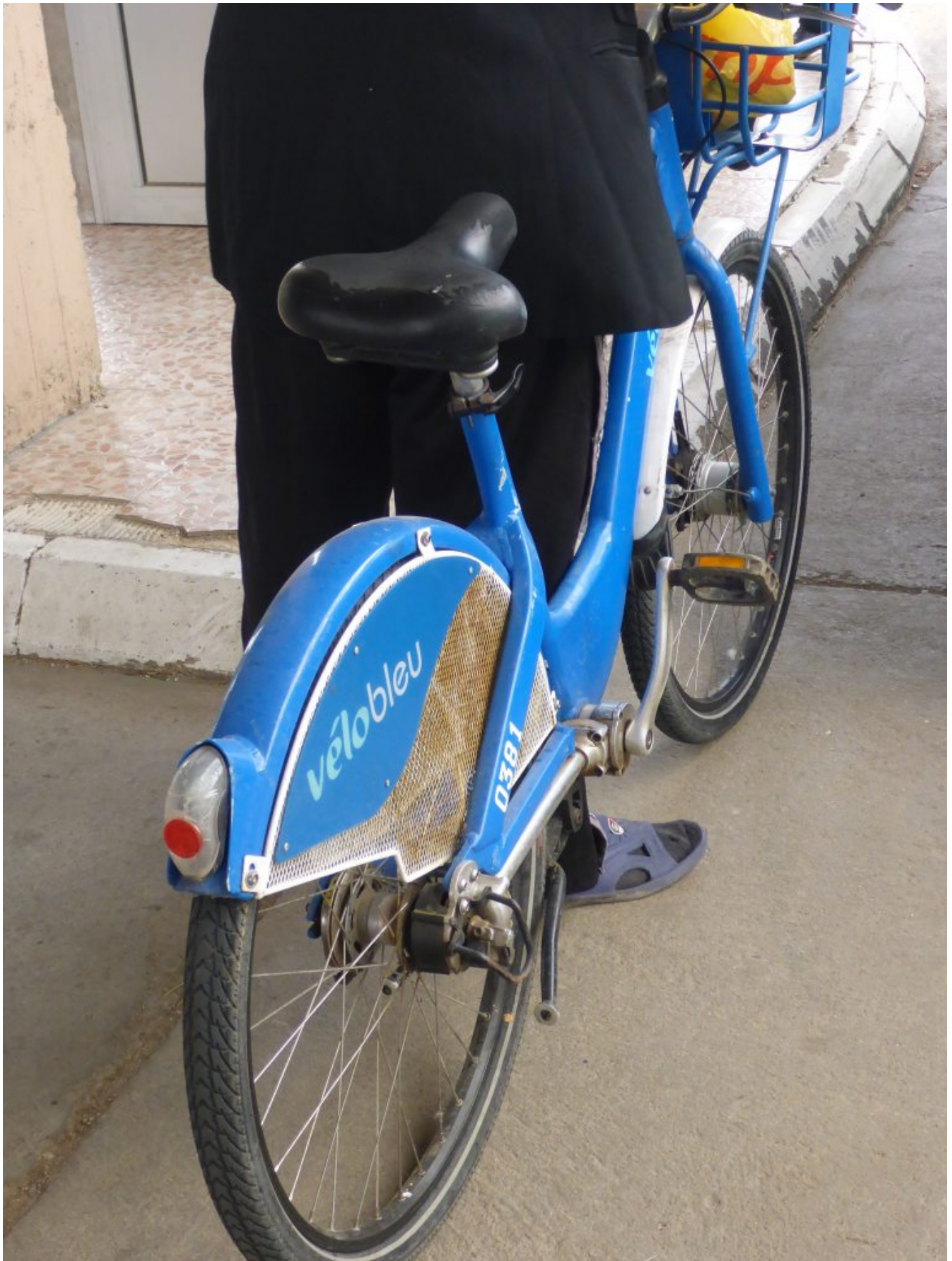
Serbian village residents

Soon after we arrive at the Romanian border and are quickly waved through. We now need to get back alongside the Danube

and dismiss the flat route that meanders back into the river valley and take a short cut that includes a chunky hill but saves 25km.



Approaching Romania



A french city bike has found a new home in Romania

Luckily the climb is sheltered but the last stretch of the day is back into the headwind so when we arrive in Moldova Veche

we're ready to take shelter in a cafe. This is a town that is either half built or half demolished but it's hard to tell which. Instead of dogs our welcoming party is a group of children who run alongside shouting 'Tourist!' 'Bani!' (money). We ask them where we can get a coffee and they lead us to a smoke filled cafe then stand outside peering in while we drink some bitter coffee without milk.



Tiled houses in Moldova Veche

It's starting to get dark so we are forced to get going again to look for somewhere out of the wind to camp. It's a half hearted search, there is rain in the air and I'm still coughing and sneezing so we abandon the idea and check into a hotel. It's 100 Lev (£18) well spent.



Scenic Moldova Veche

After breakfast of omelette with added cigarette smoke we pack and get ready to go. There are some sailors staying in the hotel too but they are stranded because of the high winds. They are trying to get to Istanbul but would end up back in Budapest if they set off at the moment. Returning to the hotel nearly becomes our decision too when we almost get blown clean off the road several times in the first 8km. The wind is unbelievably strong and again on solo bikes we would have been in considerable difficulty. But our perseverance pays off as we round a corner into a more sheltered section close to the river and it becomes a lot easier.



Iron Gates National Park



Kirsty in the Iron Gates National Park

We're now entering the Iron Gates National Park and the scenery is framed by high sided hills on either side of the Danube that is now about 800m wide. There are enormous barges up to 150m long trundling up and down the river, just slower than the tandem so we play tortoise and hare (or tortoise and slightly slower tortoise) all day.



Barges on The Danube

There was a presidential election the day before and the results announced that morning show that the country has a new leader in the form of Klaus Johannis who is from a German speaking part of Transylvania. We're quite often mistaken for being German for some reason, so a few times that day we get the comment 'Are you German? We have a German president!'. They seem non-committal as to whether the new appointment will be a good thing but In a country that is notorious for corruption any new leader will have to do a lot to gain the trust of the people which can only take time. Both of the main candidates seem to have spent a huge amount on their campaign as there are posters and banners absolutely everywhere.



Vote Iohannis, oh you already did



On the other side of the river we can see the Serbian road which we could also have taken and it appears to be the harder option with more climbing but with some tunnels and bridges that we miss out on. In the summer that side is more shaded but we don't need to worry about that today. The hills on either side get steeper and become 500m cliffs to form a gorge that we're now riding through and it's very much like being in a Norwegian Fjord or Scottish Glen. We even have some authentic Norwegian/Scottish weather with low lying cloud and a fine mist in the air.



Norwegian Romania



Iron Gates National Park



Fishermen in Iron Gates National Park





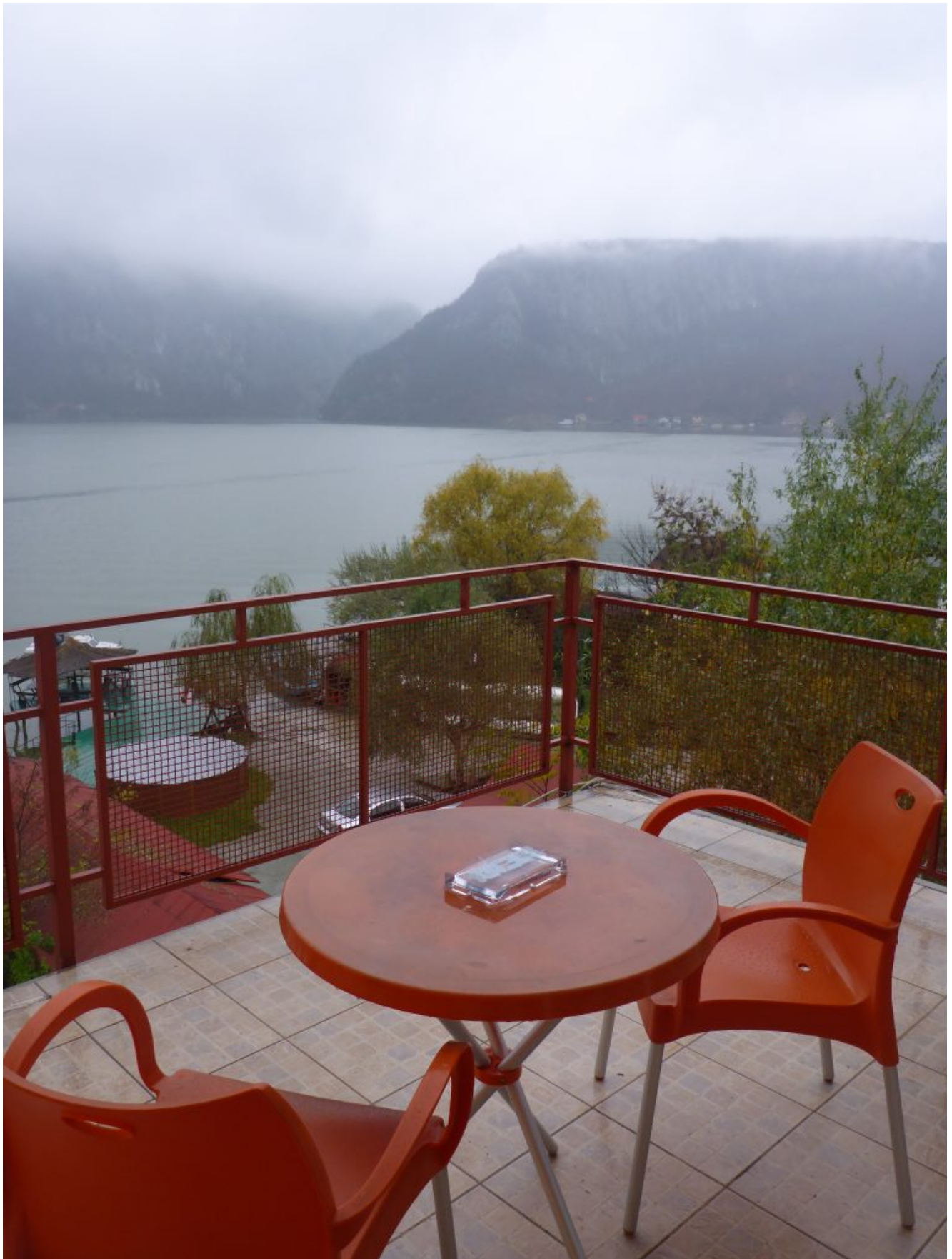
Iron Gates National Park

We end the day with a climb that takes us away from the river just as it narrows right down to 150m and we rejoin it on the other side of the hill where it has opened out into a huge basin with the town of Dubova laid out around the edge.



Iron Gates National Park

A giant fish on the outside of the Decebal hotel lures us in as we wanted to try the famous Danube catfish. Once we've checked in we make our way to the restaurant only to find they are out of just about everything so we have to make do with Crap Fish instead. This may have been a typing error in the menu.



Room with a view, Hotel Decebal

One of the highlights of the Iron Gates National Park is the carving of King Decebal that stands at over 40m high and is

the tallest rock carving in Europe. There is talk of Serbia carving their own face on the other side but as yet this hasn't happened. Not surprising really as Decebal took 12 sculptors 10 years to create so was a huge investment in time and resources.



Iron Gates National Park



Monastery in the Iron Gates National Park



Carving of King Decebal

We take a look on our way out of the Iron Gates and before arriving in Eselnita, a town that has only one paved road, though piles of rubble everywhere indicate that someone may be planning to build some more at some stage.



Rural Romania



Plenty of horse and carts to race



Romanian SUDS

We quickly climb up and over into Orsova for a cafe stop before continuing on a busier road that takes us to the first of the dams that are responsible for forming the Iron Gates National Park. When the two hydroelectric dams were constructed in the late 60's/early 70's little thought was given to the impact of the 35m rise in water level on the ecosystems of the flora and fauna but the gorge is now environmentally important enough to be under protection by both Serbia and Romania.

We take a photo at the dam then get approached by a security guard who tells us not to take photos of the dam.



Covert photo of Iron Gate One hydro electric dam

After the surprisingly modern looking town of Drobeta Turnu Severin we have another long climb before dropping onto a plateau. It's been 6 nights without camping so it's nice to be back in the familiar surroundings of the tent that night although there are a few disturbances when mice decide to run around beneath the groundsheet.



Drobeta-Turnu Severin

We're quickly on our way to the next border the next day. We've discovered that although everyone looks quite suspicious of us to begin with, a wave and calling out 'Salut!' usually prompts an enthusiastic response. The flat road has allowed us to make good progress so we have time to stop for lunch in Calafat before crossing to Bulgaria. It's a good job we had lots of time as it takes over an hour for the food to arrive! Romanian service levels leave something to be desired.



Rural Romania

To get to Bulgaria we have to cross the Danube and up until last year this would be done by ferry. But the ferry service suffered from inconveniences like running aground in summer and being frozen in in winter so after 40 years of talking about it they decided to build a bridge. We may well be the first tandem to cross it.



Free the bees

It takes us into the city of Vidin which doesn't give a good first impression of Bulgaria so we don't stop and instead ride through and make our way to our Warm Showers host for the night.

