

# 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



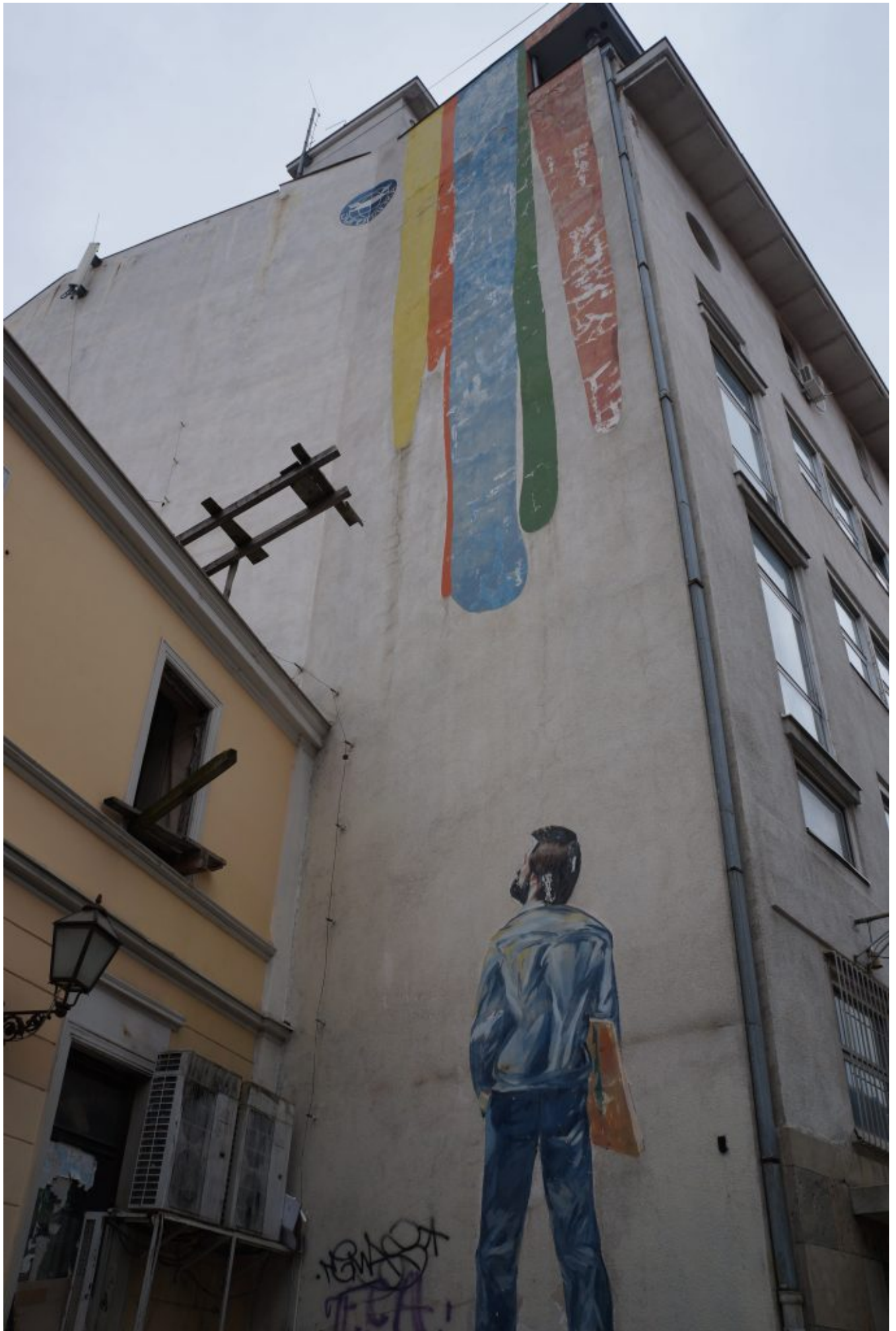


## Grave of Tito

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.

