

# **Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz**

**Joy of naturism and travelling in  
Central- & Eastern-Europe**



## **Chapter 27**

**May 2015 - December 2015**

# Joy of naturism and travelling in Central- & Eastern-Europe

Eastern-Europe is another region, we didn't favour, when choosing our destinations. Except 25 years ago, when we've visited a few of its capitals, and some 15 years ago, we've travelled through Croatia, Slovenia and Hungary. Nevertheless, we've never felt very attracted by the countries behind the former iron-curtain. However, with all the political changes during the past decades, the former east-bloc countries had been undergoing much more than just some cosmetic changes. Therefore, we thought, it might be interesting to see what has changed since we visited last.

Well, already buying a guidebook revealed the first surprise, as former east-bloc countries like Slovenia, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic or Poland are now included in a Central-European guidebook, abreast with Austria, Germany and Switzerland!

As our Central- & Eastern-Europe trip was to take place during the warm summer-months, naturally, we intend to stay predominantly at naturist-resorts. However, we always leave a few days of travelling when changing grounds, and some of our chosen naturist-destinations are situated in the midst of various attractive sights....

## Austria: six relaxing days

On April 29<sup>th</sup> 2015, we've crossed the Italian-Dolomites into Austria's East Tirol. Our first destination was the charming town centre of **Lienz**. After a good look around, we reached the main square which is surrounded by well restored houses. Here we had lunch and were surprised about the low prices in this rather noble Café. Of course, the choice of dishes was quite different here, though it seemed a fair bit cheaper than in nearby Italy. Even the Austrian's favourites "coffee and cake" were a fair bit cheaper than we remember from previous visits to this country.



## FKK Grosscamping Sabotnik: naturism on Lake Keutschacher

From Lienz, we continued over a small pass with a funny name: Gailberghöhe which translates more or less to "Horny Mountain Height" though it wasn't as exciting, as it sounded. Soon the green valley broadened and we reached the sunny Carinthia Region (Kärnten in German), which is famous for its many lakes. Keutschachersee is one of them and almost all of its southern shore is reserved for naturists. They are pleased to find four naturist grounds (from west to east): Müllerhof, FKK Gross-camping Sabotnik, Klein-Camping, a public nudist beach and Kärntner Lichtbund, a club ground. To the very east, there's a large textile camping, a Lido, and the town beach, to please those who prefer to show off their bathing costumes.

As we're fond of big grounds with lots of space to roam around, our logical choice was [FKK Gross-camping Sabotnik](#), the largest retreat for the nudes. It's 9ha ground is nestled along some 500m of lakeshore and pleases visitors with several large bathing piers with benches and ladders to access the water. The reed between the piers creates a very peaceful setting. Large tree framed meadows near the lake shore invite for sun bathing, though they were a bit swampy in places.

Altogether, Sabotnik offers about 750 large pitches of which 280 are occupied by permanents. Furthermore, there are 10 on-site van's for rent and 24 B&B rooms. Across the road, a separate section of the camping is reserved for people with dogs, but the four legged friends are not allowed to access the lake.



Other commandments include a ban on driving and dish-washing between 13-14h and an obligation to wear clothes while visiting the shop and restaurant. At both, the personnel was extremely nice and helpful. Though Sabotnik's store was not that big, it was well stocked, and offered some take-away snacks, as well as hot and cold drinks.

Wireless Internet was available at a hotspot room in the main building. That's also where the B&B room was, where we stayed. Therefore, we were eating out every day and luckily, the restaurant at Sabotnik was really quite good. It offered a wide selection of well prepared dishes at very competitive prices. The reception provided us also with a list of recommended restaurants around Lake Keutschacher. It's a pleasant one-and-a-half hours walk around the lake (7.5km) and you can reach some 10 restaurants by manpower.

FKK Müllerhof is just next door to FKK Sabotnik and as they don't necessarily consider each other as competitors, but rather as contestants, Müllerhof's restaurant figures even on Sabotnik's list of recommended eating places. So one night, we went to check it out. To us, the restaurant appeared more elegant, though the choice of dishes was a fair bit smaller than on "our side". What we got was simple, but well prepared too. Sure enough, we spied around a bit upon leaving Müllerhof, to see the differences. The ground seemed more manicured, all in line: sites and flowers. We couldn't believe they had even more commandments and regulations to obey to than at Sabotnik. It appeared they had more visitors, but less permanent and as on our place, there were hardly any Dutch.



Not that there's a shortage of good eating options around Keutschachersee but our attempts to eat outside the naturist grounds, always ended in disaster... On a rainy evening, we "googled" for the best restaurants in the region and gladly took the advice for gourmet-dining at Pyramidenkogel viewpoint tower, visible from Sabotnik. Unfortunately, the restaurant closed together with the viewing platform at 8 PM, and the low clouds hindered us to get a glimpse of the marvellous view at least from the base of the modern tower. So, we had to find a restaurant elsewhere.

Another time, we followed a sign to a "Buschenschenke" of which we had heard is a restaurant on a farm. We hoped for something like a "ferme auberge" in France but learned, after a strenuous 3km hike, that this "Buschenschenke" only serves homemade cold cuts with bread, maybe some cake, but no cooked food. What their clientele probably raved most about, were their Cider and Schnapps. Disappointed we run back to Sabotnik's restaurant where we indulged in pork-filet with asparagus and Sauce Hollandaise, as well as in homemade, generously filled Cordon-Bleu, followed by some big juicy Apple-strudel.

All in all, we had spent six pleasant days at Lake Keutschacher. FKK Grosscamping Sabotnik is a lovely natural oasis right on the lake, offering all the services, sun seekers look for. And, if sight-seeing is on the agenda, the Carinthia Region is just on the doorstep and waits to be discovered.

## Via Slovenia to Croatia

On June 4<sup>th</sup> 2015, we left Austria and crossed incredibly steep, though only 1,073m high Wurzenpass (Korensko Sedlo), into Slovenia. In the steepest section, motor-vehicles and die-hard cyclists have to deal with up to 18% graduation. Now we were in the picturesque Julian Alps, and soon passed deep-green Lake Jasna. From there, the road wound over many cobblestone plastered hairpin bends up to Vršič-Pass (1,611m). After challenging the engine, the test was now on the brakes, as the road descended equally steep into lonely Soči Valley.



There were not many sizeable villages along our way, but in **Postojna**, we hit civilization again. Here we spontaneously stayed overnight in a nice B&B. After an impressive breakfast, we continued the next day to **Croatia**. By lunchtime, we had reached the seaside town of Opatija, which was pretty touristy. After driving further south, we sailed the same afternoon with a car-ferry to the sparsely populated island of **Cres** (pronounced tsrès).

## Baldarin: a naturist resort in a picture perfect location on Cres-Island

In the year 2000, we had joined a naturist sailing trip along Croatia's coast. During this week long sailing adventure, we were smitten by the clear water and the beauty of the islands in the Adriatic Sea. With that abiding memory in mind, we thought it would be great to stay on a naturist ground on one of these islands to dive into the loneliness and the splendour of the region.

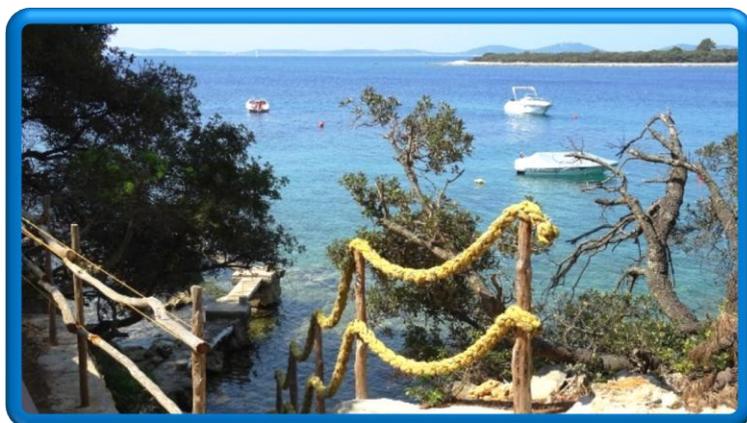
Though we expected, and wanted it to be lonely, we were still surprised, how lonely our chosen island of Cres really is! As we traversed it from north to south, we passed only a handful of tiny villages along the 80km stretch of road. In fact, the 66km long and 2-12km narrow island (406 km<sup>2</sup> big), has only about 3'200 permanent inhabitants, of which almost 2,900 live in the village of Cres.

On the southern tip of the island, we reached our destination, [FKK Camping Baldarin](#), near Punta Križa. It's not a place for purists, be they naturists or textiles. Some 20% of the ground are reserved for the prudes and the remaining 80% for the nudes. Only a small fence divides the two sections, and it's easy to walk from one to the other. Dress codes are only consequently obeyed in the shop and the restaurant. Otherwise, bathing costumes are sometimes abound in the naturist section and at other times, the nudes sunbathe stark naked in the textile section.

Most visitors to Baldarin, probably don't come here for a classic beach-holiday in the first place, but rather to admire the natural beauty of the craggy coastline along the deep blue water. Many choose one of the tiny campsites, right on the sea front. There, they spend their holiday contemplating on taking a break from everyday life. Thereby, they never get tired of looking at the limestone rocks along the coast, the change of wind and waves, the view to the neighbouring islands, and the boats sailing through the incredibly blue water.