Annalise is another Belgian and lives in a former hotel in an isolated position alongside a lake along with her dog, cats and chickens. It is almost entirely off grid with no power, phone line and just one outside tap for water. Her vision is to create an eco-hostel where travellers can stay but also people can come and learn about low impact living techniques. It's still early days and there is plenty of work to be done before it can start taking 'proper' guests so for now she is happy for passing cyclists and hitch hikers to stay for a night or two on their way through Bulgaria. No Warm Shower this time. We have dinner by candlelight, wash up in the stone basin and put as many covers as we can find on the bed in the

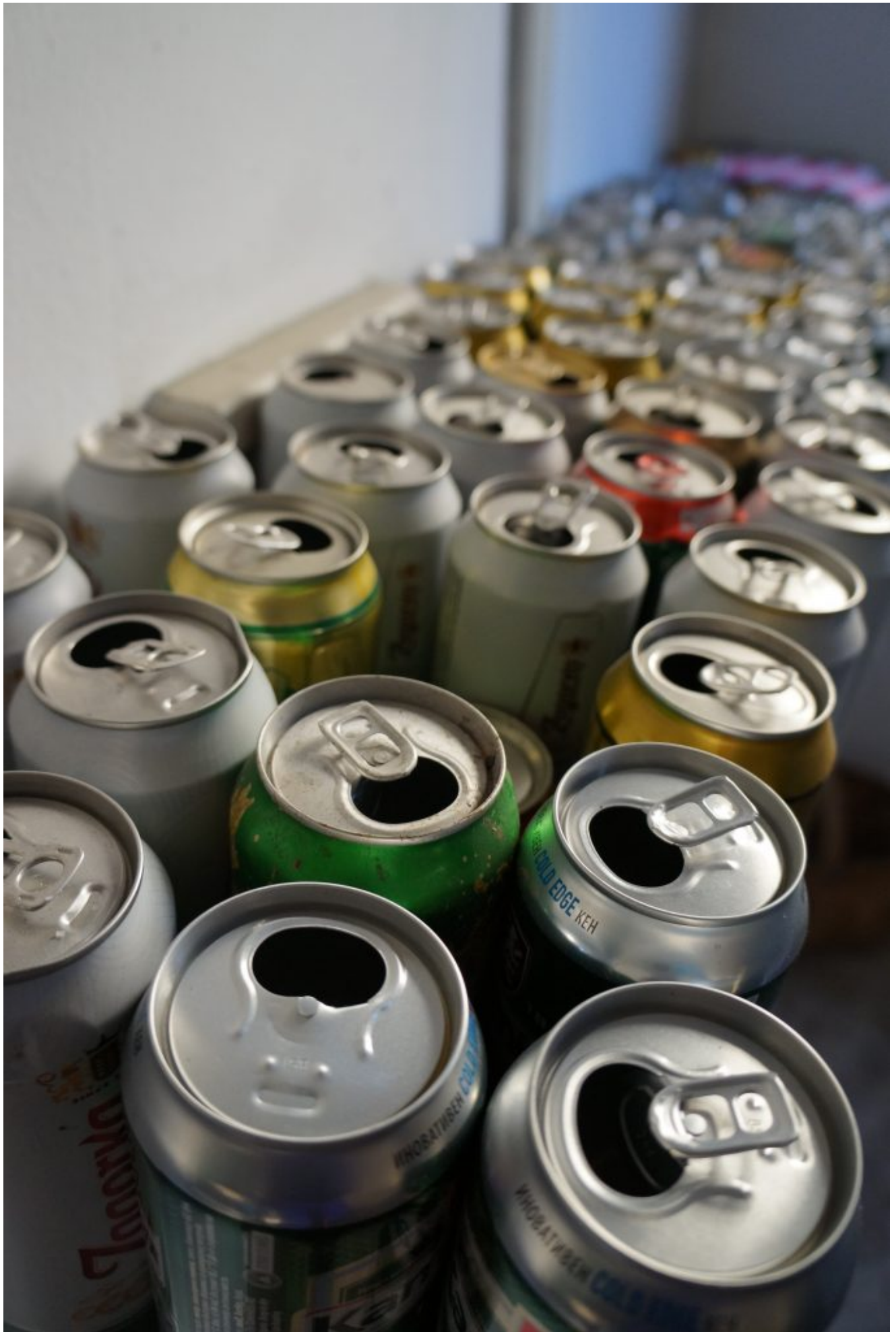
unheated bedroom. It's still a lot warmer than the tent would have been.



Annalise and Celine



The guest suite



Annalise has had some thirsty guests

Waving goodbye to Annalise in the morning we can't help but admire her enthusiasm for the project but expect she's going to have a tough winter ahead when the temperatures drop well below zero.



Celine Di-og

We've got a tough day ahead as we're straight out onto a steep climb and at the top we've got ourselves a mighty headwind again. We're travelling west now so of course the wind has turned 180 degrees. The combination of hills and wind drive our average speed for the morning down to 10 km/hr. Bulgaria isn't appealing to us but it's only a brief visit as after lunch we're back in Serbia again. The hour we'd lost going into Romania is given back to us but I've given up changing the clock on the trip computer.



Kula, Bugaria

In both Romania and Bulgaria we'd been expecting to encounter lots of vicious dogs as we'd heard plenty of stories of other cyclists having problems but although we saw hundreds of strays they were almost all fairly docile with perhaps the odd bark but only one showing it's teeth (which made Kirsty pedal twice as hard to try and get away).

Northern Serbia had been pan flat but southern Serbia is very different. We have two days of hilly riding to get to Niš and climb to a new highest point for the trip of 787m and a new top speed of 70.9 km/hr coming back down.



Sunset in Serbia



Muddy pegs



High speed descent

We hadn't managed to find any hosts available in Niš so find a cheap room with enough space for a tandem. One Warm Showers host had been trying to sort something out for us from the deck of a boat in the Caribbean but eventually drew a blank amongst his friends and family however we have arranged to meet with Milos and Jelena who don't have a spare couch but are happy to join us for a drink and a chat. Milos was studying engineering but found that being a translator from English to Serbian was more lucrative. They ask for tips for their next holiday as they enjoy camping trips too so we suggest Estonia and they immediately begin making plans.



Cargo bike, Nis



Milos and Jelena

The rear hub on the bike needs some more attention so the next morning we head to Planet Bike. The verdict isn't good as it

needs new bearings and cones, but Danny the mechanic thinks it should last us until Athens where we should be able to get new parts. He gives it a good clean, fills it with fresh grease and gets it set up as best he can. No parts fitted so he doesn't charge and he gets a photo of us for his Facebook page. Thank you Planet Bike in Niš!



Danny at Planet Bike, Nis

The previous blog needs sorting out too so we find a library and nearly get the photos added when they kick us out because

its closing so we spend a frustrating hour finishing it off on our phones while sitting in a park that has WiFi. The WordPress App is great for typing up the words but not so good for editing and adding pictures.

The most unique sight in Niš is the Skull Tower which was constructed during the Ottoman times and decorated with 952 Serbian skulls, though only 54 remain. It was supposed to serve as a warning that any resistance to the Ottoman occupation would be met with extreme force but it's now a monument of Serbian courage and resilience. In fact one of the later Ottoman rulers wanted to knock it down but the Serbs insisted on keeping it. It's a very bizarre sight and more than a bit unnerving.



Skull Tower, Nis



Skull Tower, Nis



Skull Tower, Nis

It's already beginning to get dark when we leave Niš and the busy city limits leave very few camping opportunities. But we eventually find an open space that is only occupied by a few goats and so pitch the tent in a secluded corner. Some policeman come and investigate at one point but seem happy enough that we'll be gone the next day and more importantly don't seem to be fearing for our safety.

We're now approaching the very south of Serbia and get some lovely long climbs through woods at a comfortable 4-5% gradient. Then at the ridgeline we reach our most controversial border.



Our last lunch in Serbia

For 108 countries the Republic of Kosovo has been an independent state since 2008 but Serbia still claim it as their own autonomous province. With a Kosovan entry stamp in our passports it may be difficult to get back into Serbia so this is very much a one way trip but we plan to keep moving south and exit via a different border.

Compared to the wattle and daub houses in the Serbian villages on the way up the contrast of brand new brick houses across the border is surprising. In fact most things seem to be brand new, from the signs, to the petrol stations to a lot of the cars on the busy and well surfaced roads. There are plenty of Stars and Stripes flags around to show appreciation for where a lot of the money has come from.



Modern Kosovo



Kosovan Mosque

In Prishtina we find the iconic New Born sculpture which applies to not only the fact that this is the 2nd newest country in the world but also because it's a country that seems to literally be being built from the ground up. Kosovan children are very friendly and speak good English and while looking at the New Born sculpture a group comes up to us and ask for rides on the back of the bike. Their roller blades help them reach the pedals but Kirsty is relieved to hear that none of them are suitable for replacing her.



New Born, Prishtina



Trying out a new stoker in Prishtina

Things are a bit different to other countries we've been to. There are lots of big white 4x4 vehicles to show that foreign aid workers and the UN are still working hard here. We see soldiers from Germany and Turkey who are part of The Kosovan Defense Force (KF0R) on the streets in Prizren and occasionally a military helicopter flies overhead. At each bridge there is a sign to show the weight limits for a tank and by the side of the road another sign thanks the Belgian government for clearing the area of land mines.



Tank weight limit sign, Kosovo

This is not a country for wild camping so we stay in a hostel in Prishtina on our first night and reward ourselves for 100

A top-down view of a wooden table set for a meal. In the center are several small white bowls containing various foods: scrambled eggs, butter, olives, red peppers, green vegetables, and blue cheese. To the left are glasses of wine and a pitcher of dark liquid. At the top and bottom are white plates with cutlery. A basket of bread is on the right.



Prishtina University Library. Voted the world's ugliest building.

The support of the US has been commemorated with "Xhorxh Bush Boulevard" and "Bill Klinton Boulevard" but the statue of Bill is not the most flattering. The most famous Albanian, Mother Teresa also gets her own street, statue and cathedral though the latter is a work in progress.



Bill Clinton Statue, Prishtina



George Bush Boulevard, Prishtina



Mother Teresa – The world's favourite nun

As well as Stars and Stripes, Albanian flags are everywhere as Kosovo is considered part of "Greater Albania" that also

includes parts of Macedonia, Greece and Montenegro which are populated by ethnic Albanians. Some people think Kosovo should become part of Albania but given the now hugely different economies this seems unlikely to happen.



Kosovan children with Albanian Flags

From Prishtina we head out past massive out of town commercial developments that seem to be built very much like a US town. We get cheers and waves from almost everyone and when we stop at a petrol station we're given chocolate bars to help us on our way.



Overtaking tractors in Kosovo

We have to climb another row of hills, and a new highest point of 850m, then drop down through fog to Prizren. We're staying with Dario who is working for an Italian NGO to provide help with agricultural development in Kosovo. He's beginning to think that all the foreign aid has meant the country has changed too fast and has made it too Western, losing some of the traditional characteristics which we can well believe.



Dario in Prizren

A walk round Prizren the next day takes us to our first mosque and the call to prayer rings out across the city mid morning.

But alongside the ancient building is a market square lined with bars playing music at high volume.



Prizren



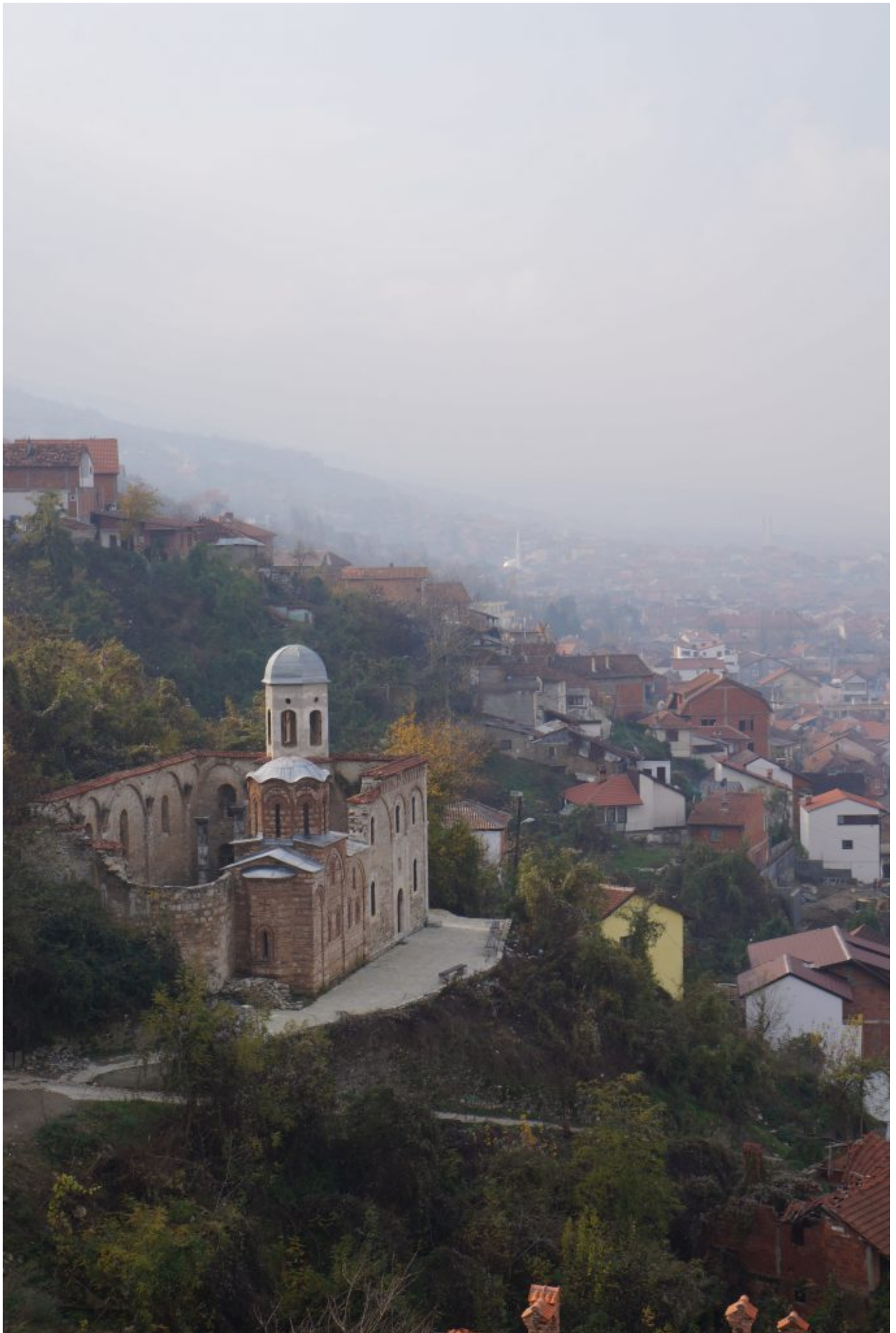
Mosque in Prizren



Inside the mosque, Prizren



View from Prizren Fortress



Orthodox Church in Prizren



Inside the C14 Orthodox Church, Prizren



View from Prizren Fortress



Prizren

There's not much of Kosovo beyond Prizren so our brief stay in this fascinating and unique country is due to end all too soon. Macedonia lies due south but we're heading a bit further east to another country with an awkward reputation to see what it's really like. Next is Albania and we've seen a few snow capped hills that hint that there may be some climbing to do.