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# Uzhhorod to Košice to Budapest

written by Marcus | 17 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



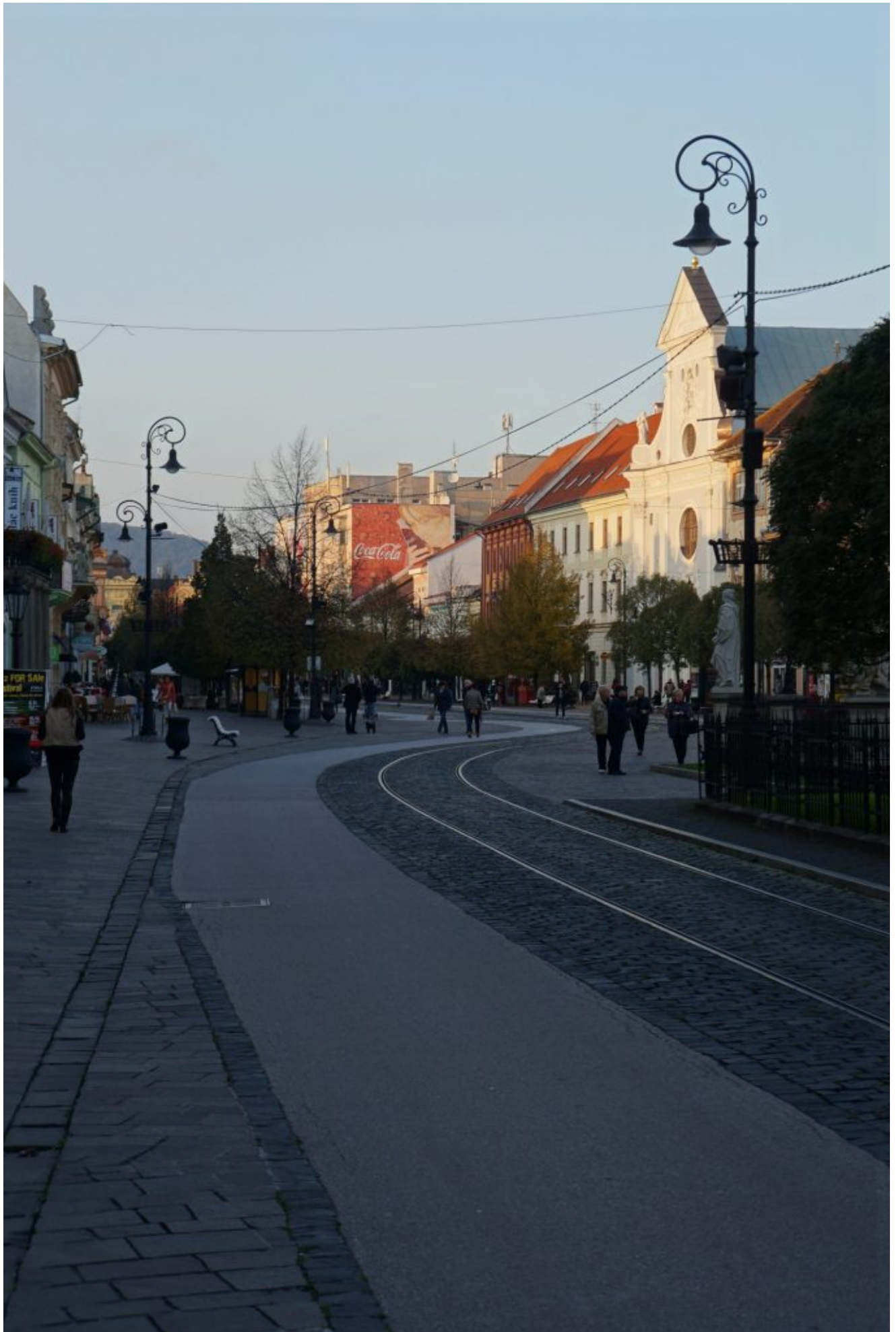