Many front-row pitches can be found on the forested camping, but some people prefer, or have, to retreat onto one of the campsites in the woods. Of course, those naturists from the back rows would like to go to the sea from time to time too. However, if all sea-front pitches are occupied, it's sometimes hard to find one of the few accesses squeezed between the sites. Many additional access paths behind the sites, are in practice inaccessible, though officially, they have to be left open to everybody. Caravans and Motor homes obstruct the sight and occupy the entire sites. Furthermore, we got the impression, the privileged pile or hang all sorts of gear and towels around them, then sit there all day guarding their luck, to ensure nobody "looks it away".

As we like to move around, we always exited the rocky limestone coast on another path than we entered it. More often than not, we felt people were bothered by our passing, according to the looks they gave us.



## Lodging, shopping and eating

Baldarin's forested 20ha estate offers some 550 pitches, plus 30 rental possibilities. The latter are owned and managed by [Gebetsroither](#), an Austrian company specialising in holiday rentals on campgrounds around Europe. Some 20 on-site vans and 10 mobile homes are available at Baldarin. We chose one of the very well equipped mobile homes, complete with Air-con, TV and a large fridge-freezer. When booking, we were not aware that the mobile homes stand on extra large plots. Our location was really generous and occupied almost 5 of Baldarin's normally rather tiny pitches.

There is a rather large supermarket on the campground. If everything that had been available for a day or two, during our two-weeks stage, would have been available all the time, it would have been easy to assemble a full-value meal. However, as in the good old communist times, more than just a few things were always sold out, without being replaced the next few days. Sure enough, the newly delivered replacement articles could be almost the same to those already stocked en masse, just not what the clientele was looking for. Consequently, clients started to squirrel new products away, as soon as they hit the shelves. Only cakes were always plentiful, if loveless presented. They were cheap and good,

though not necessarily the healthiest diet... Driving out for a better shop was only an option, if you didn't mind driving 40km on a slow road just for the better selection, as prices were hardly more competitive.



Eating out was certainly easier! The dishes are simple: meat grilled to perfection, or fish grilled to death. Then there's always chard and potatoes. Luckily, we felt the seafront-restaurant inside Baldarin was far superior over the other three we tried outside the camp. Anyway, Foodies shouldn't expect anything fancy and our friends told us, why French naturists usually only come here once. After that they'll say: "il y a rien a bouffer ici!" (there is nothing to gorge on here). Germans seem not to be so picky, as long as the price is right. Together with Austrians and Slovenians they were the majority of guests at Baldarin. Luckily, we later discovered that gastronomic offerings in Croatia on the whole, are much better, away from this remote corner of Cres. Those who look out, can meanwhile eat as good as "God in France", and those who prefer, can still find "good and cheap".

## On- and offshore outings

As amazing, as the coastline around the camping is, as hostile it is, to walk on the shore. It is of sharp edged limestone, and keen bathers can only enter the water comfortably on a few specially prepared places. Because of the edgy rocks and the presence of sea urchins in several places, Baldarin's guests do their feet a favour, if they wear water shoes for swimming. There is neither a pool, nor a sandy beach, only some manmade sections with coarse gravel.

Luckily, our friends Annie & Herbert, who live in the French part of Switzerland were presently here too. They camped with a small tent near the beach. As they come to Baldarin for some 35 years, they know Cres Island very well, and we were happy that they showed us around. One afternoon, Herbert took us out with his zodiac, equipped with an outboard engine. That way, we got a different view of the coastline with its many small bays. The colour and the clearness of the water was just breathtaking, as all over the Dalmatian Coast. Herbert told us that nude bathing is common and accepted in the southern part of Cres, and practiced in many coves. Five Finger Bay was one that sank deep into our memory, because it was the only one with fine sand and also shallow water, perfect for swimming. After learning that this beautiful Bay (Meli) can also be reached in less than an hour by foot, we set off to find the way already the next day. Part of the path was carved as firebreak between the low bush land, therefore hot and rough, but we didn't need to wear anything at all. We hiked there three times, also to compensate for the limited walking possibilities inside Baldarin and swimming in the blue bay was always our anticipated reward.

Another day, Annie and Herbert showed us the neighbouring island of **Lošinj** with their car. There, the tourist trade is much more developed than on Cres. Never the less, there are a few charming old villages, usually grouped around a harbour. We were shown around pretty **Mali Lošinj**, **Veli Lošinj** and **Nerezine** and it wasn't long before we had seen countless souvenir shops and (stopped at some) ice cream parlours. Those were things, you didn't find anywhere near Baldarin, and most of its regular visitors go there precisely because of this peace and quiet. At Baldarin, it's all nature, where deer, birds, lizards and harmless snakes can be observed regularly.



Annie and Herbert, who know Baldarin for four decades, think it's getting almost too commercial now. Sure enough, they enjoy the modern toilet- and shower blocks, and the WiFi access, but they regret bygone times, when Baldarin only had guests visiting with simple tents. Nowadays, the vast majority "camps" either with a caravan or a motor home. Judging by the size of the pitches, Baldarin was obviously designed to accommodate tents only. If it would still be used like this, everybody could easily walk around the ground and access the sea anywhere. However, today's modern large "camping equipment" (with, or without wheels) does just not match the cute little spots. As in a real village; a few lucky ones occupy the seafront and the mob must be thankful if the others let them partake once a while...

Many regular visitors to Baldarin bring a small boat along and that's probably the best way to experience the quaint (and lonely) bays in the Adriatic Sea. We're very glad having been able to explore the astonishing seascape around Baldarin from the shore, as well as from our friend's boat.

Upon leaving Baldarin on June 20<sup>th</sup> 2015, we set off to see some interesting places along our way north eastwards to Lake Balaton in Hungary. Still on the island of Cres, we drove to the hamlet of **Vrana**, from where we had fantastic views down to the namesake lake. Not much further, we visited the village of **Cres**, the only sizeable settlement on the island. The pretty place is quite touristy, as it's nestled around a picturesque harbour. Ice-cream parlours are plentiful and serve good quality. As good tourists, we adapted to local customs and walked around with a cone in hand.

After consulting the time-table, we rushed to the ferry port at Merag and arrived just in time to catch the car ferry to the island of Krk. Over there, we stopped at **Krk Town**, another tourist favourite with a nice harbour. We found it very rewarding to leave the waterfront and venture into the fortified old town with its narrow alleys.

## Trip through Croatia and Slovenia en route to Hungary

After crossing the impressive toll-bridge between Krk Island and the Croatian mainland, the weather changed from pretty sunny to pretty wet, as we came into a thunder storm. Seeing how the scenery changed from barren to green, rain seems not to be an exception around here. While driving on small roads that had almost turned into creeks, we passed a young couple walking on the roadside. Feeling sorry for them, we offered a lift. That way, we got to the old fashioned, yet nice village of Fužine, where their car was parked.

Following the border river Kolpi between Croatia and Slovenia, we passed a hamlet named "Kot" (German for faeces). That unappetizingly baptized place must have smelled to heaven so much so that the clouds disappeared and the sun reigned again.

Soon, we crossed the border into Slovenia and ended up in **Črnomelj** for the night. To buy some water, we stopped at a simple super discounter on the roadside. After two weeks on the remote Island of Cres, even that store appeared to us like a real foodie's paradise...

The village of Črnomelj is not touristy at all, so there are almost no hotels, but ample choice for eating out. We were lucky to get a stylish restaurant recommended, where we got excellent food at modest prices.



The next morning, we continued over rolling green hills to **Brežice**, a place we have stayed at 15 years ago. The historic little town is well restored, though we experienced it very different from last time. Situated only 40km from Zagreb, locals told us in 2000 that Brežice functions as "the shopping centre" for the Croatian capital, as the choice is much better in Slovenia. As both countries meanwhile joined the EU, things have changed. Croatians don't need to go over the border anymore for decent shopping. We felt almost sorry for pretty Brežice, as dozens of restaurants and ice-cream parlours almost outnumbered the few visitors on that Sunday afternoon.

So, from Brežice it was not far to the Croatian border. Later, we visited the town of **Krapina** that was marked on our road map as a place worth visiting. However, it was more because of its Neanderthal-Museum, than due to a beautiful centre, so we didn't stop for long.

After another hour's drive, we reached the town of **Varaždin**. Seeing the first rows of nice townhouses, we spontaneously parked the car to venture around. Thereby, Varaždin emerged as a totally unexpected highlight indeed! Though it is touristy, not many foreigners have discovered this town yet. Due to a long weekend, the streets and restaurants were bustling with Croatians. We admired the many squares framed by pretty, colourful houses of which most were well restored. Wide pedestrianized roads connected several stately plazas and if we hadn't had a reservation in Hungary for that night, we would certainly have stayed. Instead, we left at 7 PM and rushed to the freeway.

# Hungary: naturism at Berény on Lake Balaton

Hungary is a rather flat country, with an very eventful past. At first, it raided other countries, then it had to submit to different powers. In 1867, it became an equal part of the powerful Austrian-Hungarian empire, that lasted until 1918. After a rapprochement to Nazi-Germany, Hungary came under Russian supremacy after WW2, which lasted until the iron curtain fell. Today's Hungary consists of an area of 93.036 km<sup>2</sup>, and has almost 10 million inhabitants. The former Eastern-bloc country joined the EU in 2004, but for the time being, retains its own currency, the Hungarian Forint.