Shoe shining



Trying an Albanian hat for size

Budapest to Osijek to Belgrade

written by Marcus | 27 November, 2014





Apparently if you can get to grips with the complexities of the Hungarian language then it should help develop your brainpower which is one of the reasons why Hungary has produced so many Nobel prize winners. And Enid Rubik. Oh and László Bíró. For a start there are 14 vowels with only subtle differences and it leads to many potential social pitfalls if you pronounce things incorrectly. For instance 'egészségedre' is a traditional toast meaning 'for your health,' but pronounce just one letter wrong and it becomes a terrible insult about the size of your backside.

Luckily we managed to avoid upsetting anyone with our 3 word Hungarian vocabulary, but we did find ourselves confronted by an unhappy Hungarian man on the first night after Budapest.

7th to 15th November 2014

We leave Budapest with a bellyful of muesli and a handful of directions from Povi for a good route out of Hungary. Our destination that day is lake Balaton and we make fast progress out through the suburbs and back into the countryside. This

part of the country feels more modern and Western European than the northern region and seems at odds with the cheap prices in the bakeries. Lake Balaton is huge and we arrive with just enough light to appreciate the view over the turquoise water, but not quite enough time to get in for a swim. We find a perfect camping spot with a bench to sit on and make supper, neatly cut grass and a lakeside view. But just as we set a pan of rice to boil the unhappy Hungarian man turns up and makes it clear that he wants us to clear off. Of course we have no idea what he is actually saying but can pick out the word Police so know that he's serious. This time no amount of pleading that its just for one night will work and eventually he leads me to the double doors that we'd pushed the bike through into the private beach area and points to the sign that says closed from 8pm to 8am that we'd ignored, alongside a symbol indicating no bikes. So we have to pack everything up and repitch 150m away in a small public park just outside the double doors. No-one seems to mind this time.



Fisherman at Lake Balaton



Lake Balaton



Parklife, by Lake Balaton

The deciding factor for taking the route via Lake Balaton was that we could ride along the north shore then get a ferry to the south shore part the way along. It had been ages since our last ferry crossing so we felt the need to take to the water again, even for just 10 minutes. The 70km long lake is surrounded by hotels, holiday homes and campsites and serves as one of landlocked Hungary's main summer destination. Kirsty and I decide it would make a great venue for a triathlon but of course someone else has already thought of that and Balatonman is a well established event.



Ferry across Lake Balaton

Povi had warned us that this wouldn't be the flattest route south but it would be more interesting than following the Danube. He's right on both counts and we encounter a few ups and downs as we head towards the town of Pecs but also get lots of good views of rolling countryside and interesting

villages including one that seems to be entirely inhabited by chickens. We seem to have caught up with the beginning of Autumn again and left winter for now so the jackets are off in the 20 degree heat. In one village we set off a dog relay with one dog running and barking alongside us until it reaches the end of its garden then the next dog taking up the 'baton' and running and barking at us to its boundary and so on with at least five dogs playing the game. If you love the sound of barking dogs then a cycle tour through Eastern Europe is a must.



Viaduct, Koroshegy



Traditional ploughing



The sky is clearing

After a night in a field with no disturbances we begin the final climb before Pecs and it winds up to 500m before we drop down the other side into the town. The last 150m are an optional extra, again suggested by Povi as being worthwhile as it takes us to a better road down, and although we curse his name on the way up we thank him on the way down when we get a great view and few cars.



Climbing up and over to Pecs



View into Pecs



Standing over Pecs

Our Couchsurfing host in Pecs is Tiva who is an enthusiastic but injured triathlete. He managed to pick up a stress

fracture while taking part in a 100km ultra marathon that was taking place on a 1.5km loop so I think the problem may be mental rather than physical.

Heading out into Pecs we discover they have a Christmas market of some kind. We saw our first Christmas street lights way back in Poland several weeks ago so by now we're well and truly in the Christmas spirit. Maybe.

The biggest queue is for a little cake stall (naturally) so we join the back and order what everyone else is getting which is a Kürtőskalács (Funnel cake). Take a long round bit of wood, cover it with dough and then barbecue it with plenty of sugar before rolling it in chocolate powder then devour while warm. If the queue wasn't so long we'd go back for another. As well as a cake stall Pecs has a lovely market square, interesting cathedral and a mosque all of which are worth a look.



Roasting the funnel cake



Pecs Cathedral



Fish Door handle Pecs Cathedral



Pecs Market Square

In the morning Tiva's mum gives us a freshly baked onion loaf then Tiva leads us out of town to the nearest Tesco Hypermarket. The aerodynamics of his triathlon bike seem to be giving him a distinct advantage over our fully laden tandem as it's hard to keep up. We wave goodbye then head to the 'international produce' aisle of Tesco to find a box of PG Tips as our supply from Stockholm has almost run out.



Purple and Gold crisps!



Tiva, our host in Pecs

There's a thick fog and back out on the road several police cars and an ambulance come hurtling past before we eventually

grind to a halt in a queue of traffic. While we wait a local news crew films us waiting on what must be a slow news day. We quickly get bored of waiting so slip through past the cars to the front where a policeman is directing everyone onto some sides roads, telling us the road ahead is shut. We consult the map and it looks like the possible diversion will be lengthy, but all of a sudden the policeman jumps in his car and drives off so it seems the road is open again. Just in the nick of time too.



Riding out of Hungary towards Croatia

We ride on and the fog lifts as we hit a wine region with vineyards on either side of the road. In Siklos the buildings start to look a bit more Mediterranean and the sun has even made an appearance to complete the effect. Then we reach another border, this time for Croatia and cross over after a cursory glance at our passports and a short chat with the border guard. We're heading for the town of Osijek and the

riding is flat and fairly featureless save for the occasional village where things don't seem too different from Hungary. When we arrive we're greeted by Martina and Dani who have very kindly agreed to host us at short notice and also their two tiny puppies George and Sooty and giant cat Loki . We have a great evening with them with plenty of traditional Croatian food provided by the restaurant that Dani manages and lots of fun playing with the puppies. We learn that life in Croatia is tough at the moment with high unemployment and a former prime minister in jail for corruption charges. Martina and Dani's solution is to build their own 'off-grid' house in the country and try and be self sufficient which sounds like a great idea. Our previous visit to Croatia was to the Dalmatian coast, which is where most tourists head, but the hugely inflated prices mean that a lot of Croatians don't actually go there.



Kirsty with George



Stylish slippers



Fighting Puppies



Martina with Sooty and Dani with George

All too soon we leave Croatia the next day via a small wine

region and one vineyard advertises some sampling but we get no answer when we ring the bell.



Osijek



Bendy church at Aljmaš



The mid point of the Danube where it joins with the Drava

The border with Serbia is formed by the Danube which is now huge having converged with the Drava a few km upstream and straightaway there seem to be more horses and carts and people on bikes than we'd seen in Croatia. The Cyrillic alphabet is back on the road signs, the houses have very decorative, though mostly crumbling, facades and everyone seems very friendly. In fact we think this might be the friendliest country we've visited so far. Each time we stop someone comes to chat to us and plenty of cars pass with a toot of the horn and a wave (not in a British 'get off the bl**dy road!' type way). The landscape in this region is still flat and featureless though with acres of arable fields, some with stubble fires and a few still harvesting what looks like maize for animal feed. An abandoned house provides a lawn for us to camp on and we listen to the farm machinery working long after dark.



No-mans land between the Croatian and Serbian borders



Stubble fires



Serbian village home

The next day we arrive in Novi Sad and stop for a coffee. The two national pastimes of Serbians are smoking and drinking coffee. Unfortunately they are allowed to do both at the same time as smoking inside is still legal so we get a lungful of fumes with our cappuccinos.



A Yugo – The car of choice in Serbia.



Novi Sad

Out of Novi Sad we have two options: either follow the Euro Velo 6 route along the Danube or take the shorter more direct option to Belgrade which takes in a bit of a hill and a busier main road. We're both keen for the shorter option so take the climb and the traffic and get a head wind as an added bonus.

As we ride into the suburbs of Belgrade we hear loud music. We soon find out where it's coming from as a car zooms past with an enormous set of speakers strapped to its roof. A couple of cars behind is a police car with its lights rolling so I'm guessing the party was about to be stopped.



Rising into Belgrade through Zemen

We hit the centre of Belgrade at rush hour and it's uphill all the way to our next host. Some careful lane hogging to prevent the taxis trying to squeeze past and keeping all eyes out for pedestrians and busses makes for a tough last few km. But we arrive at our destination safe and sound and after splitting the bike in two to get it into the lift we're welcomed into Bert's flat and immediately offered a warm shower and hot dinner. And rakia, a type of fruit brandy which is Serbia's national drink.



View from Bert's flat



Belgrade Rooftop

Bert is actually Belgian and is in Belgrade teaching French. He's been a bit of a Couchsurfing and Warm Showers hosting legend for years and in various places including Kazakhstan. He reckons he's hosted hundreds of grateful travellers in his time and it's pretty much a lifestyle for him as he enjoys having people from around the world keeping him company. Inevitably plenty of his visitors have been cycle tourists and eventually he was convinced to give this form of travelling a go. So last summer he completed a tour through the UK and France, some 6000km which isn't bad for a first trip! The week after us he has a couple staying that have been riding for 10 years so it's a shame that we'll miss them.



Bert

In the morning I wake feeling awful. The day before had ended with lots of sneezing and sniffing and now it's a full blown

cold. Or possibly ebola. Breakfast doesn't help much so I retire back to bed while Kirsty heads off to explore the city on her own. She makes some new friends on the free walking tour including a useful contact in Turkey. I manage to meet her for lunch and she does a fine job of retelling everything she's learnt while we are fed free shots of rakia to wash down our meals.



Lunchtime Rakia





War-torn building, Belgrade



The Victor Monument

The next day I feel a bit more energetic so we head over to the district of Zemun. This used to be an Austro-Hungarian town but has now been swallowed up by Belgrade. A coffee stop in a rakia bar leads to more free samples of the national drink (honey is our favourite flavour) which helps for the walk around the quirky cobbled streets and up to the Millennium Tower. From there we get the bus to the Museum of Yugoslavia which is actually just a shrine to their former dictator, Tito, and a few of the things he collected during his world travels. Of all the communist leaders we've learnt about Tito seems to be the most celebrated so far.



Zemen



View over Zemen



Zemen Artistry



Millennium Tower, Zemen



Zemen

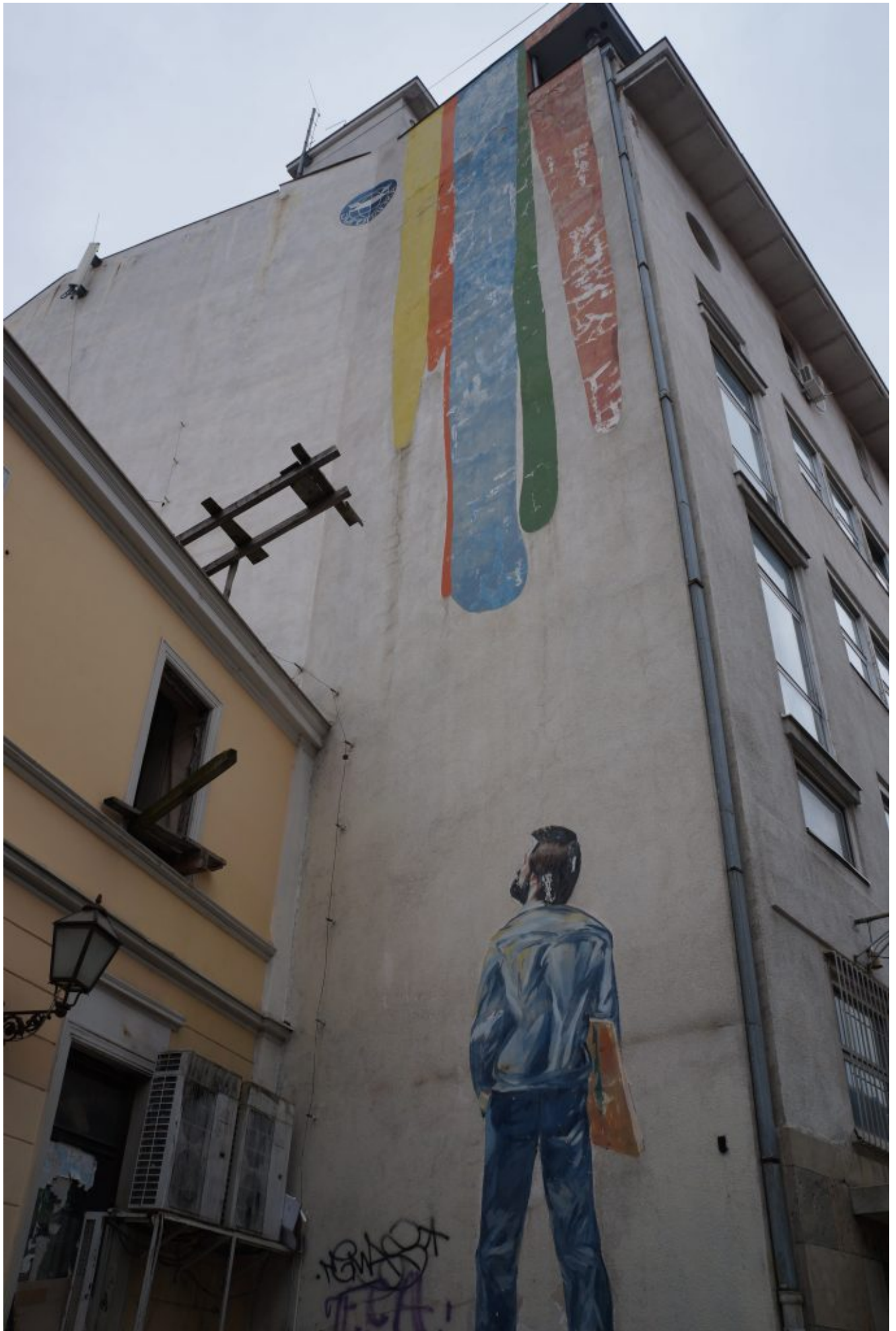


Grave of Tito

Belgrade is not much of a picture postcard city but it does feel very vibrant and we're told that the night life can be extremely lively. Unfortunately I'm not feeling lively enough to sample it. It's much more of a place to visit for the people rather than the places which from our experiences so far is true for a lot of Serbia.