## Kosice





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

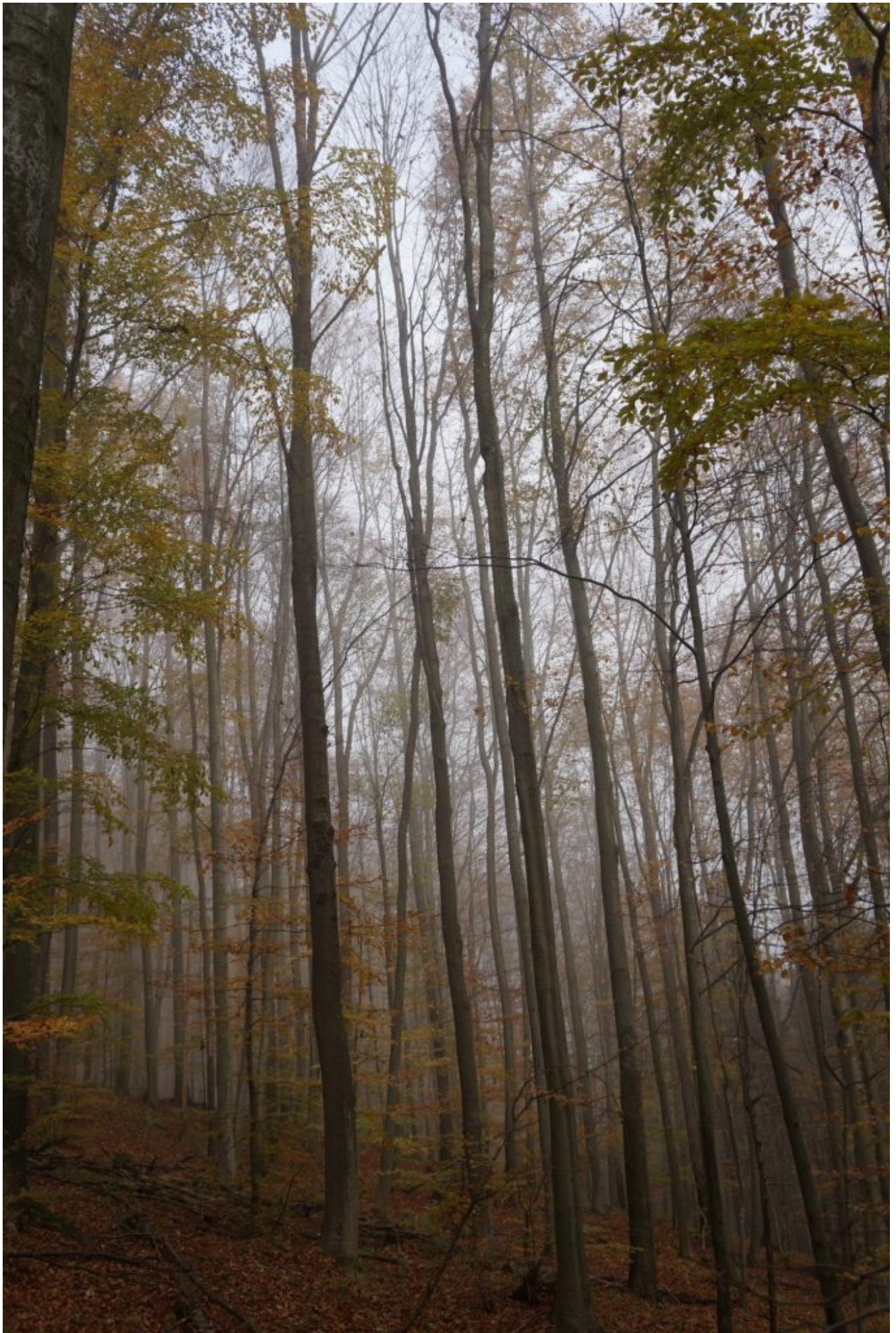


must be in hiding.



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





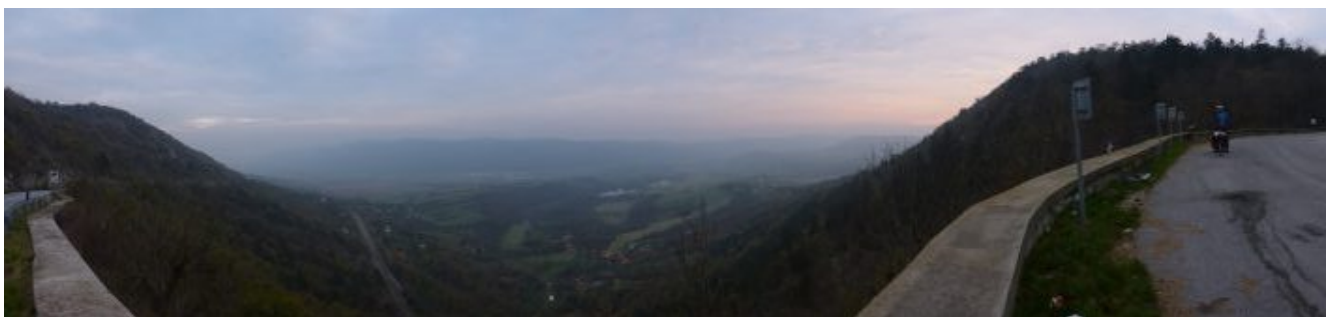
### Decorated graves for All Hallows Day