Our destination in Hungary was [Camping Naturist Berény](#) in Balatonberény, where we arrived somewhat late on June 21<sup>th</sup> 2015. Being the oldest naturist ground on Lake Balaton, Berény boasts many big mature trees on its 5.5ha estate. It has generous lawns reserved for sunbathing. The 117 grassy pitches for caravans and motor-homes, are divided by hedges, and wide paved or gravelled paths. Real campers can pitch their tents up on one of two camping meadows with space for a maximum of 100 tents. Guests travelling light can choose between 17 motel rooms, 3 apartments, 3 holiday cottages, 6 mobile homes and several on-site vans. We had chosen an extra large mobile home. As it was an older UK model, it was cosily (over-) furnished, complete with an upholstered 3-piece suite. Anyway, it was well maintained and supplemented with a new covered terrace.

As Hungary is a predominantly flat country, it's often windy, which can cause waves on the lake. This might be the only little nuisance, but otherwise, a dip in Lake Balaton is pure pleasure. Dogs are universally banned from Lake Balaton; one man's joy is another man's sorrow.

The lake bottom consists of nothing but sand and the water gets pleasantly warm in summer, sometimes up to 30°C, as the average water-depth is only 3.25m. The peculiar greenish lake, with a maximum length of 77 km and a maximum width of 14 km, is (by surface) Central Europe's largest lake.

Situated on the south-west shore of Lake Balaton, naturist ground Berény charms with its round wooden pier of almost 30m in diameter. It's popular for sunbathing or drying after swimming. Thanks to its shallow water, Lake Balaton is a paradise for families. Especially around Berény, you can wade out from the shore for more than 100 meters, until you reach the pole that indicates a water depth of 1,20m.

Not only in the area of the naturist camping Berény, but along the lake shore in general, big sections are reeded. Lake access seems to be public in most areas and therefore, owners of big villas have to contend with the second row!

Berény is one of the few naturist places, situated literally at the doorstep of a village. Inside the ground, you find a small shop, a beach-bar and a self-service restaurant. Never the less, if you go out, it's only 100m until you find another restaurant and to the village centre of Balatonberény, it's barely 10 minutes walk. In the small village and on the public

beach, some 10 restaurants and 3 little supermarkets are keen to get clients. Most foreign holiday makers resort to the restaurants, as the choice in the supermarkets is rather limited and prices for products known to western Europeans are rather high, in stark contrast to the pricing at eating places. What you have to pay for three jars of decent jams, could buy you a full-fledged 3-course meal for two in a restaurant. It's not "haute cuisine", but what you get is a wide selection of traditional Hungarian home cooking. In comparison to our last visit 15 years ago, nowadays it's much easier to find healthier alternatives to the long established deep fried stuff.



## Excursions and dental-tourism

Everything you need can be found within walking distance of Berény, but for sight-seeing, we used the car. First, we had to fill it up. Thereby, we realized we were the only ones doing so, as the locals only topped up between 2.5 and 5 litres. It seems many Hungarians are not so well off, and can hardly afford the bare necessities; a car is already luxury. However, dental care should be affordable to everybody, but ironically, in Hungary it isn't! Prices have skyrocketed due to the increasing number of foreigners who pilgrimage for "inexpensive dental treatments" to Hungary. Well, what Western

Europeans consider low-cost dental care, is unaffordable to most ordinary Hungarians. Why shall dentists be motivated to repair their compatriot's teeth for a "tip", if they can guild their villas with the money they earn by gilding their precious foreign clients' gnashers? Seeing the bad state of many a Hungarian's teeth, made us aware that too many westerners are lured (by local agents in their home-country) into unnecessary complex treatments. The more costly and the more often the teeth are fixed, the more the patient saves, and both sides feel as winners, the dentist and the patient!

On Lake Balaton, also the summer holiday business is thriving. Holiday houses, apartments, hotels and campgrounds abound. Furthermore, there are uncountable restaurants, ice cream parlours, and souvenir shops. However, season is extremely short. When we visited the town of **Keszthely** end of June, the lido was still closed, yet its park was open for strollers. That's how we found out that this public town beach hosts dozens of restaurants, souvenir shops, and ice cream parlours too, as well as its own fun fair, fee-based play grounds and gaming machines. Apart from a handful of businesses, all were still closed or maybe getting ready. . .



Sure enough, the eateries around Keszthely's charming old town offered much better value for money than those near the waterfront. Never the less, most holiday makers seem to prefer the lakeside resorts and pay the price.

**Balatonmárfürdő** and **Fonyód** were two other tourist magnets we visited along the south shore. To see a hopefully more authentic Hungarian place, we drove to the historic town of **Nagykanizsa**, some 50km away from Lake Balaton. There are quite a number of beautifully restored art deco houses and a nice town park with a fountain and monuments. The town centre was dominated by business- and apartment-buildings. Like in many other Hungarian towns, in the side streets, it looks rather like in a village with small single family houses and adjoining annex buildings or stables.

But we didn't see many human beings! Nobody was promenading in the neat centre of Nagykanizsa, and there were almost no restaurants! What a contrast to touristy Lake Balaton! Seeing the poor choice of eateries, we ended up driving back to the lake.

Around Lake Balaton, restaurants are plenty and usually translate their menu into German and sometimes English too. On the other hand, we got the impression that at least during peak-season, the vast majority of visitors are Hungarians.

## Guests at the naturist ground

Locals are also the majority of guests at our place, Naturist Camping Berény, especially among day visitors. Berény functions also as public naturist beach, and this proves extremely popular among Hungarians and foreigners alike. Many of them stay in nearby holiday accommodations, but like to take advantage of Berény's large naturist sunbathing lawns, and the pleasant lake access from the unique round pier.

During our stage, most of the vacationers who stayed a few days or weeks at the naturist campground, originated from Germany, Austria and various Eastern European countries. End of June, the season was not in full swing yet, though Berény was much more lively than the nearby textile resorts. Those who allow the sun to kiss the bum, seem to enjoy a longer summer...

A couple, staying in one of the other mobile homes approached us, and asked to get some pictures taken of them. Naturally, we didn't mind to serve as "bipods". They were keen to get a good selection of photo souvenirs and we asked them to take some shots of us too. While chatting, Petra & Dieter asked, whether it was possible that our faces had been depicted in a German naturist magazine. After our affirming, they regretfully said, they had missed several times to sign up in time, for the photo shootings organized by the German Naturist Federation. So, in the following we spontaneously took some more pictures on Berény's landmark, the round pier. It was refreshing, how enthusiastically Petra & Dieter posed for some photographs and to feel that publishing them in a naturist magazine is just a natural part of their lifestyle.

To us, Camping Naturist Berény was the perfect choice for our 10 days in Hungary. We loved the superb lakeside setting, the shallow water, the natural atmosphere, and the good choice of eating places just at the doorstep. The place is managed by Balatontourist, a big company owning 13 textile- and 2 naturist campgrounds, plus a hotel, all on the shore of Lake Balaton. Yet, despite this big company, Berény's guests get to know the staff; all very friendly and motivated. When we paid our bill, we got a 10% INF discount, some helpful tips and a warm farewell. We really felt it matters to them that guests feel welcome to return.

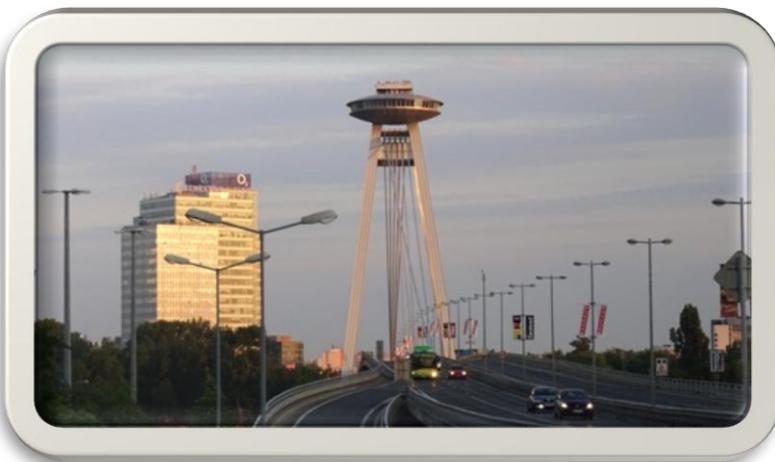
# Slovakia: 16 days in one of Europe's youngest countries

On July 1st, 2015, we left Hungary on lonely country roads towards the Slovak border. On 1.1.1993, Slovakia became an independent country, as it terminated the union with the Czech Republic. Together they had ended the communist era three years previously, in the so called Velvet Revolution. Today, the 5.5 million inhabitants of the 49,035 km<sup>2</sup> country do quite well, though there is a huge difference between the cities and the countryside. Led by the capital, Bratislava, Slovakia's economy emerged surprisingly fast and the country joined the European Union in 2004 and was accepted to the Eurozone in 2009.

## Bratislava: a gem polished to shine

A two-day-stay in Bratislava was our introduction to the Slovak Republic. The 50 Euros we paid for a posh hotel room, including underground parking, was value for money indeed, but after that we got almost a price shock! The prices in Bratislava were very high indeed! They were a fair bit higher than in Austria's Carinthia region, where we had been one month ago. In nearby Vienna, it might be different. We read that not long ago, Austrians came to Slovakia for shopping, but nowadays, it's vice versa.