Belgrade



Belgrade artistry



A 500,000,000,000 Dina note from the days of massive inflation



Zemen



Chess in the park, Belgrade

From Belgrade we plan to continue east and to follow the

Danube through the Iron Gates national park. This is a huge gorge where the river level has been raised 25m after the construction of two hydroelectric dams, Iron Gate I and Iron Gate II. There is a road on both sides of the gorge and we have to choose which one to take quite early on as there is no way of crossing until you get to the first dam. We have decided to ride along the east bank as we're told it's a bit flatter but also because it gives us a chance to visit another new country: Romania.

Uzhhorod to Košice to Budapest

written by Marcus | 27 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



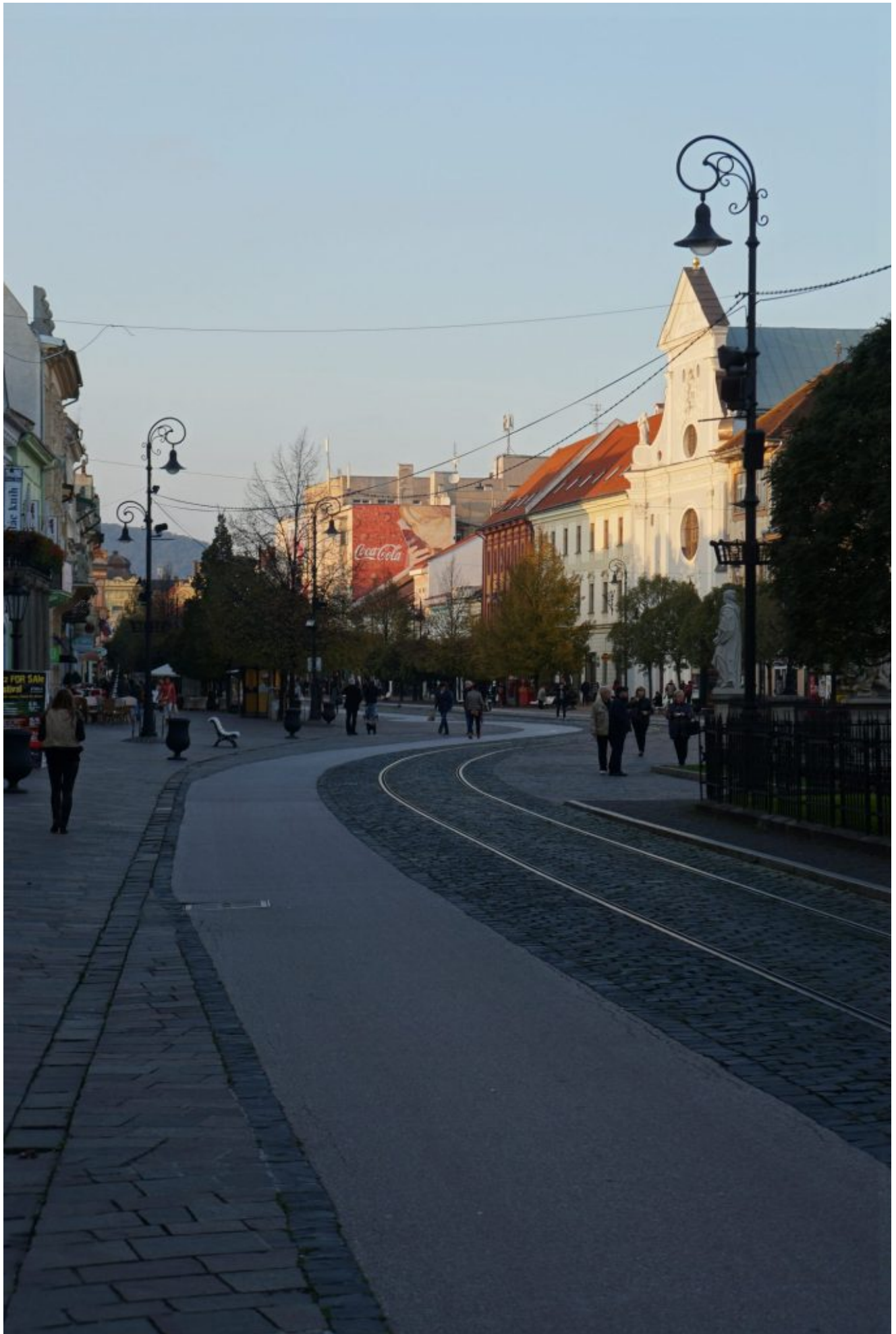
Kosice Cathedral



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



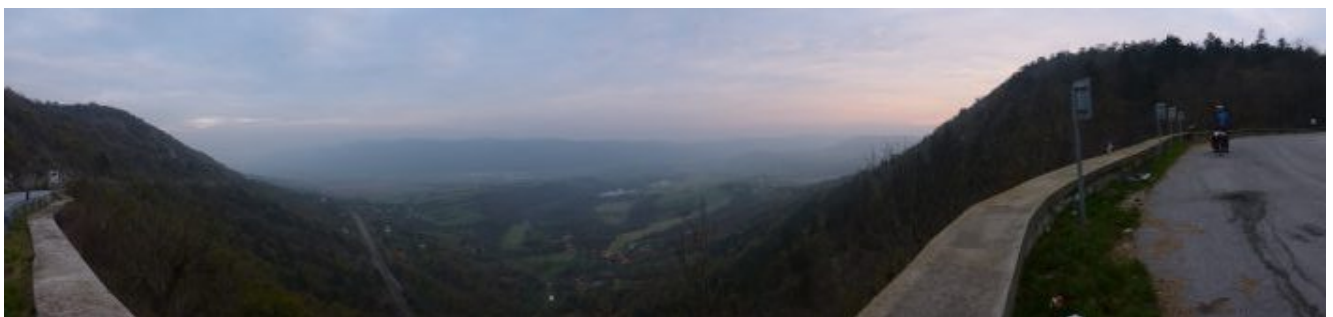
Decorated graves for All Hallows Day

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

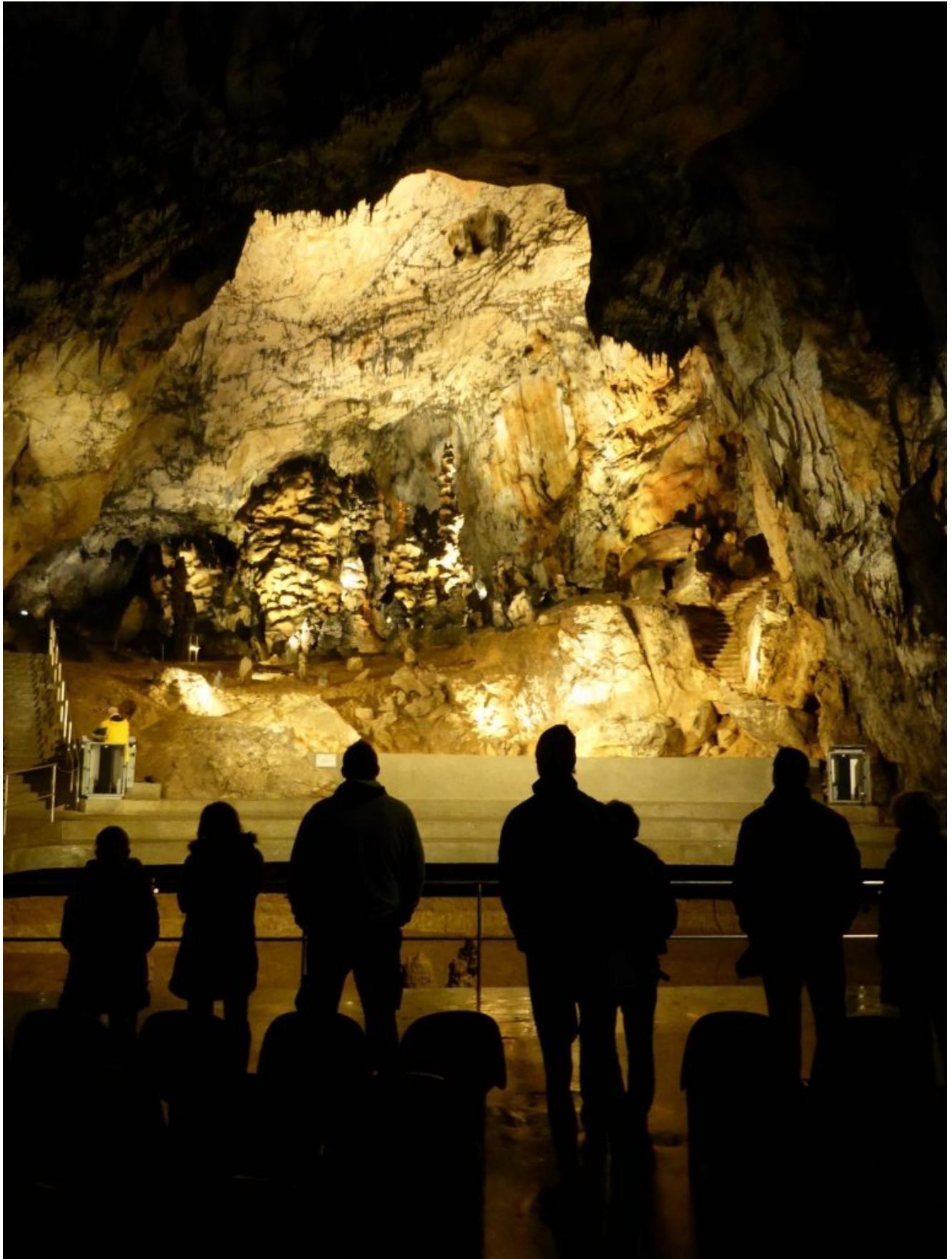


Plesivec, Slovakia

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.