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

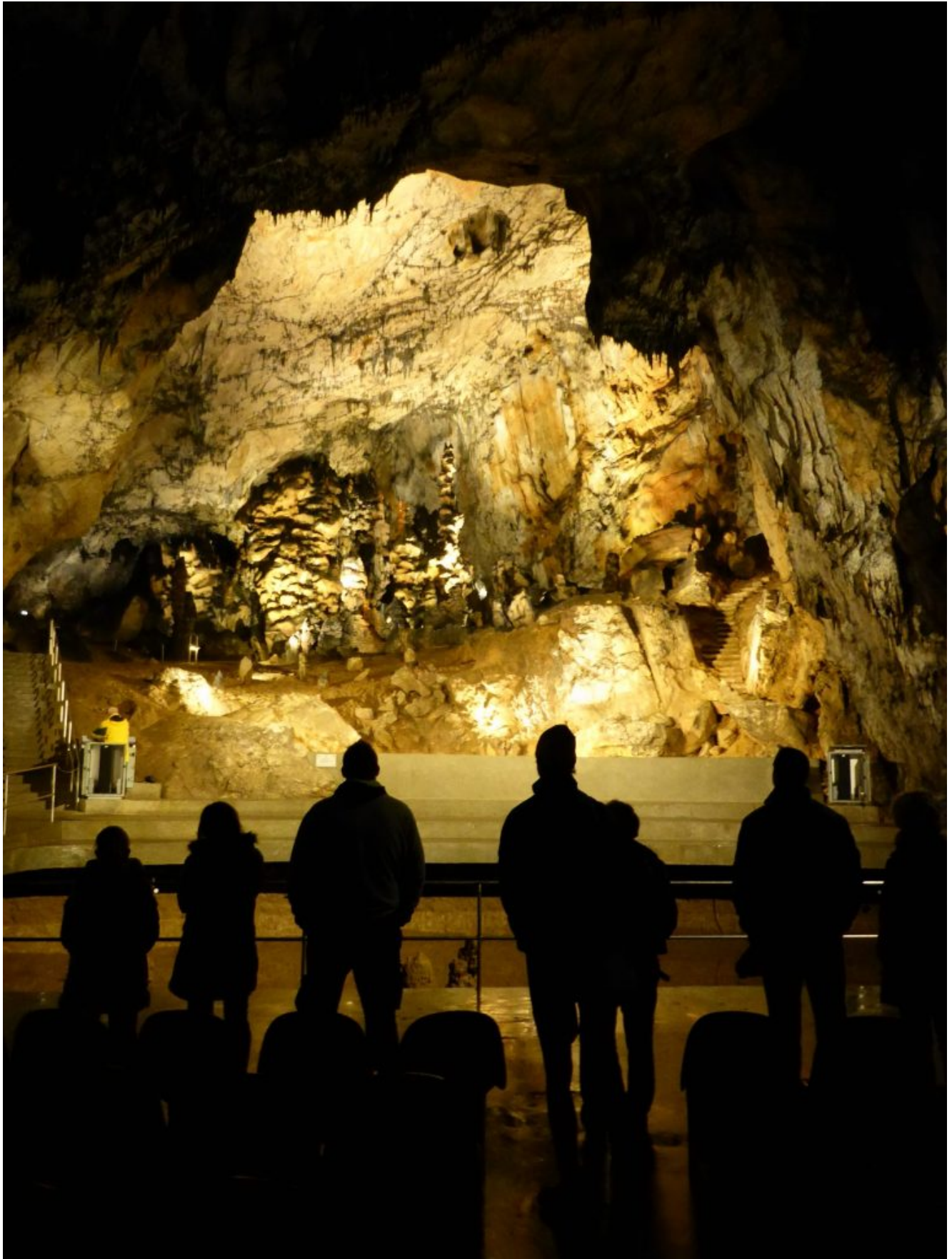
After climbing out of Slovakia over a few more hills we expect to see the vast Hungarian plain laid out in front of us as Michal had promised but it looks decidedly lumpy. It must be an optical illusion. We have to wait until 11am for the tour of the cave at Aggletek but its worth the wait as we're led 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.