Bratislava's suburbs are dominated by large business- and apartment buildings. Many are new and modern, but there are



still industrialized apartment blocks from former Eastern-bloc times. The latter had meanwhile been renovated and colourfully painted. The town planners biggest challenge was probably to create parking for everybody, as it seems that now everybody owns a car. On the other hand, as in Hungary, there were ample foot- and bike ways. So, the 30 minutes' walk from our hotel to the old town was very pleasant. We approached it over Bratislava's landmark bridge, crossing the Danube. Almost 85m above the water, a restaurant called UFO, sits on the pylon that supports the tensioning wires. Pedestrians and cyclists don't need to mingle with motor traffic, as there are, along both sides of the bridge, foot- and cycle paths below street level.

The first thing you see, when crossing the bridge, is a castle on one side, respectively the pier for the Danube-cruise liners on the other. A few steps more, and you're already smack bang in the middle of the historic centre. It was a very hot day, and so we were happy for the big tree lined square Hviezdoslavovo námestie. All over the centre, countless cafés, restaurants and ice cream parlours hoped to attract the tourist crowd. Sure enough, some of them were just tourist traps, hyping simple overpriced food as local specialities, or luring tourists with dirt cheap meals, but intend to earn a fortune with outpriced booze! However, the towns 430'000 inhabitants know to separate the wheat from the chaff, and tourists who take the time to choose, find some excellent gems, including cuisines from all over the world.

Bratislava's pedestrian area spreads almost over the entire old town, which is rather big. Countless historic buildings have all been lovingly restored. The alleys were bustling with foreigners and locals alike. It took a while until it occurred to us that no shops serving the daily needs abounded. The shopping streets for the town's population can be found just a few blocks outside the very centre. There, you see the same retailers as all over Europe; it's almost impossible to find a local brand. German super-discounters, supermarkets from the UK, Austria and France, furniture stores from Scandinavia, clothing- and shoe stores from Austria, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands or France, do-it-yourself stores from Germany and the UK - anyone is here - and they all make good money! Obviously, the money the EU invested to develop the former Eastern-bloc countries, is paying back several fold to the Western European economies.



## The Slovak countryside

As we left Bratislava, we were curious whether the capital's high prices prevail all over the country. Well, Western European retailers were still around doing business at the same city-prices but otherwise, everything else is more than a fair bit cheaper on the country side. Just as Americans apply the "Burger Index", we resort to an "ice-cream index". In Bratislava's old town, a scoop of delicious artisan ice cream sets you back 1 Euro, out in the suburb -.80 Cents, in a medium size town -.50 Cents in the countryside -.40 Cents and in the remote villages only -.30 Cents. Those looking for something a bit more substantial, will find lunch menus for as little as € 2.70 in the countryside.



Before enjoying the first ice cream, we followed the Danube. After around 50km, we reached the locks and the hydraulic power-station near Gabčíkovo. Tourists were allowed to climb a viewing platform on the control tower, to observe how ships pass the locks. In 1977, the power plant was initiated as a joint-project between Hungary and then Czechoslovakia. After Hungary backed-out due to ecological and financial concerns, Czechoslovakia built a reduced barrage all on its own territory. As the waterflow to Hungary is seriously affected by the project, the neighbours are still at loggerheads.

Continuing through lonely pastoral landscapes, our navigation system suddenly indicated a freeway ahead. Despite having bought a new map, we couldn't find anything like that, and with the sparse traffic, a freeway wouldn't have made sense anyway. Soon, we discovered the bug: totally unexpected, we stood at the shore of a river. A small vehicle-ferry with two cars already on board was waiting. Luckily, our car is rather short, so we could just squeeze in - otherwise we would have needed to wait for the next crossing.

Having driven through half the country, we noticed that the layout of Slovak villages resembles those of Hungary, but with the difference that Slovak single family houses are much bigger. Here, we only rarely saw "for sale" signs. We heard that some 80% of Slovak families have the privilege to live in a single family house they own. In Central Slovakia, we drove over low rolling hills with golden wheat fields. Because of a long lasting heat wave, there was a shimmering heat haze. This eased a bit further north, as the landscape was rather forested and we got to higher altitude.

## Dobrá Lúka: naturism on a Dutch run farm retreat

Arriving on 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 2015 at [Dobrá Lúka](#), Mark and Margode, the Dutch owners gave us a warm welcome. We just interrupted the communal meal and wondered why everybody was wearing warm clothes. After all, it's a naturist place and the sun was still shining. However, not much later, we started to feel how quickly the temperature here dropped from 30°C down to 15°C. Margode told us, this happens every day, as we were now on 700m of altitude. Great, it seemed we had chosen the right place to survive the heat wave that hit the continent.

Dobrá Lúka, which opened 2010, is Slovakia's first and still the only naturist ground. This small camping is more of a lifestyle farm, where animals always outnumbered the naturists, during our stage. The owners love to have a lot of different animals, solely for the entertainment of their guests and themselves. Goats, sheep, horses, pigs, chicken, rabbits, a dog, cats and the neighbours' calves roam around the petting zoo. Watching the animals, especially the offsprings that regularly managed to escape the broad-meshed fence, was not the only entertainment. There is also a small pool, a fee-based sauna and a big barn, divided into nicely decorated rooms. There, visitors find internet access, a library with tourist information brochures, and a large lounge with a fire place. Sometimes, canoe and sight-seeing tours are being organized.



Communal meals are offered three times a week. As they are being served at 6PM, we were not sure, whether they're meant as afternoon tea or dinner. Despite the local chef, the atmosphere on the table is very Dutch, as most guests come from the Netherlands. The owners speak very well English, but the majority of placards and lists to subscribe to something, are printed in Dutch only, rarer in English, and even more rarely in Slovak. No wonder that the few Eastern European guests left the camping normally after one or two nights.

Eighteen pitches are to be found on several sunny meadows. Furthermore, there are an apartment and two on-site vans for rent. We, as roving spirits naturally had to go for the latest addition of the rental range; a gipsy wagon. Originally, it has been used as working quarter on Slovak construction sites. After it came to Dobrá Lúka, it had gotten perfectly renovated, wood-panelled and equipped with a wood stove, a kitchenette and a terrace. The bright blue wagon is located on a hillside, granting unhindered views and a cooling breeze.

We enjoyed our stay, but unfortunately Dobra Luka is not ideal to experience much of Slovak life, as it is located in a very sparsely populated area without many places of interest to tourists. You have to drive 15km to find two Pizzerias, an ice-cream parlour and a medium-sized supermarket. However, to find a genuine Slovak restaurant and a sizeable town, you have drive 30km. This is the town of **Zvolen** and that's where you find it all: a wide range of restaurants, and any western brand of supermarkets, including a 24h Tesco. To reach the first worthwhile tourist-sight, the former mining-town of **Banská Štiavnica**, we had to drive 45km, though we spent a nice afternoon there.

## Exploring Slovakia's North-East

In fact, Slovakia boost many worthwhile sights and towns to visit and that almost all are off the beaten track, adds to their appeal! Most are to be found in the north of the country. We reserved a few days to explore at least the north east. To get the most of it, we left the Dutch colony a day earlier than planned.

Our first stop was in Zvolen, where we had lunch. Then we continued to the world heritage listed wooden church at **Hronsek**, where we had the privilege to be the sole visitors. Well, we were not all by ourselves, as some women from the neighbourhood were busy to groom their church with brooms.

We devoted the rest of the day to the pretty town of **Banská Bystrica**, where we also stayed overnight. The brightly painted houses along the huge elongated main square, are all wonderfully renovated. Numerous church- and clock towers are guarding the nicely pedestrianized plaza, decorated with flower beds, a fountain and a war memorial. The population



whiled away the time in the many outdoor café-bars and eateries, or strolled around with an ice-cream in hand. We joined in with a delicious home-made ice-cream. Later we had dinner at a nice restaurant and before midnight, a cake and fruit cocktail at another place. As any sizeable Slovak town, also Banská Bystrica boasts a wide array of hip coffee- and cocktail bars, specialising in cakes and elaborate drinks. It was only the beginning of the week, and we were amazed how popular the uncountable trendy establishments prove among young Slovaks. It seems they have enough money to spoil themselves with extravagant drinks that may cost more than a lunch meal. Obviously, people rather

drunk some fancy cocktails than too much alcohol. As much as we were amazed about the locals' habits, they couldn't see any reasons for us coming here. More than once, somebody asked us for our reasoning, as they couldn't see anything of interest to us around here. Slovak people all seem to think that Swiss live in a beautiful country, amidst of the spectacular Alps that must outshine everything Slovakia has to offer.

Our motivation for coming here wasn't to see high mountains, indeed. Never the less, the **Tatra Mountains** still bore some surprises. As hinted before; wherever we went, we felt, we were the sole tourists. At **Štrbské Pleso**, this was certainly not the case! This High Tatra mountain resort on 1,350m of altitude, was bustling. Visitors arrived from all over Eastern Europe, though Western Europeans didn't seem to be attracted. Everybody admired the small lake Štrbské Pleso, where not only trees, but also a few big hotels were beautifully reflecting on the water. Many tourists opted for one of the very popular hiking paths, where keen walkers soon became part of human "ant trail", just perfect to show off their designer hiking gear. Up here, it got so obvious how quickly Eastern Europe has transformed to a consumerist society, and nobody seemed to pass the countless souvenir stalls without spending some money!

