

Budapest to Osijek to Belgrade

written by Marcus | 17 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 Kürtőś kalác (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

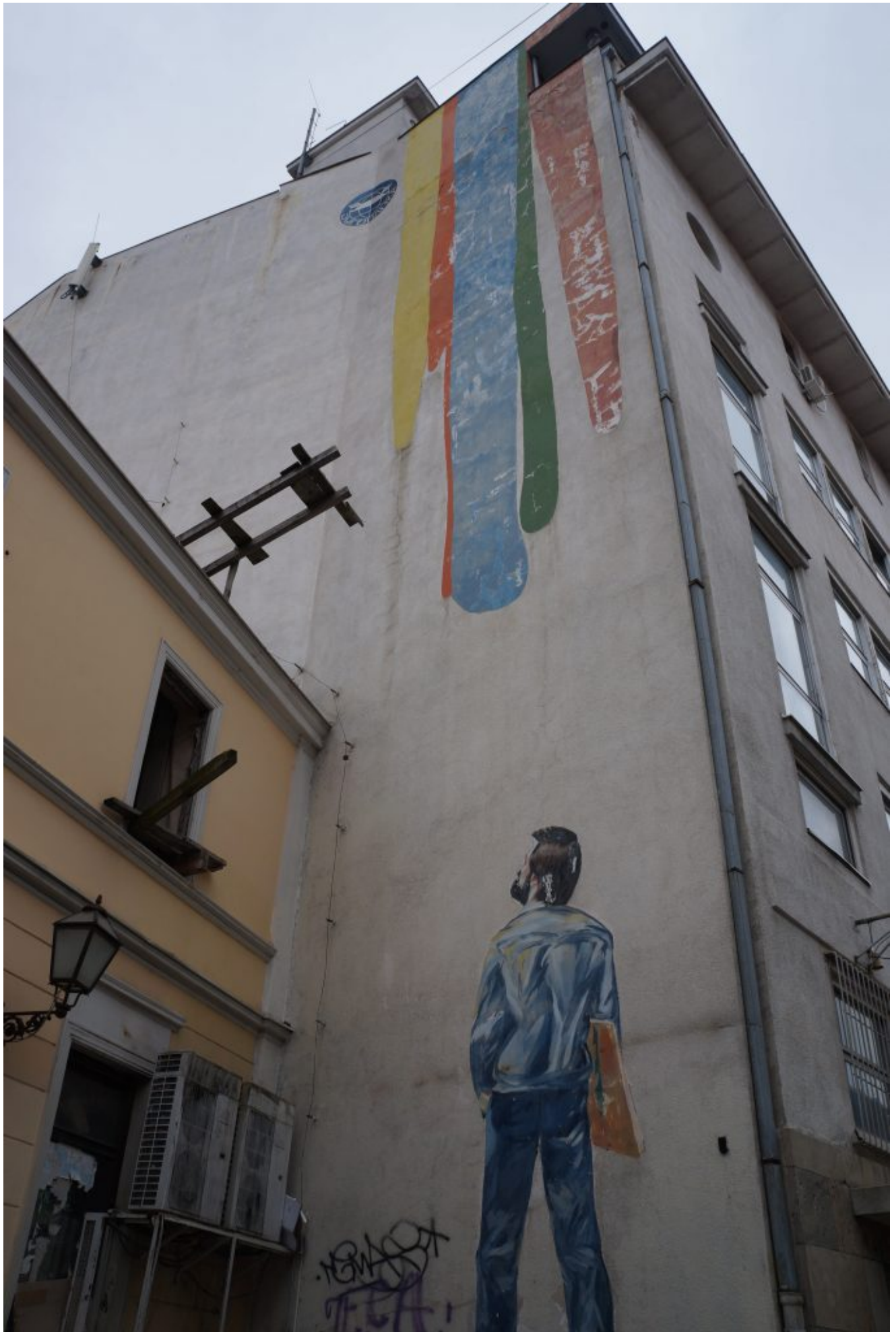


Grave of Tito

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.