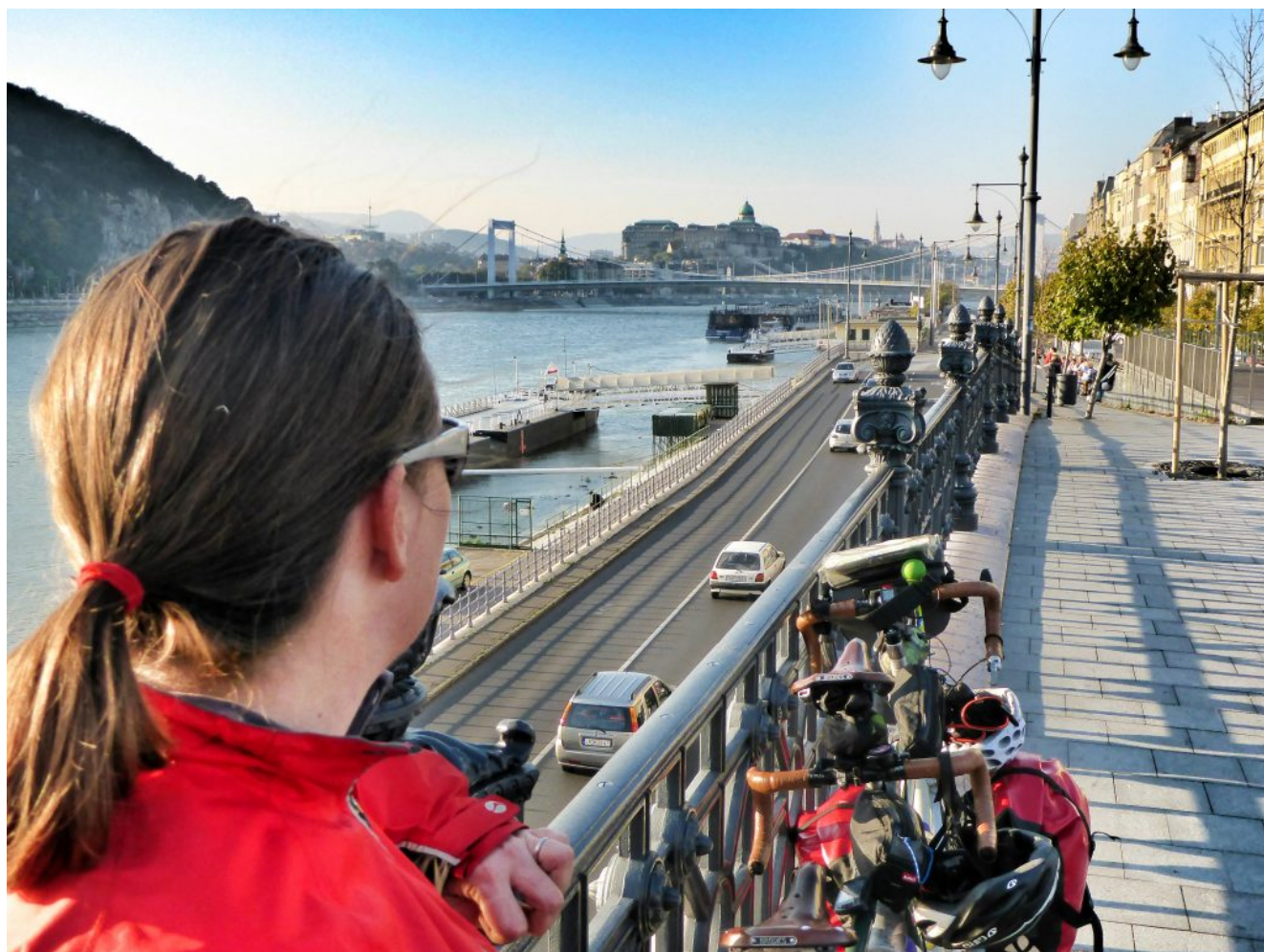
A contender for Hungary's most Hungarian man



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.