## Off the beaten track

Late afternoon, we continued to the beautiful small town **Kežmarok**. It lies so close, yet so far away from the tourist circus of the Vysoké Tatry, as the High Tatras are called in Slovak. The name Kežmarok stands for "cheese market". Smoked cheeses, often made of sheep milk, available all over Eastern Europe, were among the culinary delights of the region. Anyway, food was an unexpected highlight of our Slovakia trip. Many chefs realize that there's more money to be made with creative food than with just simple fare, and locals seem to like it. Less delightful, we deemed the Slovak breakfast. We admit, at any hotel, the bread is as fresh as straight from a bakery. In the few bakeries we found, we got an ultralight spongy something, that felt so fresh, we were sure it had been baked within the last fortnight... The only noteworthy exception was a plaited loaf, available from any supermarket and similar in taste to our beloved Swiss "Sonntagszopf". Slovak bakeries are more concentrating on great cakes and pastry than on bread. Consequently, most call themselves "Cukráreň" (sugar baker, or confectionery respectively). You find them all over the country aplenty, often with an attached coffee shop, and they proved always very popular.



The next day, we drove to the easternmost point of our summer tour. On the way, we briefly stopped at **Stará Ľubovňa**, where a giant castle ruin enthrones the town. This town has a different feel, as most inhabitants belong to the Roma people. In fact, about 10% of Slovaks are Roma and they seem not to be too well integrated. Most live rather in remote settlements, often in inadequate housing. The lack of willingness to integrate this ethnic group, became a big problem and it's Eastern Europe who suffers most of it. Particularly bad is that the few integrated Roma often seem to become racist against the non-integrated. Most tensions seem to be amongst Roma from different areas and not between Roma and Non-Roma.

All peaceful it was around the old wooden church **Venécia**, above the small village of Lukov. As at many of Eastern Europe's other top attractions, we were again the sole visitors at this Greek Catholic wooden church, constructed in 1708.



The next jewel we visited, was the historic old town of **Bardejov**. It has a big town square, centred solely by the small town hall from 1511. The square is framed by nicely restored colourful town houses and an impressive cathedral. Considering the holiday season, Bardejov was surprisingly quiet for an UNESCO World Heritage Site. Slovakia does certainly not realize the potential it would have for tourism. The ten or so, ice-cream parlours surrounding Bardejov's main square, are a good example: strangers will only find them, if they see somebody coming out with a cone in hand. The show-case is usually in a back-room. No sign advertises the sweet temptation. What for? Locals know where to go!

Slovak tourists seem to be more attracted to the healing waters at the nearby spa town of **Bardejovské Kúpele**. Here, tourism obviously has a long tradition, reflected by a mix of beautiful old mansions, and huge ugly concrete spa hotels from the communist area. The town's open-air museum, where several historic wooden buildings can be found, seems less popular. Why else would it close, even during peak-season, already at 16:30h and this, after a lunch break?

In places with so few tourists, you get to know each other. So, when we looked around for a place to have dinner, back in Bardejov, an Austrian couple offered us to sit on their table. They couldn't believe either that Bratislava seems to be Slovakia's only town, popular with western tourists and that uncountable valuable centuries old cultural assets are not on the tourist trail at all. On the other hand, this bears the advantage that locals appreciate the few visitors. We always felt very welcome, very safe and Slovak people were all very friendly and helpful, whether they spoke a language we understood or not.

## Poland: country of vast contrasts

Arriving from north-eastern Slovakia, we reached Poland on July 17<sup>th</sup> 2015. With an area of 312'679 km<sup>2</sup> and almost 38.5 million inhabitants, Poland is the EU's sixth largest country in size, as well as in population. During a very eventful past, the country had been an influential power, got annexed and divided several times, got independent again and finally, today's Poland joined the EU in 2004. However, for the time being, it still retains its own currency, the Złoty. After the communist area, it developed quickly and has now a thriving economy.

### World heritage sites: uncommercialized cultural treasures

Just after crossing the border into Poland, the first highlights were already waiting for us: world heritage listed wooden churches. So far, we've experienced Unesco listed World Heritage Sites mainly as over-commercialised crowd drawers, bustling with people. In Eastern Europe, this is wired differently. You can have such cultural treasures all to yourself, even during the summer holidays - if you find them at all, as they are hardly signposted. The many pretty wooden churches in Poland are among those world heritage sites. However, if you pop up, quite often, seemingly out of nowhere, somebody arrives with the key and lets you see the precious inside of the temple. The three- to six hundred years old places of worship look already very pretty from the outside. Most of them have been built in wood only. Their roofs were covered with shingles and also the "nails" were made from timber, though through renovation, some might meanwhile have obtained roof covers in copper or other metals. Architecture and shapes vary tremendously, as the churches have been built during different periods of styles, e.g. Gothic, Renaissance or Baroque. Square and round elements can be found, either as nave, rooftops or towers, of which some have pretty onion domes. Originally, many temples were constructed by Lemkos as Ukrainian Greek-catholic (now Greek orthodox), but are "used" as Roman-Catholic today.



In the beginning, we made detours to see as many of those wooden churches as possible, but soon we realized, they are so numerous in the area of Lesser Poland, we can't see all of them anyway! Those we visited, include the wooden beauties at Konieczna, Kwiatów, Skwirtne, Hańczowa, as well as the new and old church at Wysowa-Zdrój. We've also visited those in Czarna, Brunary, Binczarowa, and the last in Bogusza, which has a small bell-tower standing beside.

As we drove through the Polish countryside, we noticed the sheer number of single family homes along our way, many of which were brand new. They were not only in urbanisations or villages, they were just about everywhere, always surrounded by large plots.



It was already late afternoon, when we stopped at the picturesque village of **Stary Sącz**. Here, we got to see another type of church: open air. In the courtyard of the monastery of Poor Clare Sisters (Klasztor Sióstr Klarysek), the benches were ready for mass, above them the altar in the centre of what resembled a bandstand.

As we were still in the midst of a hot spell, it was absolutely necessary for our survival to learn the Polish word for ice-cream. Luckily, here in Poland, it's a much easier word than in the other Slavic countries; just Lody. Ice-cream parlours are as plentiful, as in the other former Eastern bloc countries, but they are again often hidden.

## Cracow: pretty but overrated.

Towards the evening, we reached **Kraków**, undisputedly one of Poland's main tourist magnets. The huge main square, framed by well restored historic buildings, is very impressive indeed. Unfortunately, just around the corner from this show-case piece of Cracow, the façades of many buildings are crumbling and blackened with soot. Not really what we expected to see! Tourists come anyway, if it's only because of the cult made around a former Polish Pope, or to visit a factory, where parts of the movie "Schindler's list" had been recorded.

Otherwise, Cracow gave us the impression of a rather wealthy city. Its 760,000 inhabitants have quickly adapted a modern western lifestyle, with all its pro's and con's. Upmarket shopping centres abound, hustling and bustling, and the roads are jammed with cars. Young people can afford to go out, and boost the business at the countless restaurants, upmarket bars and drinking dens. On the positive side, we noted that creative restaurants are now so readily available that Gault Millau, as well as Michelin, issue gourmet-guides about Poland. On the negative side, it's obvious that excessive drinking and smoking became serious problems. It's almost as bad as in the UK. Every morning, we saw the police collecting drunks from pavements and parks; no wonder with 24-hour booze shops abound, selling those legalized drugs.

After two days in Cracow, we continued our trip south-eastwards. The green hilly landscape was again dotted with single family houses, all along our way. When stopping in **Zator**, we found something abundant all around Poland, only with one little difference. Here, it was eye catching to everybody, not hidden and only known to village folks: an ice-cream parlour.

Eastern Europe has rapidly adapted a western lifestyle where everything is available almost everywhere. However, often shopkeepers assume, their prospective clients know their choice of products. They don't see a need to clearly mark their store, so strangers know whether they sell motors, meat or clothes. The European Union wants to help change this and has set up a fund with the purpose of "*making the offer more attractive...*".

Entrepreneurs who got a grant from that program, are obliged to display that they got money either from the EU, or one of its associated free-trade members. Here, it was clearly marked that the Federal Swiss Government contributed some 44,000 Swiss

Francs (~€40,000), to move the ice-cream counter from a dark Pub room to a new location next to the entrance, right on the village square. And really, more passersby queued here than at any other ice-cream parlour we had seen. As the EU and the Swiss Government respectively, know that ice-cream tastes even better if you enjoy it during a free concert, another Swiss sponsored fund supported also a rock festival here in Zator. Similar events were also sponsored in other Eastern European towns, like in the Slovak capital Bratislava. It's a good way to re-distribute the wealth on the continent a little bit. If Europe gets a bit more even through such contributions, it's certainly to the advantage of everybody. Furthermore, the Swiss Government can support cultural events without facing the risk that the own population moans about the noise...



## Centrum Naturystyczne Cezar: year round naturism in Poland

On July 19<sup>th</sup> 2015, we arrived at [Sauna Cezar](#), Poland's closest equivalent to a naturist resort. The owners, a Polish-Dutch couple, opened this place in Bielsko-Biała in 2003. It's mainly an indoor centre with a very large sauna, spa and swimming pool. On warm days, deck chairs on a large terraced lawn above the main building, invite to get an all over tan. Families with children will appreciate the various playgrounds, while adults may prefer the billiard table, the small sports field, or the BBQ hut above the sunbathing lawn. Sauna Cezar is popular with Polish families and couples, who make for 95% of the customers. Most come as day visitors, and as the centre is open until midnight daily, many opt to visit after work, be it summer or winter. They also appreciate the freshly prepared counter-meals of very high quality. It's a place, where you feel that you're in Poland.