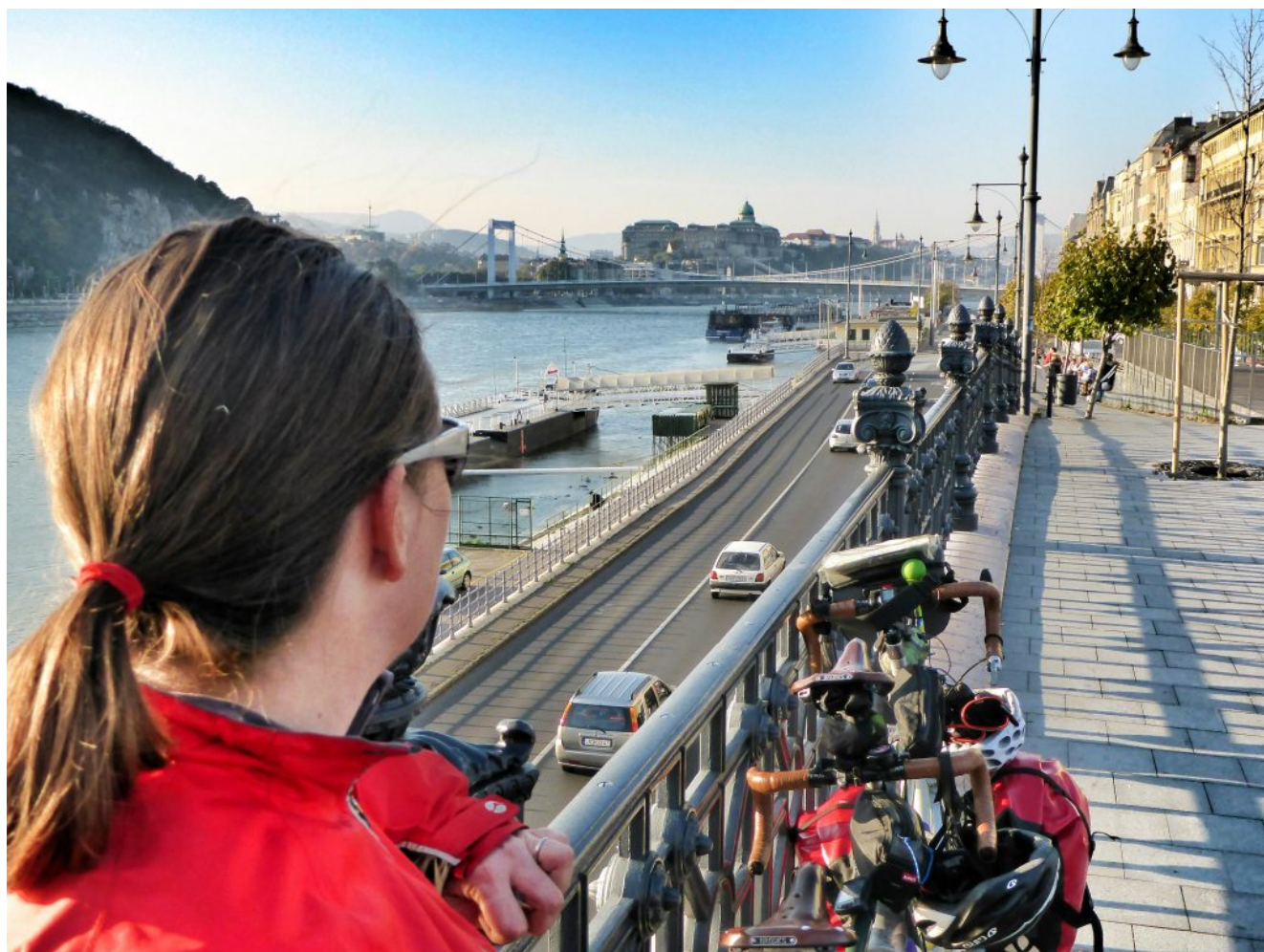


A contender for Hungary's most Hungarian man



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

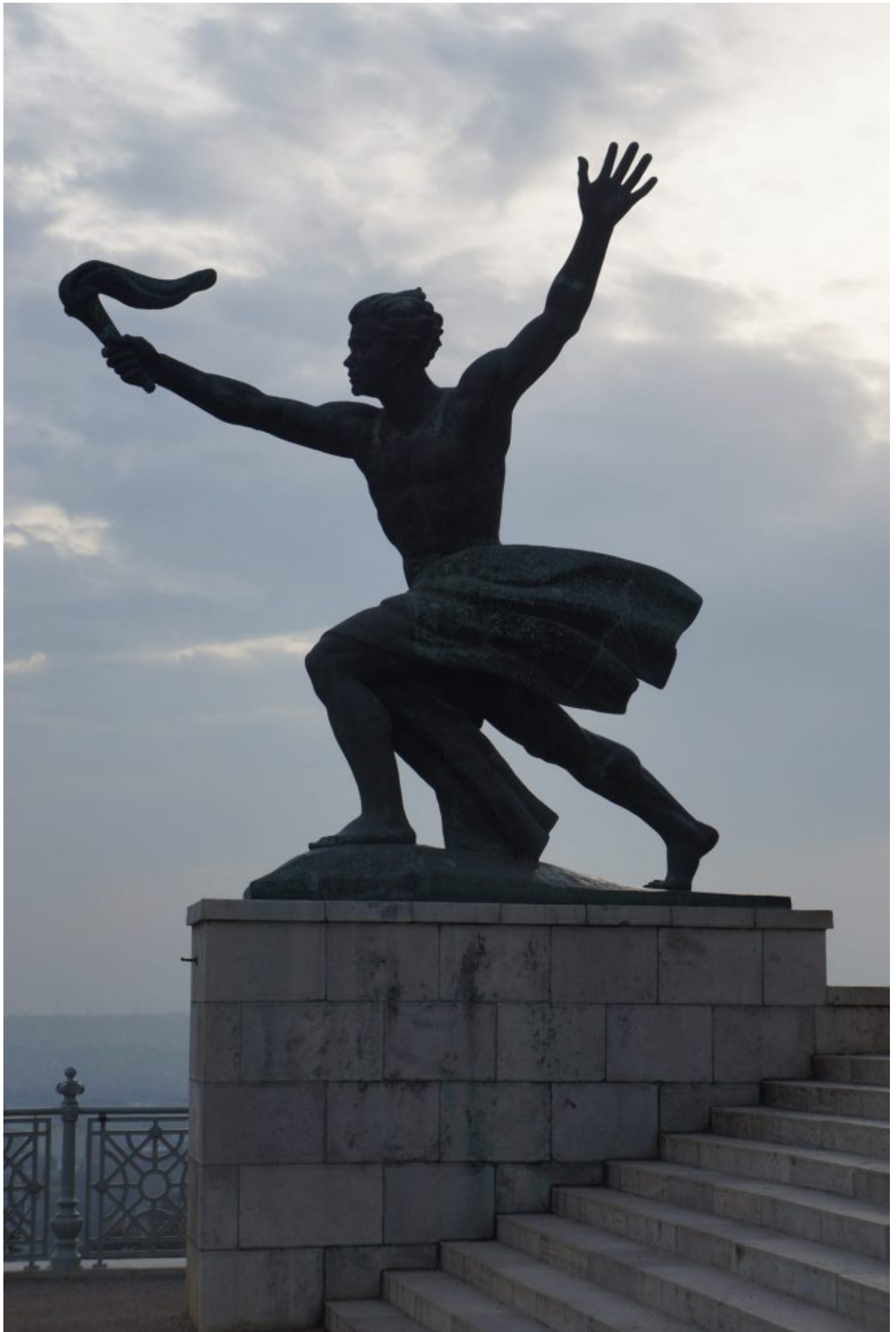
walking tour through Pest then into Buda and the castle district, a hike up to the top of the Citadel which offers a great view and we tuck into some Langos in a local market. This is a circle of fried dough the size of a plate and an inch thick with sour cream, cheese and garlic in generous quantities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



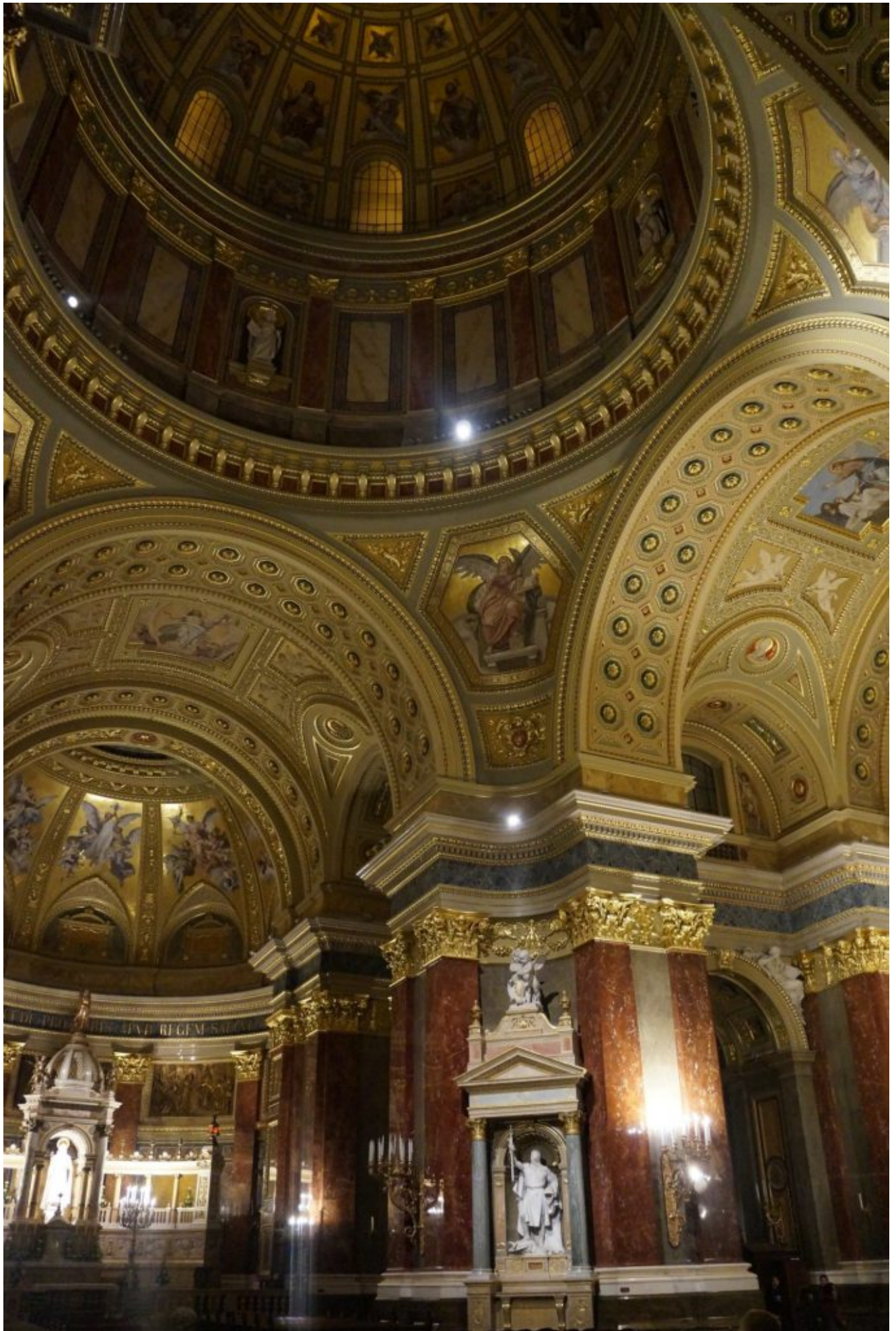
Langos!

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.



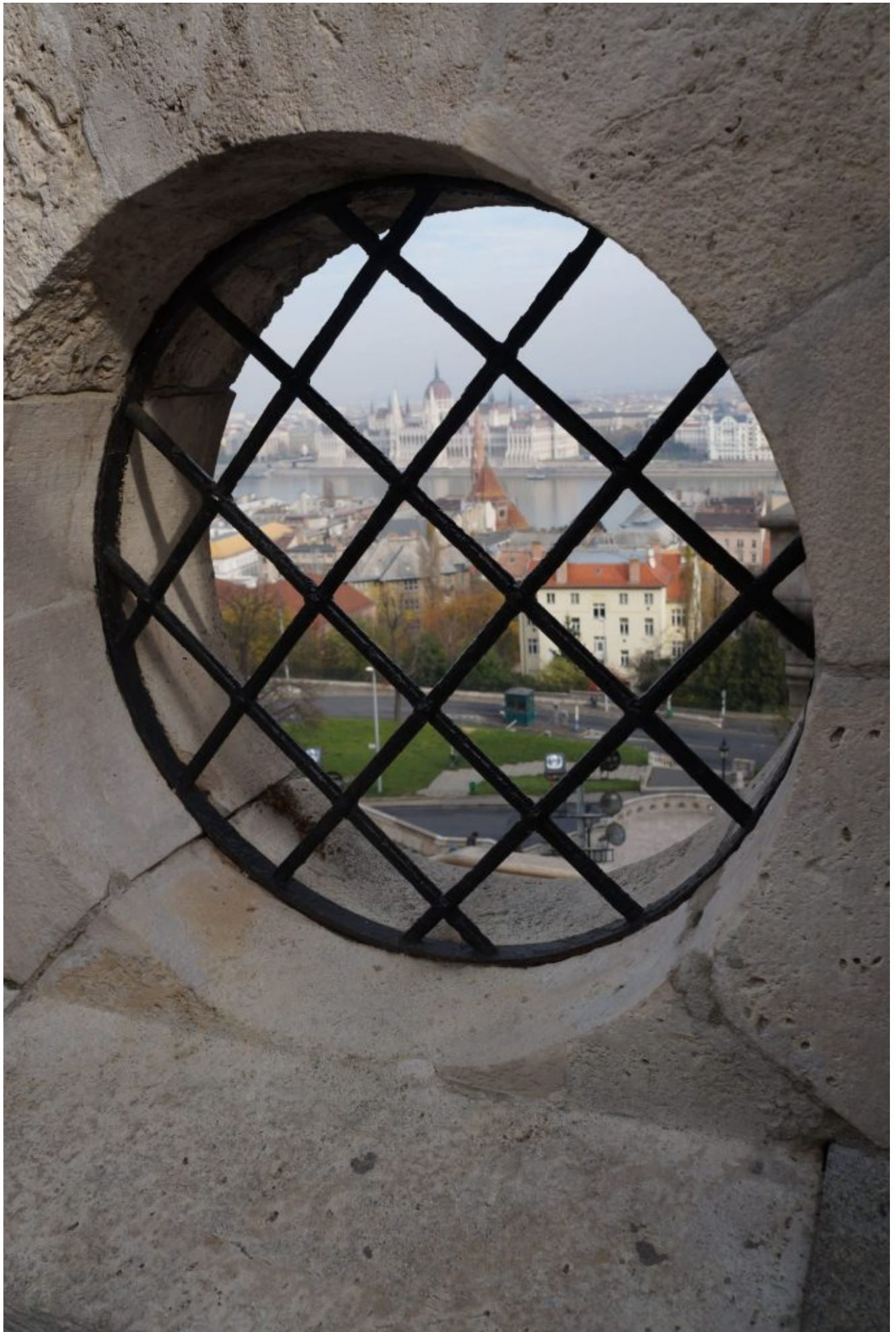


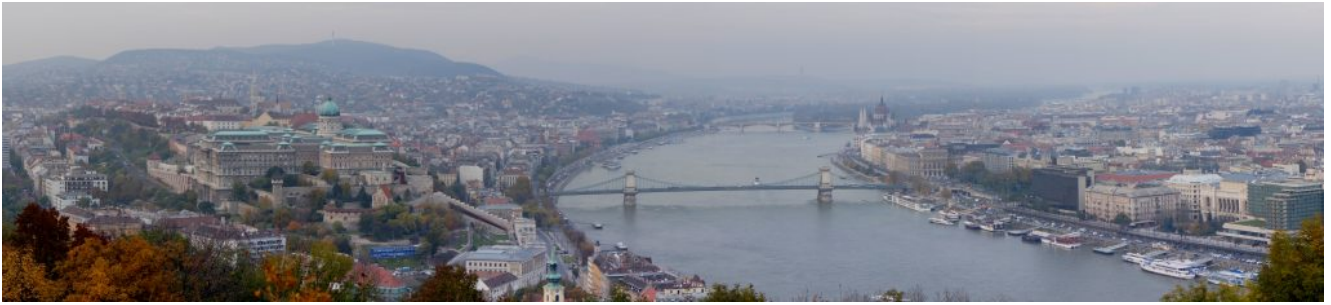












So where next? The map has so many exciting options for us from here. Within 2-3 weeks we could be in Istanbul, Athens, Rome... The next pin had been stuck into Istanbul and we'd thought we'd be there around Christmas time but we're changing our minds about this. The most popular route from Budapest 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!

Lublin to Lviv to Uzhhorod

written by Marcus | 27 November, 2014



You'd be forgiven for thinking that cycle touring is always fun and easy and to be honest on the most part it's a fine way to spend your time, but the longer you are doing it the higher your chances of having a bad day. There are a multitude of things that can spoil the rhythm of eat, sleep, ride repeat and with various consequences: Bike parts can break, tyres can puncture, food can run out (or get eaten by animals), body parts can ache or chafe, route choices can lead to nowhere... The list is endless but really shouldn't be contemplated for too long otherwise you'll never leave your tent for fear of something going wrong. But the most likely thing to put a dampener on proceedings (pun intended) is the weather.