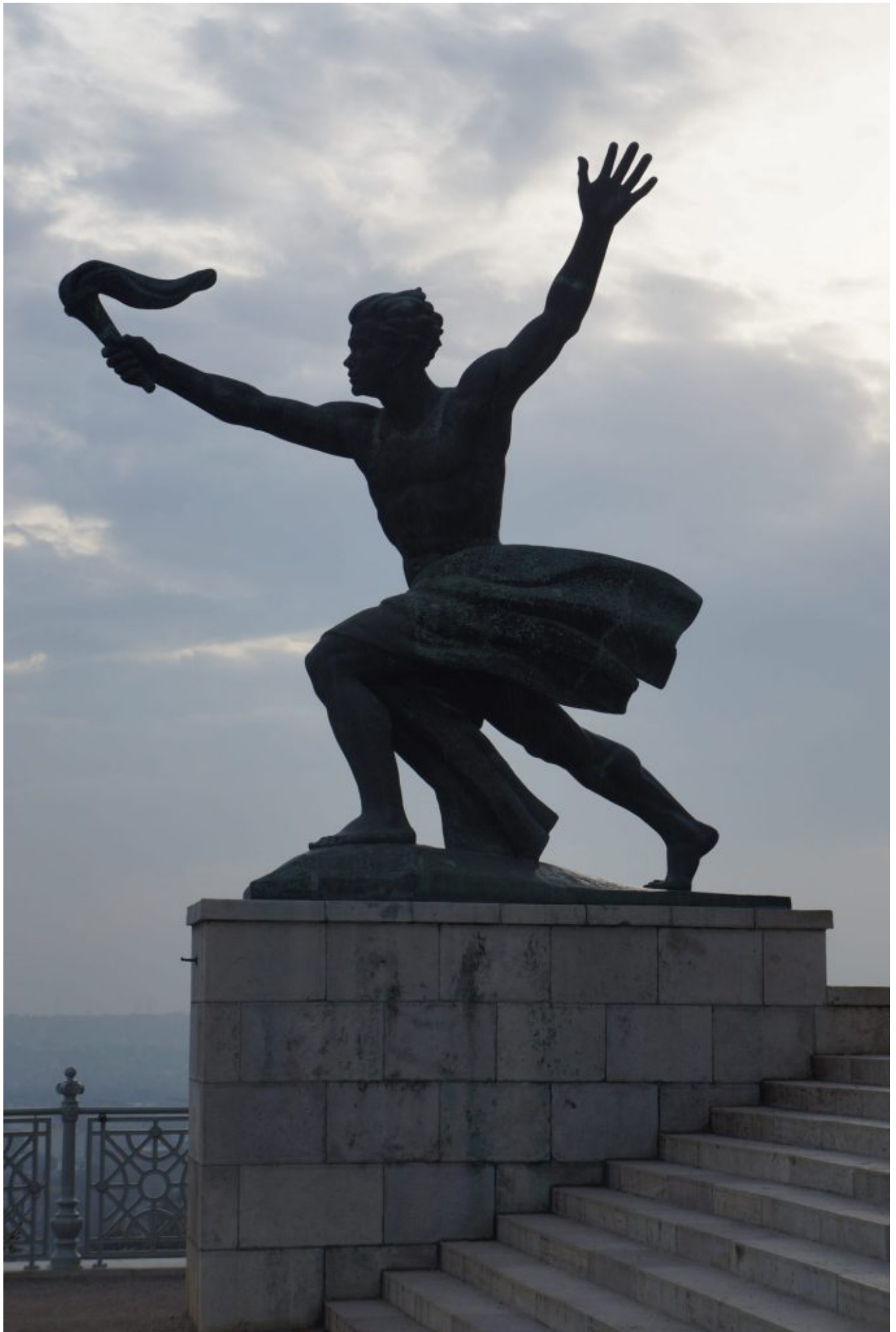


Langos!