The small charming place, offers some possibilities to stay overnight; a few pitches for tents, a few for caravans, 3 camper's rooms, 2 hotel rooms and 1 apartment. Overnighters pay the entrance to the naturist complex only on days when they visit it - on sight-seeing days, you pay for the overnight stay only.

We had reserved Sauna Czesar's large luxurious apartment for 10 days, and we liked it, as well as the location of the centre, very much. We were situated on a hillside at the edge of a mansion district. The fit can reach a good number of excellent restaurants, grocery stores and even a shopping centre on foot, the lame go by car or public transport. Yet, nothing is far away, the problem is just to find it. We didn't need to stay in Poland for long, until we noticed the lack of town planning. Apart from historic town centres, laid out in ancient times by former rulers, no-one seems to have imposed policies on where to build what. If you inherit a yard in the midst of a residential area (most of Poland is residential area), it's up to you, whether you build your family home, a hotel or a disco, a workshop or factory, a shopping centre, or a naturist centre - all is possible. If the yard is large enough and you got the cash; just do it! Wherever we walked to from Sauna Czesar, it was always interesting to see what kind of businesses intercepted the residential area. The restaurants we had chosen to sample Polish cuisine, were mostly surrounded by family homes.

When venturing out, we discovered that many towns and villages don't have a visible centre, as all businesses are dotted around. The twin-town of **Bielsko-Biala** is a notable exception, as it has a very nice old town, built by former rulers, predominantly from Germany and Austria. During Poland's eventful past, the River Biala separated not only the towns of Bielsko and Biala, but was for many centuries the boundary between different kingdoms and shires. The two towns were unified by the Nazis in 1939 and by 1945 they became (again) part of Poland.

Nicknamed "little Vienna", Bielsko-Biala has been flourishing for long, due to a wide range of industry sectors that settled here. Transformation from the communist system to a western market economy, went here probably even faster than in the rest of the country. Though there's an amazing number of small local supermarkets, also here, the big players invaded from all over Europe. Nowadays, three large up-market shopping centres with almost all Western brand stores, seek to make profit with the growing demand of the 175,000 inhabitants. Should anyone run out of money, they just ask for a credit at a "local" bank, like Crédit Agricole or BNP Paribas from France, ING

(International Netherlands Group) or Banco Santander from Spain, just to mention a few. Western European EU countries are retrieving their investments manyfold whenever they can, indeed!



When we booked at Sauna Czesar, we were not aware that it's situated in such a beautiful, though not touristy region. It was a real stroke of luck. We truly enjoyed the good choice of creative restaurants in the vicinity and we were pleased to find heavy brown bread available everywhere in Poland.

## Czech Republic: overrun or overlooked - but all neat and tidy

Coming from western Poland, we arrived in the Czech Republic on July 29<sup>th</sup> 2015. This 78'864km<sup>2</sup> large country of today 10.5 million inhabitants, had been under the rule of the Habsburgs for a long time. Therefore, many towns and villages have not only a Czech, but also a German place name. Today's Czech republic emerged in 1993, after Slovakia split up from Czechoslovakia. However, both sort-of "re-unified" in 2004, by becoming members of the EU. Meanwhile, the East-Bloc past is nothing more than invisible. Even if the Czech Republic didn't introduce the Euro yet (on political reasons) it has become a modern industrialized country too, with a strong economy and very low unemployment.

Concerning this subject, we have translated a quote from the prestigious economist Tomáš Sedláček:

quote ...we have created manic-depressive societies that are able to grow quickly, yet are very unstable. For the sake of growth, we sold stability. In my point of view, stability is more important than growth.

Increasing the GDP isn't mandatory. The example of the neighbours Czech- and Slovak Republics point this out. The Czech Republic had modest growth during the last 10, 15 years, and unemployment rates of six to eight percent. In the Slovak Republic on the other hand, unemployment was higher than ten percent, despite the growth rate being twice as high as in Czechia. unquote

## Traversing the picturesque country from East to West

Our first destination was the unexpectedly beautiful town of **Olomouc** (Olmütz in German). The UNESCO decided that the Holy Trinity Column deserves to be listed on the World Heritage list, though we would put the entire old town there!



The awarded monument stands on the town's largest plaza: "Horní náměstí". From there, you don't have to go far to reach one of the other squares. None of them is actually square, but all of them, as well as most roads, are lined with picturesque colourful, and well restored town houses. Olomouc is a real beauty, and we can't understand why it's largely overseen by tourists. To us, this town had much more appeal than Krakow in Poland, which is raided by tourists. Well, Olomouc is nothing else than just an extremely beautiful town of 100.000 inhabitants, but there is neither a famous cult figure nor another pilgrimage site of modern times.

Now it was time, to get to see something created by Mother Nature. The Moravian Karst, north of Brno, is famous for its uncountable caverns and caves. In an area of less than 100km<sup>2</sup>, about 1100 caves are known. Five have partly been made accessible to tourists, so the common man can get a glimpse of the wonders in the underground. Now in peak season, the most popular must be booked weeks ahead. This is not our way of travel, so we chose **Balcarka cave**, where it was possible to buy a ticket just five minutes before the next guided tour started. The small parking lot was pretty full, mainly with Czech visitors and some other Eastern European, but we were the only "Westerners". Consequently, we didn't understand the tour guide, but we got a little leaflet in German. With 14 participants, the group wasn't too big and words were not necessary to describe the beauty of the diverse cave formations anyway. Though the tour through the extensive cave system lasted for an hour, Brigitte felt being pushed through too fast, as in any cave-tour. There was hardly time enough to admire the stalactites and stalagmites, before the lights were switched off behind us.



## From ordinary to extraordinary villages

Fed with uncountable new impressions, we left the cave in the forested area and continued over rolling hills, dotted with nice manmade fish ponds. Often, we were also seeing huge cornfields, where presently big harvesters were at work with the grain crops. Luckily, we didn't meet any of those monsters on the narrow roads. But summer was also the ideal time for road work. Therefore, we run into numerous diversions. In the Czech Republic, re-routing of traffic normally means not only a few hundred meters, but rather a few dozen kilometres. With so much extra mileage, we didn't get far and landed for the night in the village of **Velká Bíteš**. We felt, it was interesting to explore an entirely ordinary "no-name" place. As many Czech villages, also Velká Bíteš has a large cobble stone main square, guarded by picturesque nicely renovated houses and a town hall. We could choose between several places to stay and also here, it was easy to find a good place to eat.



After a brief stop in Třebíč, we reached the 6.000 soul village of **Telč**. This is another world heritage listed jewel, largely ignored by Western tourists. Local visitors abounded, especially around the souvenir stalls. The large elongated main square is a real feast for the eyes. A big castle and a church are situated at the northern end, but really remarkable are the long, uninterrupted rows of 16<sup>th</sup> century houses framing the plaza. Most have arcades and nicely decorated gables, like crow-stepped, or corbie gables. The façades are often nicely painted or decorated with sgraffito.

After passing some more hills, ponds and lakes, we reached the town of **Třeboň**. Its pretty old town didn't look that different from Telč, though it is smaller, yet has more inhabitants in its agglomeration. Třeboň was as beautiful as any town we had visited so far in the Czech Republic. There was only one difference: that Friday night, accommodations were solidly booked, and we had a hard time finding a suitable room. We had to drive 5km out, until we were successful. On the next morning, we discovered the reasons for this stampede. Hundreds of market stalls occupied the main square, offering nothing but tourist junk, yet they were ever so popular. Furthermore, a few concerts attracted the locals. Seeing that, we just smiled in disbelief. Even more astonished we were upon leaving the village. We passed a 5km long queue of cars, patiently waiting to enter the village and find parking.

We started to worry, whether we should give a miss to our next destination, **České Budějovice (Budweis)**, a city of 100.000 inhabitants. We didn't need to worry. Budweis was empty on this Saturday! Why, we didn't know. We just enjoyed to have another Czech town full of highlights almost all to ourselves. Again, not only the cobble stoned main square, but almost any road in the centre was flanked by beautiful restored, and colourful town houses. Particularly interesting was the stately pale-purple town hall, decorated by turrets, statues and emblems. Not only the historic architecture was playful, but also some of the modern art work. A little billabong, just outside the old town, was decorated with a raft, used by six bathing belles made of black wire. Some had a bikini, others just a slip painted on. Another "group" was obviously performing handstands in the water, as only their moving legs were sticking out of the water.



## Steeped in History against steeped in money

Less than 20km west of Budweis, we visited the small village of **Holašovice**. Also this rural idyll is largely ignored by tourism. The extraordinarily beautiful farm houses, built in South Bohemian rural baroque style, are only between 150 and 200 years old. All were carefully restored and freshly painted. They're all individual in style, yet they match each other perfectly. If Holašovice was to attract more tourists, the 400 inhabitants would probably feel like living in a museums-village. Luckily, the village is still unspoilt, despite being World Heritage listed. Visitors neither pay entrance-, nor parking fees.