Turnip field campsite

22nd to 29th October

We leave Lublin late in the day so only made 20km before needing to find somewhere to camp but suitable sites are limited. Our eventual choice is a field that seems firm and level and with the tent pitched we eat pierogi dumplings. It would be hard to imagine a more Polish scene as there's also a huge pile of turnips alongside but there is one missing ingredient that would complete the picture. In the middle of the night the wind picks up and it begins to rain, a storm is closing in. The soil surrounding the tent turns from firm ground to soft mud within minutes and becomes less capable of holding the pegs so with a particularly strong gust a few are pulled out. It takes a while for us to realise that the loud flapping noise was the tent starting to collapse but when I eventually open my eyes I had to quickly put on a jacket and shoes and run round the tent in my pants trying to get the

whole thing upright and stable again. An hour later it happens again. By the morning we are both cold and tired so decide to pack up at first light and head for the nearest cafe. It's still raining and freezing cold so after packing up the soaking and muddy tent I can hardly feel my fingers and can't get my gloves on. Somehow we manage to get down to a petrol station and stand in the kiosk trying to defrost while the man behind the till looks at us but says nothing other than 'No toilet'. Once we feel normal again we venture back out and pedal hard to stay warm longing for a cafe to appear round the next corner. Eventually we find one, scoff pancakes and omelettes and make the decision to push on until early afternoon and then check into a hotel. In all we cover 60km which, given the conditions, was considered to be a good day's work. The hotel is very smart until we unpack all of our wet and muddy kit into the room but for some reason it lacks hot water which is the one commodity we really need. Kirsty is particularly unhappy about this as you might well imagine. The next priority is to fill up on dinner so we abandon the hotel and head into town to the ubiquitous pizzeria. Saulius in Druskininkai had suggested we try some Flacki (a soup made from tripe, i.e. cut up cows guts) while in Poland and I finally manage to find some. It's hearty, tasty and much better than it sounds provided you don't look too closely at the contents. In fact it's so filling that not all of the 37cm pizza that follows gets finished.

The next morning the skies are clear and the sun has returned but it's still chilly, barely above freezing. We're feeling much better after a good night's rest and we ride out into the Roztoczański national park with forest all around us. We don't want to stop for long that day so have a quick lunch break with our healthiest menu yet: left over pizza, kebab flavoured crisps and some kind of processed meat stick but balanced out with an orange. Then on to Tomaszów Lubelski to pick up dinner supplies before finding somewhere to camp. The forecast is for -6 degrees that night so we want to make sure we can get a

fire going before bed time. Kirsty picks up a bottle of some unidentifiable liquor to help heat us from the inside too. We find a great spot in some woods with plenty of kindling and quickly get a fire going that is just the right side of being under control. Putting most of our clothes on and making sure we are fully heated from the flames and the liquor we retire to the tent to see how our lightweight sleeping system will fare.



Warming toes by the fire

It's not the most comfortable of nights but we don't catch hypothermia and we now know that our kit can go well below zero, but we wouldn't want to have to endure that too many times.



Our last campsite in Poland

We have 20km to ride to our next border crossing and the sun comes out to warm things up a degree or two. On the way we pass a 24hr hotel that was 500m away from our camp site.

Researching the Ukrainian border guard website has told us that you shouldn't be able to cycle across at the Hrbenne/Rava Ruska crossing as it's for automobiles only, however we are heading that way regardless. We had read a couple of blogs where one person had hitched across by catching a lift in a passing mini van while in September another couple had simply turned up and played innocent and after a bit of persistence were let through. So it sounded like it should be possible and if we got through we would avoid having to ride an extra 100km south to another crossing that would definitely let bikes across.



Approaching the Ukrainian border

Rolling up to the first checkpoint the Polish guard waves us past the queue of cars, takes our passports from us and disappears into a booth without any fuss. A few minutes later we're beckoned to the window of the booth where our passports are returned and we're sent on our way to deal with the Ukrainian side. At the next checkpoint we encounter a stern looking Ukrainian guard. It's a Saturday morning, there's a cold wind whipping round his fur hat (I was wishing I had a fur hat too) and he doesn't need this kind of complication today. He steps back and chats on his radio for a bit then with a sigh fills out a slip of paper, hands it over and sends us on to the next checkpoint. Here we are interrogated about where we are heading and why and again our passports disappear into a booth. Someone else in the queue tells us it's not great weather for biking as it's a bit cold. It's not great weather for waiting around at a border control either but finally our passports are returned complete with the first

stamp of the trip and we're waved through into Ukraine! Well nearly as there is a final checkpoint where the slip of paper and our passports are checked again, but after that we are free to continue on.

This now feels like a proper foreign country. It's just been through a revolution, it has a war zone in the East, it uses the Cyrillic alphabet which Kirsty has been busy learning and is excited to try out her new skills, and our mobile phone charges have gone up by a percentage factor that even wonga.com would be ashamed of (data is 26x more expensive than in EU countries). The phones get switched off.

The big open road is lined with petrol stations and money changers and every other car seems to be a Lada. The towns we ride through all have ornate orthodox churches that are brightly coloured and shiny but everything else seems to be in fairly poor condition, particularly the side roads. We cross through 50 degrees of latitude so are at last below our previous southernmost point, which was Brighton some two months ago.



Rava Ruska



Shiny church

We decide to try some local delicacies at lunchtime and stop at a small cafe that has a pickled gerkin, some ham and not much else on display in the counter. It doesn't look appetising which is fine as the lady refuses to serve us and points us to a restaurant around the corner instead. Here they are setting up for a wedding banquet but they don't mind fixing up two basic meals for us but it's a shame we're too early for the party as the banquet looks much better. The food with coffee costs us about 60 Hryvnia which is less than £3. Because of all the things happening in Ukraine at the moment the economy has crashed and with it the exchange rate has taken a hammering. This is very good for foreign travellers but very bad for Ukrainians who may want to visit other countries in Europe.



Don't stray off the main road

Back out on the road into Lviv we start to encounter several hills and a hierarchy is soon established amongst the traffic.

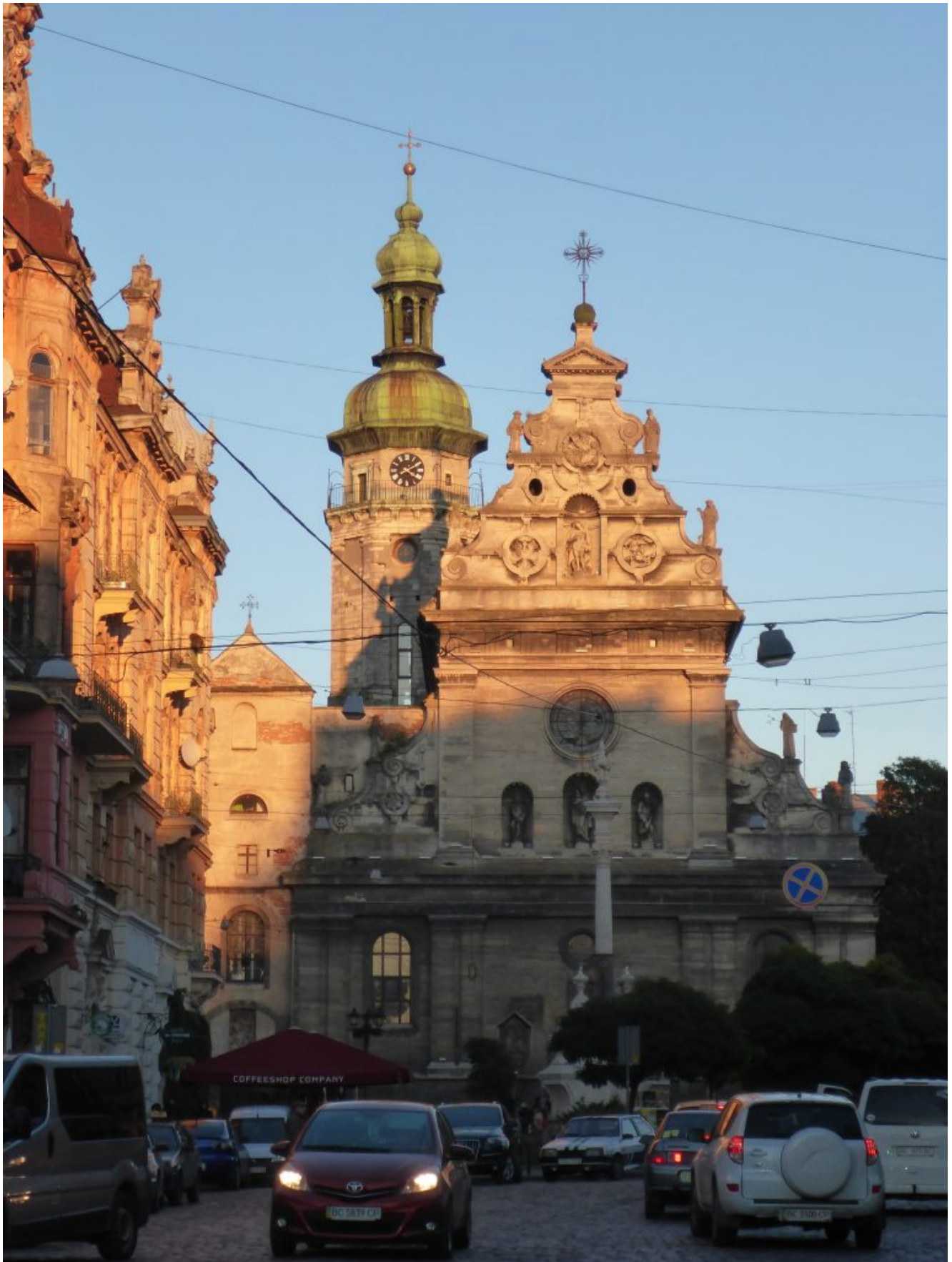
The tandem is marginally faster than a horse and cart, a Lada is marginally faster than the tandem, and a truck is marginally faster than a Lada. But on the descents the tandem is level pegging with the Ladas. It's a major road but there are farmers selling vegetables on the hard shoulder so occasionally a car pulls over to buy some cabbages and we have to swerve around them.



Racing a horse and cart

Lviv (or Lwow if you're Polish or Львів if you're Ukrainian) sits in a big natural bowl so after cresting the final hill we freewheel most of the way into the city centre. We'd been having trouble finding a host despite starting the search about a week before arriving as everyone seemed to have a full house. Our last resort was going to be the Ghost-el which claims to be a medieval themed hostel, but in the nick of time we received an email from Irka, a Couchsurfing host, to say we can stay with her. After meeting up in a coffee shop we head

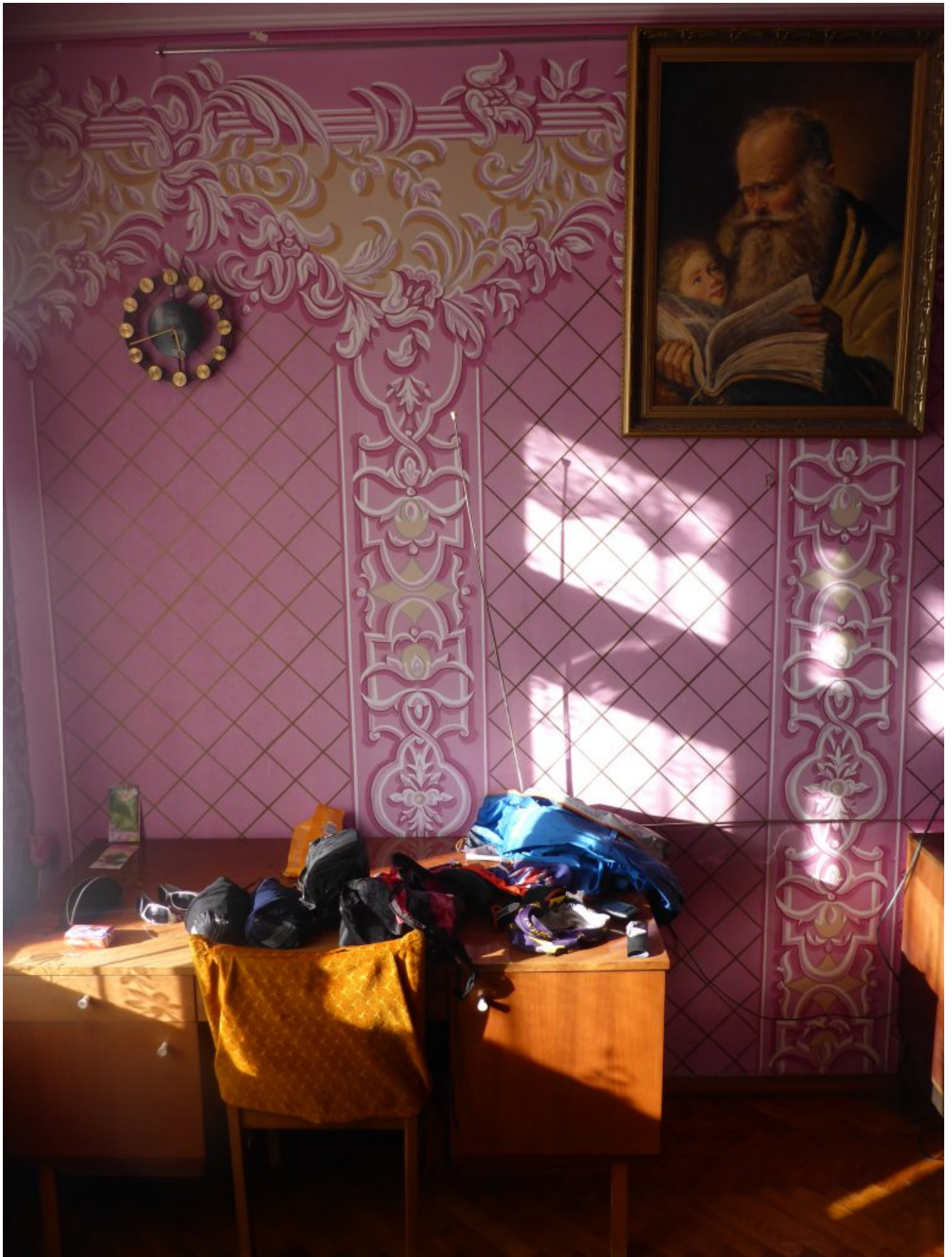
back to her apartment which turns out to be even more bizarre than even the Ghost-el was promising. All of the walls in the hallway and kitchen are hand painted with cartoon images of a fairly tale with knights princes and castles. In the bedroom we have an intricate floral pattern on the walls and ceiling and a painting of St Lucias reading to a child. Irka apologises and says her landlady forbids her from changing any of it but it makes for a very unique place for us to stay.