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



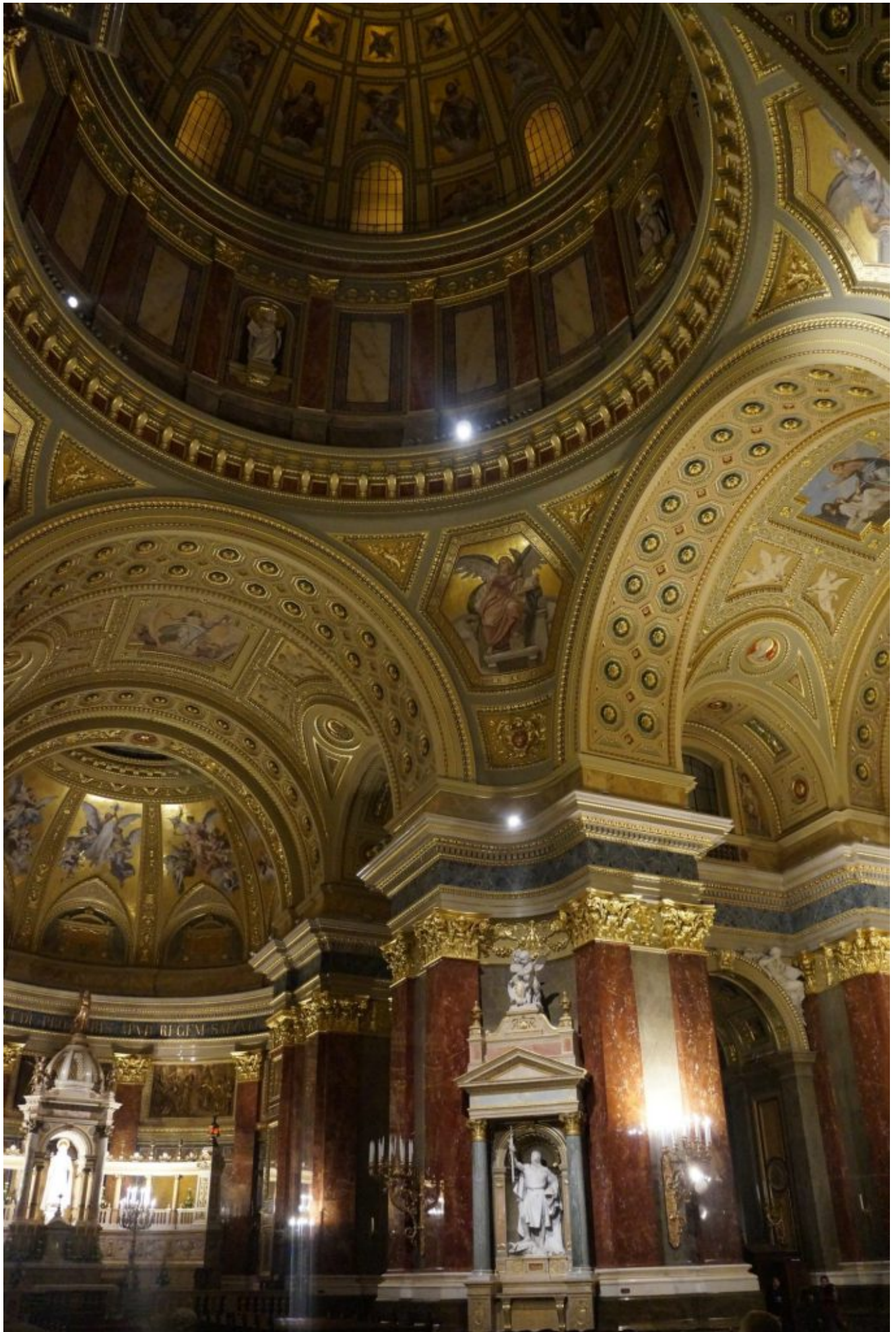
a small fraction. This one comes highly recommended.