However, one smart farmer worked out for himself that fee based attractions can become real bonanzas. A big rock was in his way every time he was mowing. Instead of moaning about it, he had the sober idea (?) this rock shall become the seed capital to his new tourist enterprise. In the year 2000, construction of Holašovice's own "Stonehenge" began at the edge of the village. By 2011, the megalithic sun ship consisted already of 25 stones, plus a menhir and a dolmen on its solstice. Meanwhile, the meadow has become a spiritual site, in actual fact attracting visitors who happily pay parking-, and entrance fees, in the faint hope to climb up to a higher level...

Next, we visited **Český Krumlov**, or Bohemian Crumlow in English. The old town and a big castle give this place, on a bend in the Moldavia River, a very distinctive identity. Most buildings date from between the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and are of Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque styles. The castle lies on two hillsides along the shore of the Moldavia and is connected with an impressive, several stories tall, arched bridge.

Český Krumlov was the most touristy place we've visited in the Czech Republic. The bulk of holiday makers were Czech and other Eastern Europeans, followed by bus- or planeloads respectively, of Chinese. As the borders of Austria and Germany are quite near, we often heard also German spoken. Visitors are not only attracted by the beauty of the old town and the castle, but love to join the short thrill of canoe rides over a small rapid on the river.

Continuing through Southern Bohemia north west, we stopped at **Prachatice**. This small town turned out to be another of Czechia's many great unknowns. We admired the neat, properly renovated historic buildings around the main square, of which the most prominent was the elaborate town hall. The centre plaza, as well as many alley ways leading from it, were cobble stoned and flanked by stately bourgeois houses. All over the country, it was noticeable that Czech really take care of their towns and villages. However, to us the people seemed to be rather unemotional. We observed for example several times that nobody clapped hands after performances on open air stages, some of which were really quite funny and good.

## Mléčná Dráha: a naturist ground with a pleasant bathing pond

After so much sightseeing we needed a rest. We had opted for [Mléčná Dráha](#), a nicely landscaped naturist centre near Vimperk. Meanwhile it was the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 2015, and therefore, the camping was quite lively with child-rich families, who spend their two weeks summer holidays here. As the owners are Dutch, they mainly attract guests from the Netherlands and the Flemish part of Belgium. We didn't see many Czechs here, but there were regularly some non-Dutch visitors popping in for a day or two, on their way to or from the (Croatian) coast.

Set up among a landscape of forests and fields, Mléčná Dráha offers 80 even grassy pitches, on 12ha of hillside. There is a cottage for rent for self-caterers, as well as 7 bed & breakfast rooms.

We had rented one of these rooms for our 11 days, but realized that the B&B is rather designed for people staying just a few days. However, the owners were generous to us, and created some space in their bar fridge. That way, we could store a bit of cheese and salami, to assemble sandwiches for lunch. The provided breakfast was wholesome, but not for individualists. It was served on a communal table at 9 o'clock, and we were not the only ones who had to set the buzzer. Mléčná Dráha doesn't have a restaurant, but naturists who like socialising, can sign in to a communal meal every evening. Like any other notice, the menu is posted in Dutch only. On our barbed remark, the owner replied: "with your German background, you should be able to sift out what's on the menu". For certain things this was maybe true, but the owners also expected their few guests from France, the UK, and Norway, and even local guests from the Czech Republic, to have the same familiarity with a world language like Flemish. Wonder how many people would be embarrassed, if a Czech Family opened a holiday resort in Amsterdam and would expect any Dutch guest to understand the Czech language?



Anyway, every restaurant in the surrounding that values foreign customers, translates its menu in foreign languages too. As it's important to us, to feel we were in Czechia, we drove out in the evenings for dinner. Luckily, around Mléčná Dráha, there is a good choice of excellent eating places. Each and every restaurant we visited, had a German and sometimes also an English menu, and often the staff had some foreign language skills. Also in the Czech Republic, food was a big surprise; much better than we had hoped for. After the collapse of the iron curtain, Czech landlords realized quickly that improving the quality and adding creativity to their dishes, is the only way to have customers accept higher prices. In general, we got excellent food, often with a tendency to gastronomic cooking.

As this summer was dominated by an exceptionally long lasting heat wave, Mléčná Dráha's guests appreciated the place being situated some 700m above sea level, making it a couple of degrees cooler. The big hit is the little swimming pond, fed by a cold stream, where everybody loves to cool off. Children and adults alike, were fond of the provided surfboards. Especially the little ones were dabbling until they almost grew webbing, or their parents called them to the next meal. On colder days, the sauna is a good alternative to warm up if you don't mind to spend some extra cash. You have to book sessions, which are separately held for children and adults. Furthermore, there are several common rooms in the main building. Here, you can pick up your ordered bread, or a Wi-Fi signal, and buy drinks and ice-cream at the bar.

We got the impression, Czech people are not that keen on naturism, yet they don't seem to have a problem, if others bathe naked. Mléčná Dráha is just a few hundred metres below a small hamlet. From the road passing by, and from several homes, you can easily spot some nudies. However, if the naturists want to see some of the Czech Republic's worthwhile sights, they have to be prepared to drive at least an hour. Or pass through, as we did, in transit, as several top attractions are situated some 70km away. The villages, we had explored in the vicinity, were Vimperk, Volyně, and the winter resort Kašperské Hory, in the Bohemian Forest.

We felt, Mléčná Dráha is a good choice for a naturist family holiday, as long as you don't mind the feeling of being in the Netherlands, rather than in the Czech Republic.

## Regensburg: three days in a refreshing German town



Traversing the Bohemian forest, we continued our trip on August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015 to Germany, eh, sorry: Bavaria. Our only destination was **Regensburg**, a pretty town nestled along the Danube River. We booked a room in the Ibis Hotel, perfectly situated just outside the old town. Regensburg boasts Germany's largest intact medieval town centre. It includes a large cathedral, and a bold stone bridge from Roman times. Among the narrow alleys, we found a surprising number of Asian eateries, often housed in some historic building. That way, modern eating habits blend with passed times.

The large historic old town extends over the "steinerne Brücke" (stony-bridge) to the other shore of the Danube, where one more, particularly pretty row of town houses lines the road. Strolling along the river, we saw many luxurious Danube cruise liners moored to the shore. Despite the many cosy restaurants in the pretty town centre, the cruise passengers were dining in the safety of their ship, contending with a boring vista to the bare harbour wall. If it was Medellín in Colombia, we might understand, but these were Swiss tourists on a "adventurous" trip to Germany!

Further downstream, we reached the large inland port of Regensburg, where we could look around unhindered, because of the weekend. There is a big area with container loading facilities, harbour basins and cranes. Brigitte would have loved to take one of the wooden cranes along, and convert it to a revolving wheeled home...



## Austria: visiting a former world power

After three sizzling hot days in Regensburg, we continued on a rainy and rather cool day to Austria on August 16<sup>th</sup> 2015. This alpine country in the heart of Europe used to be much more powerful during its past as Austro-Hungarian Empire. In fact, until 1918, it was Europe's second largest country, just after Russia. At its peak, the Austro-Hungarian Empire stretched from Italy's South Tyrol to parts of the Ukraine, and from former Yugoslavia up to southern Poland. To us, Austria's influence was visible in any Eastern European country, we visited this summer. Nowadays, Austria's remaining 83.878 km<sup>2</sup> are home to 8.6 Million inhabitants.

## Salzburg: lots of special things everywhere...

Our first destination in Austria was the beautiful town of **Salzburg** that normally caters very well for tourists. However, as we arrived on the first chilly day after a lengthy heat wave, most visitors sought for coffee and cake, instead of ice cream like on every other day. This came too sudden for most coffee houses to be prepared, and so their cake display cabinets looked like empty battle fields in the evening.

With all its castles and turrets, Salzburg brims with lots of grandeur and therefore attracts tourists from all over the globe. Ironically, some of the buses unloading Asian visitors, were matriculated in one of the equally beautiful Czech towns that hardly received any foreign visitors. Here, in the former salt mining-town, where the contrary is the case, festivals are organized to draw even more visitors. The Salzburg Festival, is held annually to honour the town's famous son: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. This attracts many well heeled spectators who would never arrive by bus. The most famous jet-setters



arrive by plane ((sometimes) of their own). Car manufacturer Audi is keen to taxi them around with a large fleet of luxury courtesy limousines.

It wasn't our first visit to Salzburg, but we enjoyed it all the same to amble again through the charming alleys, the large plazas and along Salzach River. Staying at a pleasant B&B some 2½ kilometres outside the old town, we had plenty of exercise, giving us a good excuse to indulge into local specialities like the famous musicians balls (Mozartkugeln), another famous guys tarts (Sachertorte) or big time meals...

## Salzburger Land: where we found what we were not looking for .....

After two days, we continued southwards, direction Carinthia. Real soon, we spotted a sign on the roadside and stopped to find out what it was about. That's how we got to know the deep **Lammerklamm Gorge**. Today, the small Lammer River winds through a crooked ravine, abraded by powerful waters over thousands of years. A boardwalk gives access to the impressive gorge that is so deep, you hardly see the sky. Compared to this imposing work of nature, our lives are just a brief insignificant moment in cosmic time.

Crossing the Hohe Tauern Ranges, we reached the village of **Mauterndorf**, where we spontaneously looked for accommodation. After an old lady offered us a room we deemed too simple, we looked for a younger lady with a newer room. We did find one indeed, yet she made us get up for breakky as early, as the old fashioned lady would have - no moaning helped; we had to get up at 9 AM. Anyway, Mauterndorf has many pretty houses, and some excellent restaurants, it was definitely worthy a stopover.