First evening in Lviv



Irka's apartment





Kirsty making a brew in Irka's apartment

Irka asks if we're here for the wine and cheese festival. Well we weren't but we are now so the next day we wonder round the old city with its domed churches, castle and beautifully ornate market square in search of wine and cheese. It's a Sunday and in the main cathedral they are broadcasting the mass to the crowd outside as it's full to capacity inside. Also the clocks have gone back so we regain the hour we had lost when we crossed the border and are effectively back on Polish time, but we still try and structure the day according to Lithuanian time to make the most of daylight. It's getting quite confusing.





Lviv market square



Lviv

When we get to the festival we are issued with a cocktail stick and small cup and head round all of the stalls to try the free samples. The wine is very sweet but works well when mulled. The mild cheese seems better as a hot fondue too. There's a large dance floor in the shape of the map of Ukraine but it hasn't been updated in light of recent events so people queue up to have their photos taken defiantly staking a claim to Crimea.



Mulled wine!



Cheese!



Claiming Crimea

Lviv is very patriotic so there are flags everywhere and plenty of anti-Putin material. You can buy a chocolate Putin dressed up like Stalin and enjoy biting his head off, there are Putin door mats so you can wipe your feet on his face and Putin toilet paper with his image on so you can ...well you get the idea, Vladimir is not welcome round here. But although voting is taking place for an election that day there are no campaign posters or in fact any evidence at all that it is happening. Speaking to Irka in the evening she says people are getting tired of all the elections and feel that there is not a very good choice of candidates to choose from so as a result the turnout is low. She has dreams of bringing dance music to Lviv and opening a night club as the music scene is decades behind the huge club culture of western Europe. You heard it here first, Ukraine is set to become the next big party

destination.



Soft and strong and very long



A Lion of Lviv



Lviv Opera House



Watching chess in the park. Lviv



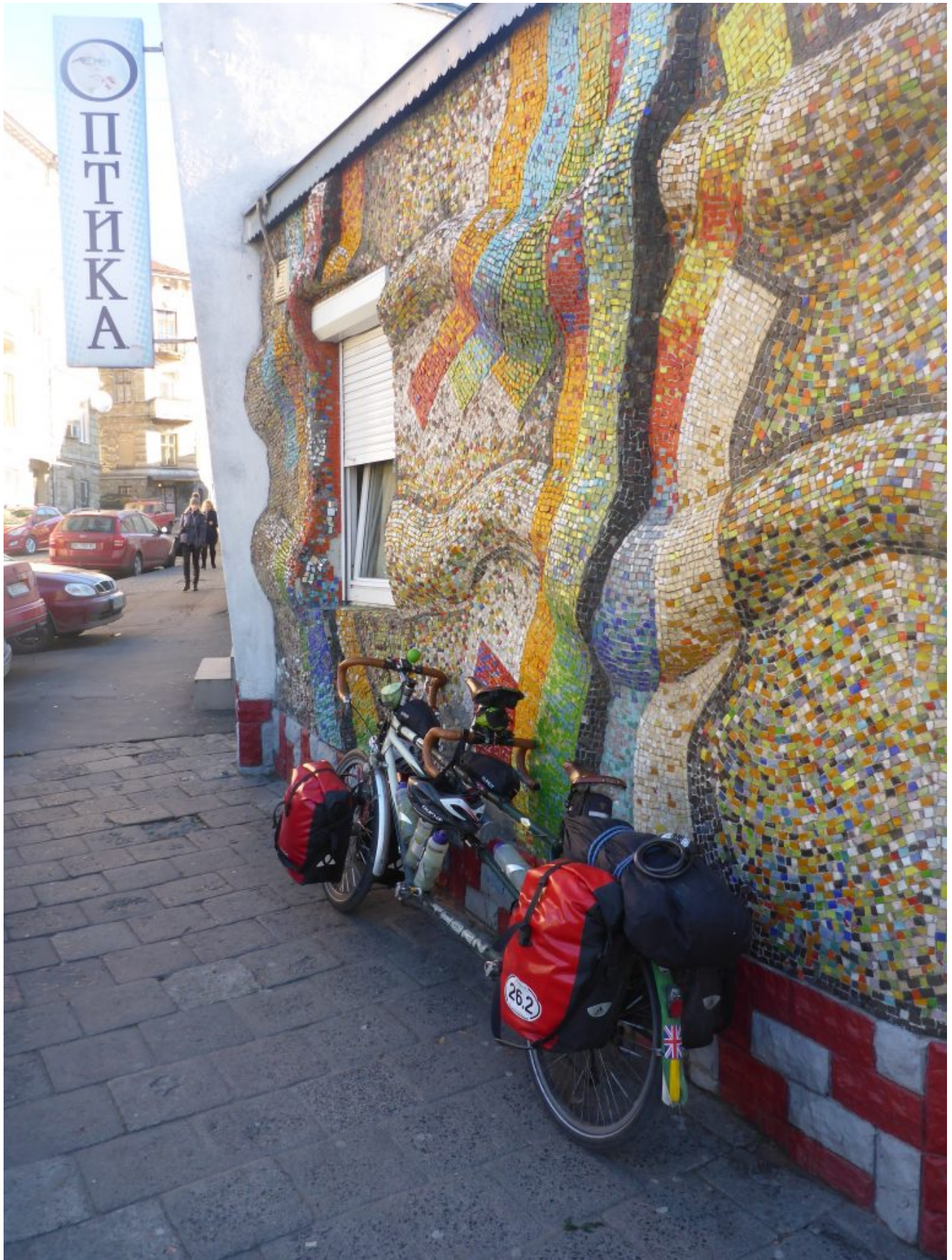
A lion of Lviv



Lviv

On our way out of Lviv we stop at a market for food and a passer-by gives us a small Ukrainian flag to hang off the bike which should help keep favour with the drivers. We also stop to buy some extra pairs of long johns in case things get colder but at the moment we have fantastic clear blue skies and it's nudging 12 degrees.



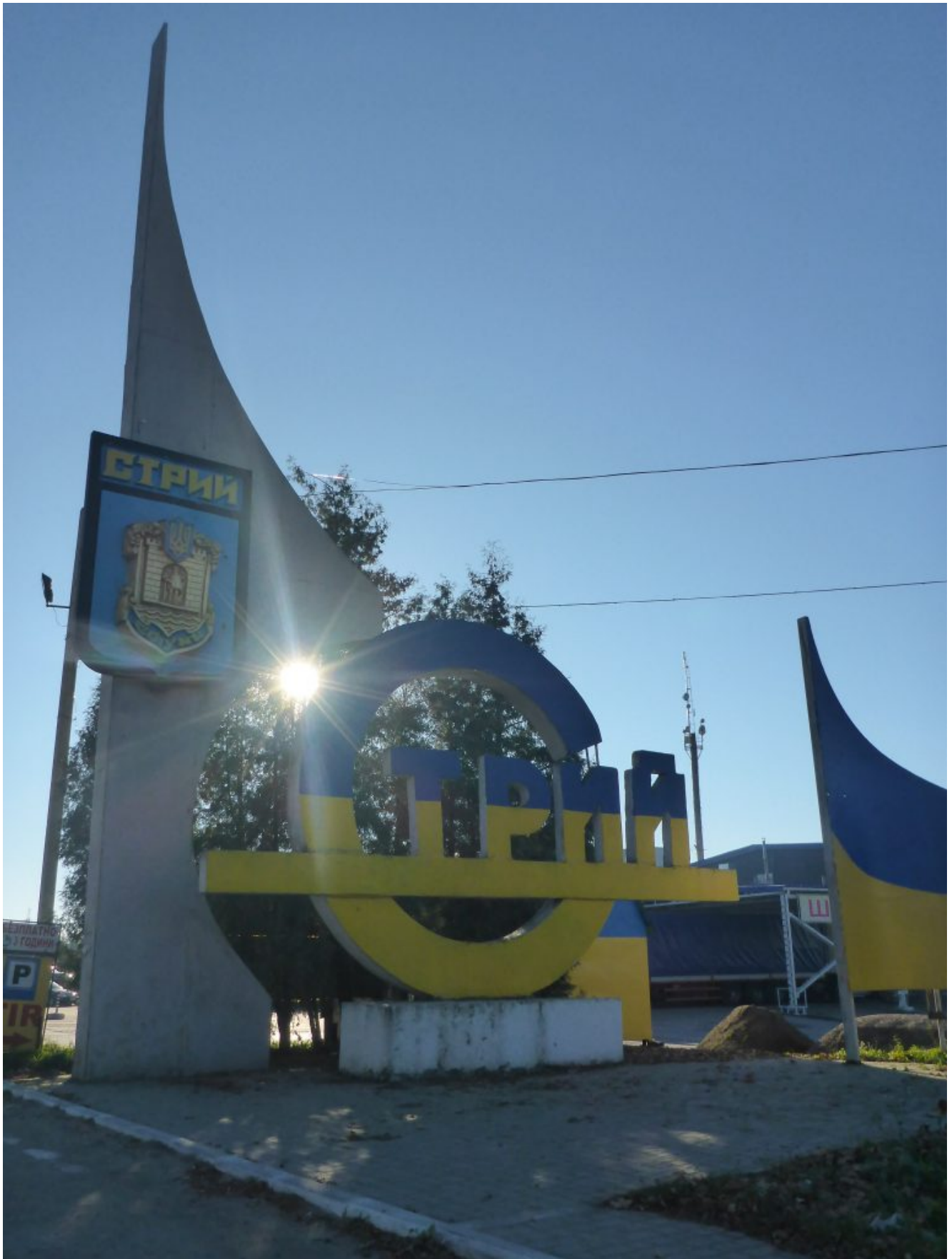


We spend all day on a main road as almost all of the side roads are more pot hole than tarmac, but it's not that busy and the traffic gives us plenty of room so the flag seems to

be working. We spend the night in a hotel in Stryi (Стрий) which costs less than the French campsite and it promises a swimming pool and sauna. The pool turns out to be roughly 7 foot long and roughly 2 degrees so I manage a single length with my toes still at one end while my fingers touch the other before hopping straight out again. Kirsty dips a toe and thinks better of it.



War memorial



Stryi town sign

In Stryi the next day we stop briefly at a busy market and while Kirsty heads off for supplies I park the bike next to a

fire station where it gets a full inspection by the curious firemen. There is snow on the roofs so the warm hotel was a wise choice.



Stryi market



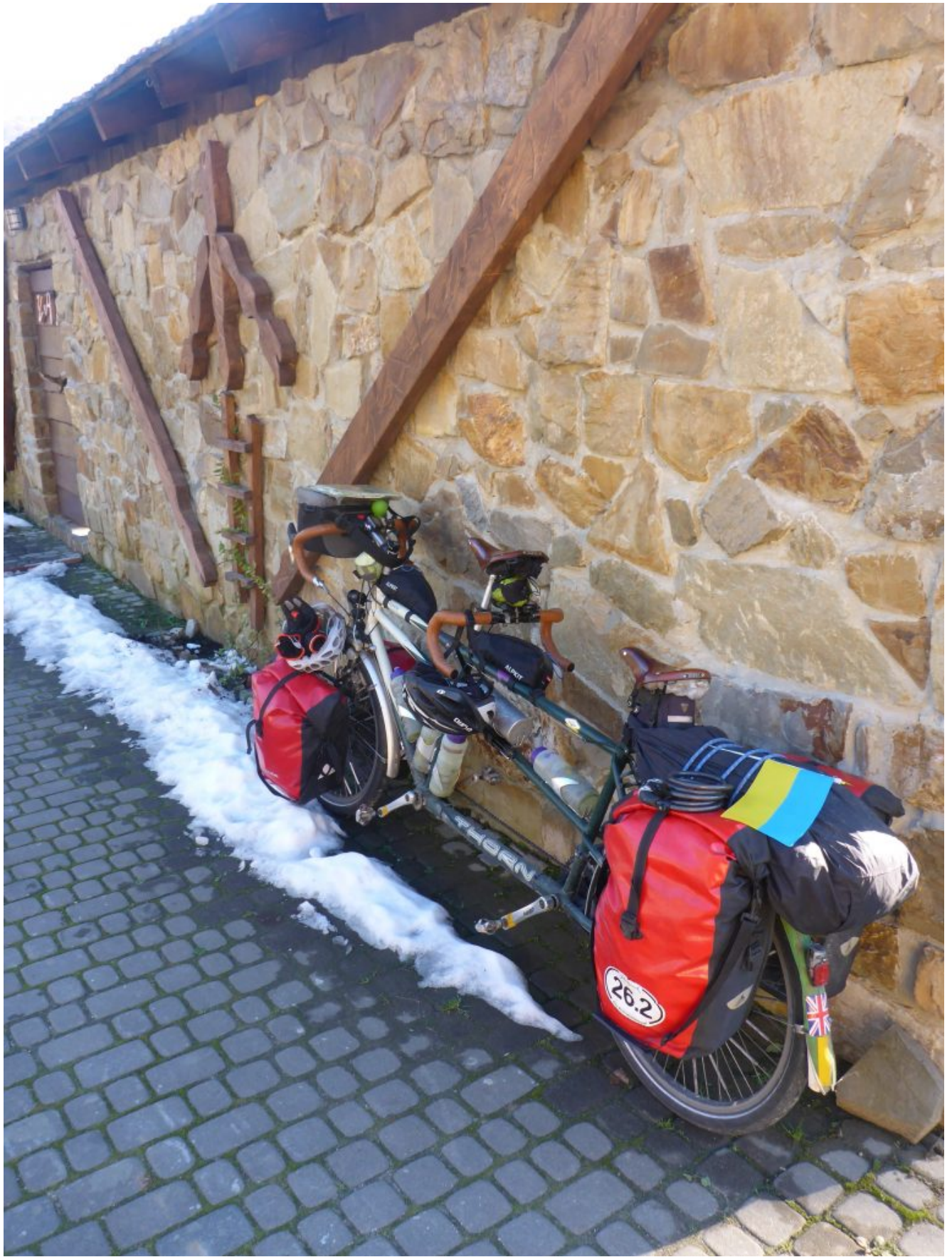
The bike gets a fire safety check

On the horizon today is an unfamiliar sight, a dark band of mountains in the form of the Carpathians. Up until now we were

beginning to think that Europe was mostly flat. In the foothills we begin climbing on a nice shallow gradient through woods, over the River Stryi several times, past shiny churches and ramshackle villages. It's another bright, clear and crisp day which is just perfect for climbing mountains. Towards the top it ramps up to 10% which requires a bit more effort but the views make it worthwhile. By the time we reach the hotel that sits at just over 700m on the top of the pass the sun is beginning to set and with it we can straight away feel the temperature dropping quickly. But we don't have enough cash and they don't accept cards. In a panic we contemplate the options which include camping (way too cold, even with the new tights), riding down to the next hotel (they might not take cards either), offering to do the washing up (not many guests so unlikely to be enough washing up to earn the 250 UAH). But the staff just say it's OK we can pay some other time, give us a credit card number and show us to our room. We're not sure what we are supposed to do with this number but are extremely grateful so settle in for the night. Try this next time you need to stay in a Travelodge and see what happens.