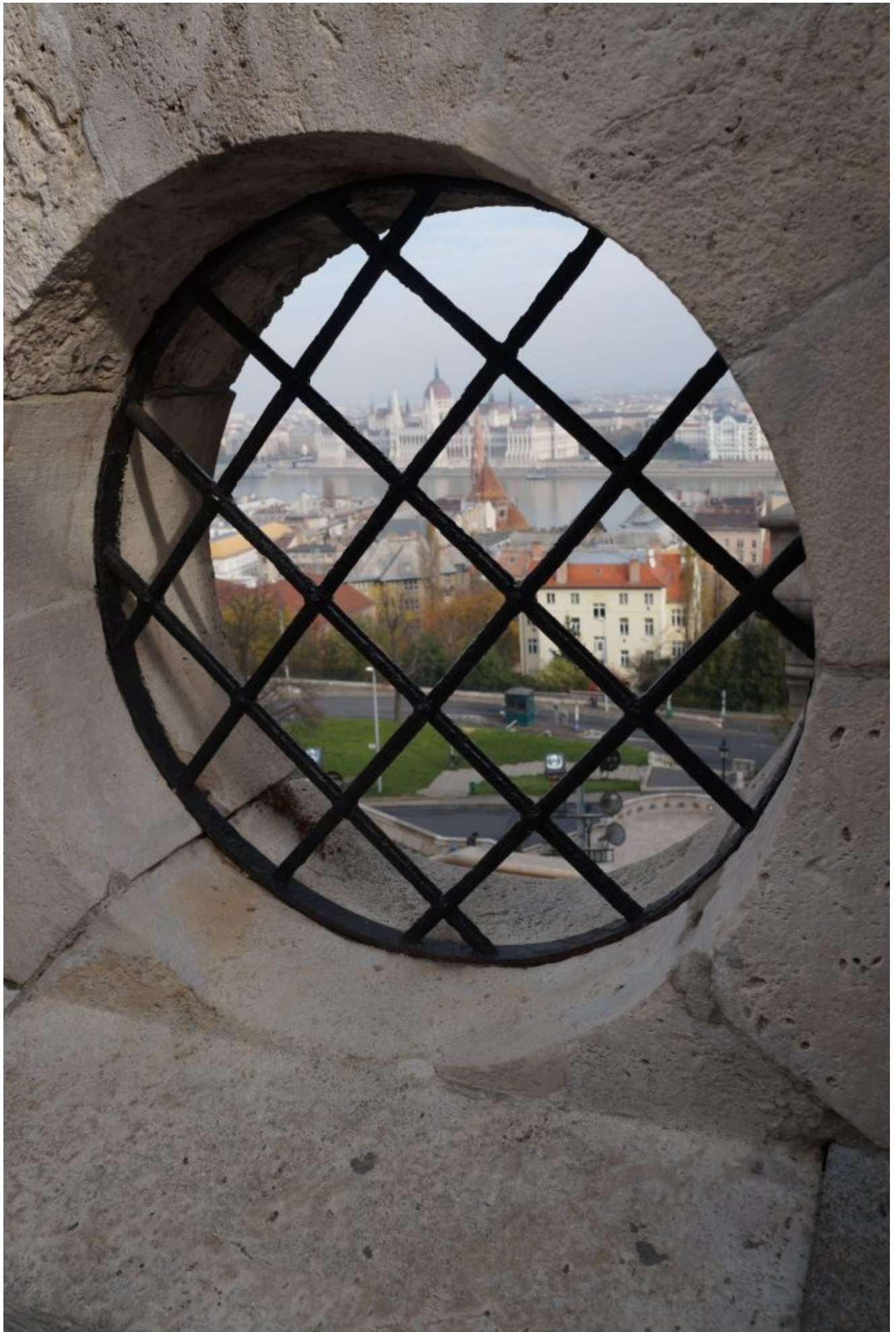




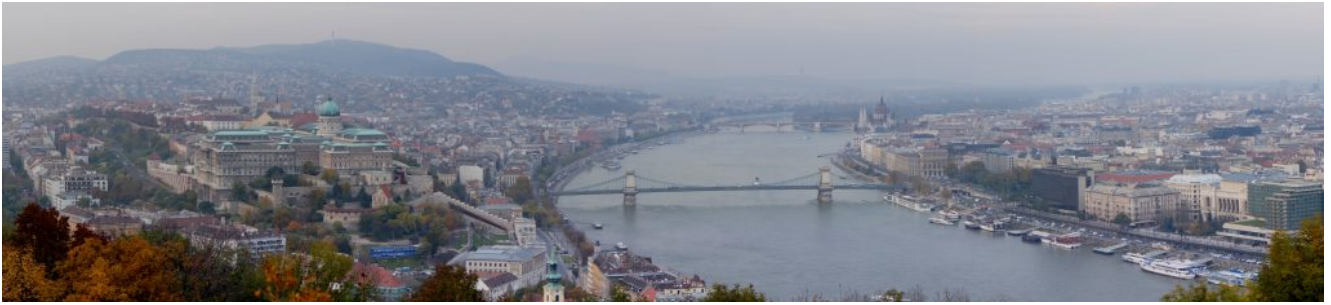












So where next? The map has so many exciting options for us from here. Within 2-3 weeks we could be in Istanbul, Athens, Rome... The next pin had been stuck into Istanbul and we'd thought we'd be there around Christmas time but we're changing our minds about this. The most popular route from Budapest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