Approaching the mountains

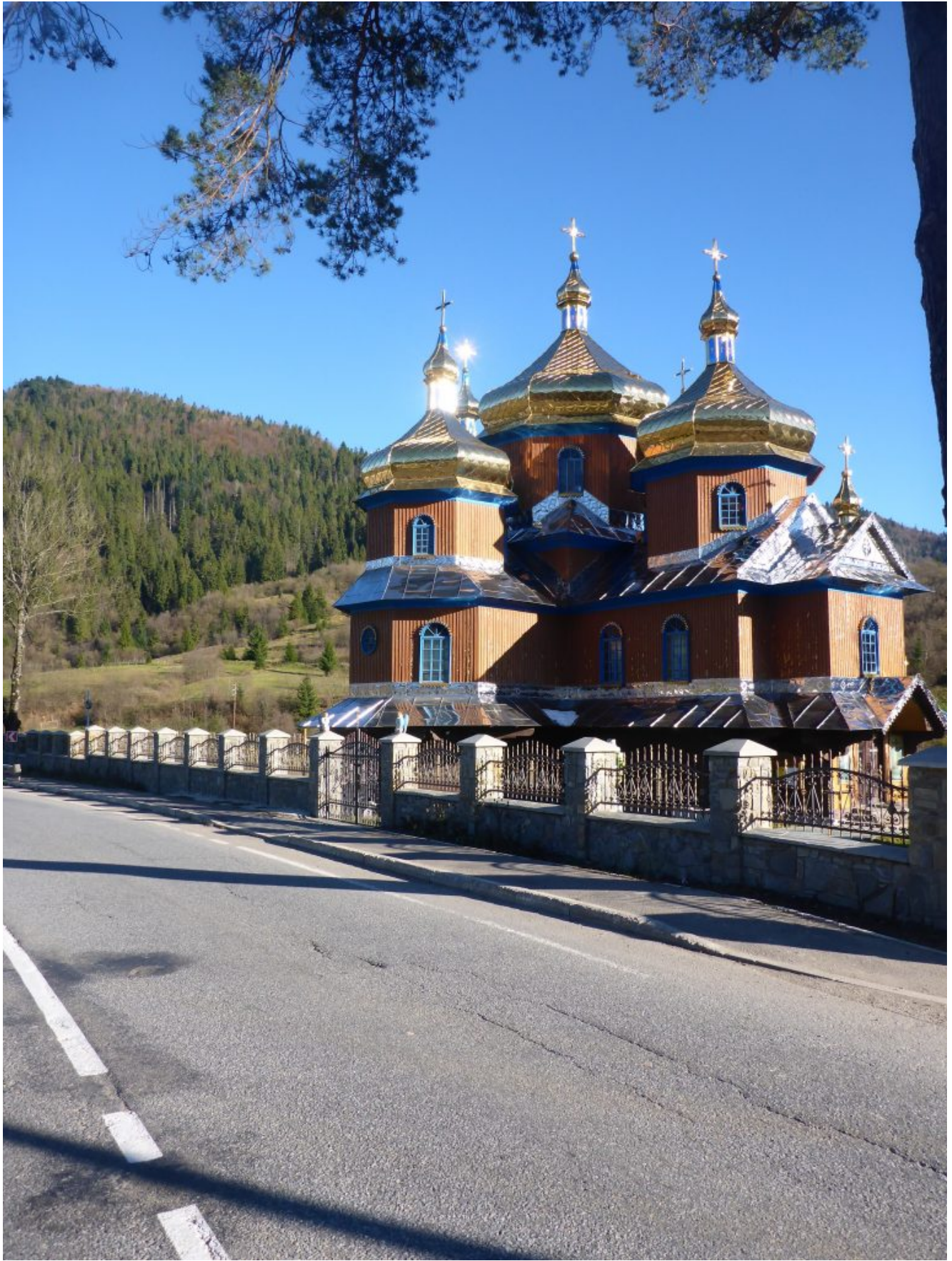




Hay stacks in the Carpathians



Into the mountains



Shiny church



More modest wooden church



Ski resort



Near the top of the Carpathian mountains

In the morning we step out into a bright but frosty landscape and get a lung full of air that reminds us of catching the first chair lift of the day in the Alps. It's warmed up to -4 when we set off and we are trying out the double layer of thermal tights to good effect. There's a small amount of climbing which warms us up nicely before we begin the long descent out of the mountains. The views are spectacular and we make rapid progress with 80km covered before lunchtime.



Frosty start on the mountain top



Frosty start on the mountain top



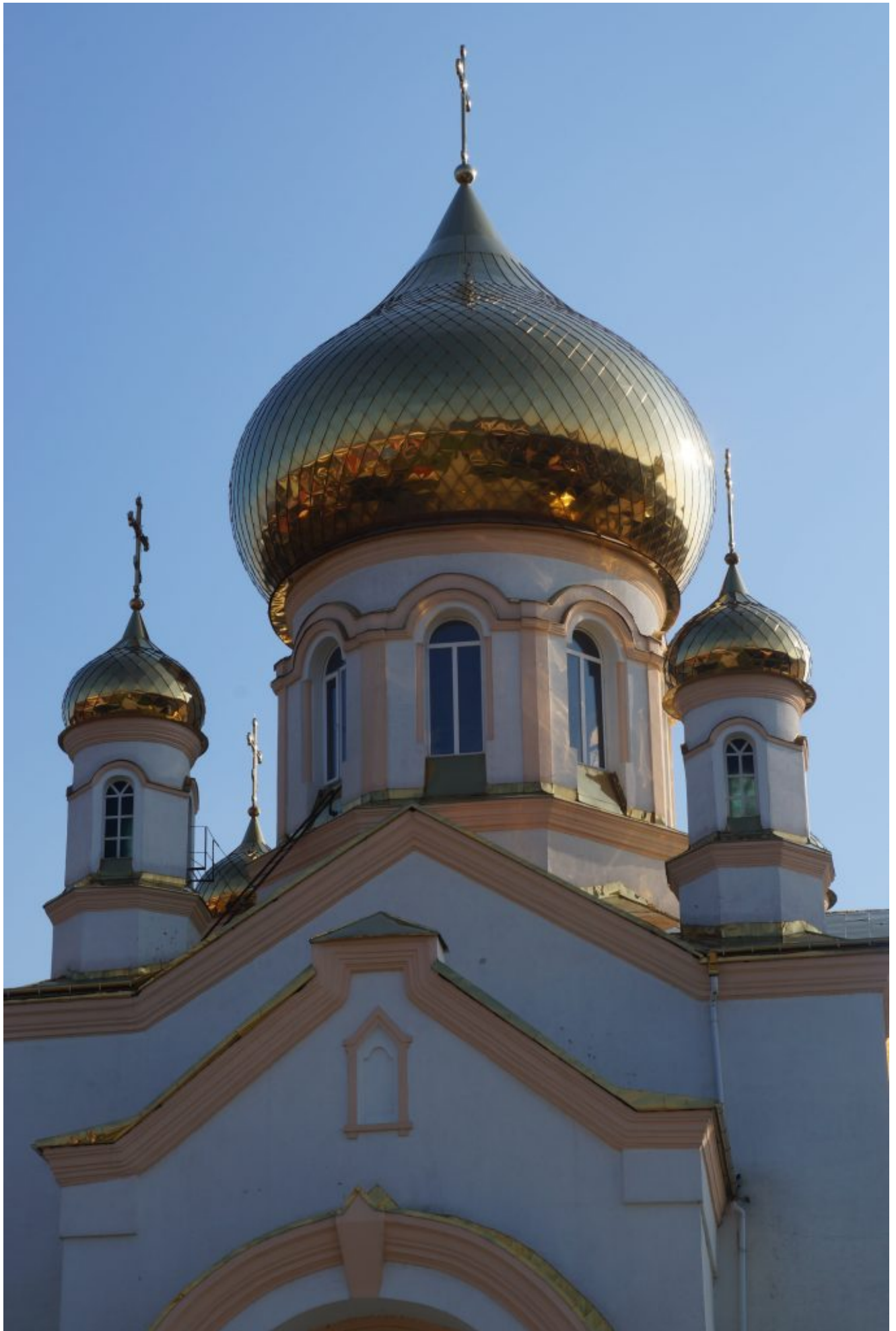
Road down the Carpathians



Road down the Carpathians

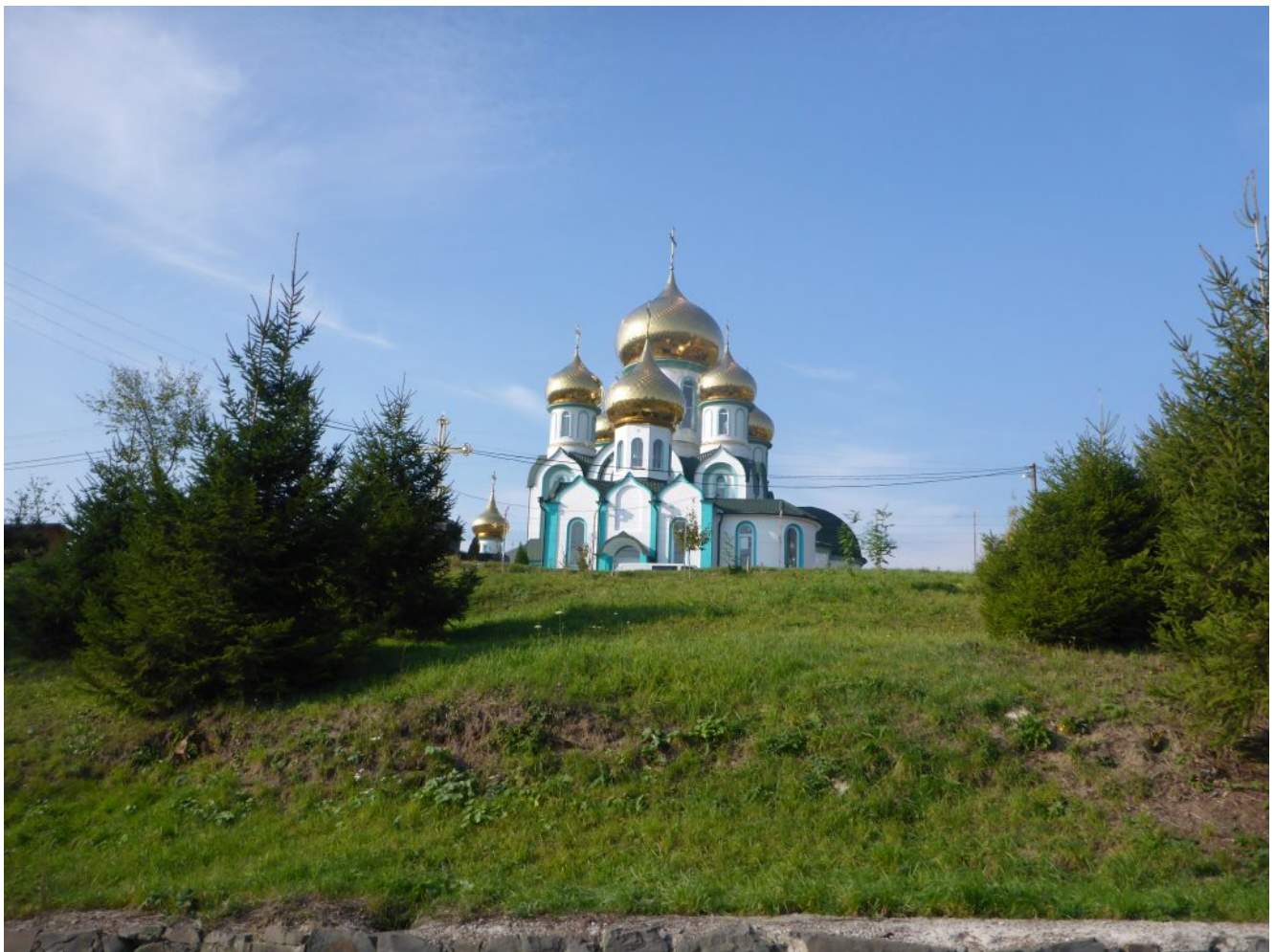


Mukacheve picnic lunch (by Mini Taj Mahal)



Mukacheve

On the way we celebrate our 5000th kilometre. It's then 40k on mostly flat road into Uzhhorod (Ужгород) for our final night in Ukraine and staying with Natalia and Jan. Over a dinner of varenyky (Ukrainian dumplings which are smaller but more meaty than Polish pierogi) Natalia fills us in on some of things that have been going on in Ukraine over the past few years with tales of propaganda, war tax and the fact that it was only a matter of time before Russia took an interest in the eastern part of the country. We also learn that within one person's lifetime this particular region has been part of 5 different countries as borders and boundaries get changed and land gets passed from one custodian to another. It's no surprise then that the people of Uzhhorod are not as patriotic as those in Lviv as they must find it hard to know where they should be showing allegiance to.



Shiny Church



A unique design of football pitch from the European Championships 2012



Uzhhorod town sign



Uzhhorod

From here we're heading over into Slovakia then down into Hungary, aiming for Budapest. The keen eyed amongst you will have realised that this brings us back west whereas New Zealand is in the east but as the old adage goes, to go east first you must go west. Or was that just a Village People song?



Natalia and Jan in Uzhhorod



Vodka section of the supermarket