## Rutar Lido: a very quiet naturist retreat in Carinthia

On August 19<sup>th</sup> 2015, we arrived at **Rutar Lido**, a well equipped naturist ground in Eberndorf, east of Klagenfurt. There, we moved into a luxury mobile-home with two separate bed- and bath rooms. We were going to share it with our Austrian friend Gusti. Brigitte had met her 28 years ago in Australia. Then, the "two girls" hitchhiked with backpacks, yet today, the ladies appreciate more comfort.

On its 19ha, Rutar Lido offers a wide range of accommodation, from year around open hotel rooms to basic camping huts. Altogether, there are also some 700 flat pitches, of which about 300 are occupied by permanents. The resort is situated



only about a kilometre from the village centre. Therefore, naturists can easily walk to mingle with the villagers, and many villagers can easily spot the naturists from their homes. In Austria, no sight-proof fence is required, nobody cares. Anyway, there's nothing special to see; just people bathing and sunbathing in and around some swimming ponds.

Especially Gusti was a bit disappointed that the bathing ponds appear bigger on Rutar Lido's brochure than they are in reality. However, at closer look, possibilities for swimming are plentiful. Two ponds are just natural habitats, one is reserved for dogs, but the largest pond is for bipeds only. A peninsula and a bridge divide it in two sections.

Who prefers swimming pools over natural ponds, finds two large open-air pools surrounded by deck chairs and, separate winter and summer indoor-pool. Furthermore, there is also a covered outdoor pool-set with four smaller basins of various temperatures, among them an impressive 18m<sup>2</sup> jacuzzi. Whenever the weather was less than perfect, the adjoined sauna could be used for free. The aqua complex offers lots of luxury, yet in a very functional design. Also rather rigid, were the rules about quiet lunch- and night hours, or the conditions to qualify for a small discount. The business minded management calculates their costs scrupulously precise. E.g., you couldn't just buy one coin for a load of washing. Oh no! Because some people bring big wash loads that use more water than others, and people choose different programs and temperatures. So it's just normal that the additional consumption of water and electricity has to be paid by the client. Therefore, the number of necessary coins varies, we were explained at the reception...

Rutar Lido's convenience store was not only served by a few young ladies, but also by an elderly family member and enthusiastic sales woman. If you looked for an article, she was always there to offer some assistance. If she didn't have your desired product on stock, she was never short of ideas what else you could buy. We asked for a brush to do the dishes and were proposed to buy instead some juice, a cucumber, plastic cutlery or maybe some apple strudel, or a newspaper... With the same fervour she was ringing the bell ahead of the weekly church service, held at Rutar Lido's own chapel. After fulfilling that duty, it was almost time to go to bed. Disbelievers, who chose to eat out instead, had to park their cars outside reception upon return, as the gate closed already at 9 PM, when guests are meant to keep the peace.

During our stay, Rutar Lido's clients were mainly old age pensioners. Families seem to shy away, which is a shame for such an exceptionally well equipped naturist centre.

The management proofed itself, how changes can sometimes do miracles. When we arrived on August 19<sup>th</sup>, the restaurant was run by a host who was more interested in selling as many drinks as possible than in cooking. We had never seen many guests there. On September 1<sup>st</sup>, Rutar Lido's owners took over the restaurant by themselves and suddenly, it was full every night, despite the number of guests having decreased a lot in the meantime.

## Sight-seeing: castles, cakes and graves



The weather was mostly pleasant and warm, and we had a lot to talk about with our friend Gusti whom we hadn't met in years. Therefore, we spent a lot of time around the camping. We didn't cook by ourselves very often. Sometimes, we drove out to a restaurant a bit further away, sometimes we walked to one nearby Rutar Lido. Around full moon, it was very delightful to come back over the farm lanes.

For sight-seeing, we visited the small town of Völkermarkt that translates into "tribe market" in English. To get there, we crossed the dam in artificial Lake "Völkermarkter Stausee". The same day, we stopped by at the fairytale Elberstein Castle in Globasnitz. An energetic Austrian artist has recently built it as his residence. As always, Gusti's highlight of the day was a visit to the cemetery. We were amazed to see, how many grave stones bore Slovenian names. Here, near the border, many Carinthians are bilingual. Also many villages have a German, as well as a Slovenian place name. We had to smile about the formal titles carved into the grave stones. Gusti told us that on older graveyards, it is quite common to see, not only professional titles, but also the decedent's titles of estate ownership or honorary work in charities and clubs, like e.g. apartment block owner, brigade commander or music director.

Another day, we climbed up to the ruins of the castle above Griffen. It sits on one of several rock outcrops on an otherwise predominantly flat landscape. On the foot of the castle hill, there is the entrance to Griffen Limestone Cave that could be visited on guided tours. Here, some other tourists were around too, but most holiday makers were drawn to the shores of small Lake Klopein that is framed by hotels and restaurants.

On our last outing, we honoured the town of Bleiburg, a snug little place with colourful houses and also an old castle enthroneing it. The starting rain only gave us a perfect excuse, to sample sweat treats at a local coffee house. We enjoyed the remaining time with Gusti, before we all said farewell to Rutar Lido, and left in different directions.



# Croatia: back to a country with pretty beaches and towns

On September 5<sup>th</sup> 2015, time was just right to leave, as it rained cats and dogs. After traversing Slovenia, we met the sun again at Croatia's Istrian Peninsula.

Croatia is one of Europe's youngest countries. For more than a thousand years, it had been disputed between the Roman-, Byzantine-, Ottoman - Habsburg-and Austrian-Hungarian-Empires.

After WWII, the country became a republic of Tito's Yugoslavia. Croatia's declaration of independence 1991, together with its ethnic cleansing, ended in a 4 years long civil war with Serbia. Only on November 12<sup>th</sup> 1995, it ended with the treaty of Erdut. By mid 2013, Croatia had become a member of the EU. This "moved" the country from the Balkan to the centre of Europe. However, political tensions among the 4.3 million inhabitants of the 56'542 km<sup>2</sup> are still high.

Therefore, foreign investment remains limited. Despite this, Croatia has become the fastest growing tourist-market on the Mediterranean. So we intended to give this market another boost, first by discovering the Istrian Peninsula primarily as naturists, then the rest of the country primarily as tourists.

## Naturism on Istria: popular and becoming ever better

Already Tito had discovered tourism as a big cash-cow. He realized that the great coastline with its crystal clear water is a big asset, and discovered nude-bathing as niche-market with huge potential.

Within a short time, some 20 naturist-resorts popped up on Istria's 100 kilometres of coastline alone. They had a capacity of accommodating 100'000 holiday-makers and Croatia became the world's most popular naturist destination. During the civil war, the biggest part of this business was lost, mostly to France. Many vacationists stayed with "La grande Nation", as they found better quality accommodation, at much more competitive prices, especially during off season. French supermarkets offered also a much better choice and quality, simply the way Western-Europeans are used to. Eating out was different too: Surely, French restaurants would never ever offer dumping-price meals. Many didn't mind to pay the price, as they could spoil themselves with real "menus gastronomique", instead of boring and cheap Tito-Epoch grub.



Meanwhile, tourism in Croatia caught up and facilities improved. Some naturist centres went textile, but the entire coastline, especially Istria's still boasts a very high density of naturist-resorts (commonly called FKK like in Germany). Most are quite large and provide a wide range of camping and lodging accommodation. Our stage in 2000 was still nothing to crow about. What we experienced during our stage in remote Cres this June 2015, was in many regards an improvement, if not outstanding. The Italian influenced Istrian Peninsula might be different, so we gave it a try....

## Koversada: a comfortable yet naturally kept naturist ground

FKK [Koversada](#) near Vrsar, was our first chosen destination on the Istrian Peninsula, where we arrived on September 5<sup>th</sup> 2015. Exactly as on its website (and of most other Croatian Resorts'), it's a bit confusing who is in charge of what. Often a large parent-company (in this case Maistra) runs a wide range of holiday accommodation; from textile to clothes-optional or naturist, and from rustic campgrounds to five-star hotels. If the wind changes, the money still goes into the same pocket.



We had a booking for an apartment, and therefore, the main- and camping-reception at the entrance referred us to a second office, inside the resort that's in charge of managing apartments only, a third is in charge of the smaller "half-board-rooms". We were very happy with our newly renovated, very well appointed apartment.



Koversada is a large and very naturally kept naturist ground on the mouth of the Lim-Fjord. The 85ha estate offers around 400 apartments and hotel rooms, plus a few thousand pitches. We arrived rather late, but as we had been there 15 years ago, we thought it would be easier to eat at one of the restaurants inside. Well, we thought. However, if a thunderstorm caused a power cut and only a few emergency lights are on, you might pass several restaurants without seeing them. On the next morning, you just wonder how it was possible to overlook what now looks like an obvious and good choice. Now it was sunny and warm and we started to explore Koversada.

At first, we were astonished how busy and lively the place still was. Somehow it almost felt like we would have arrived back in peak summer, and this on Sept. 6<sup>th</sup>. Not only pensioners, but lots of younger people and children were frolicking in the sun. The pleasant walk along Koversada's coastline and around its little namesake island, is almost 4 kilometres long. A 200m long bridge connects the island, which is reserved for the few holiday makers that really camp with a tent. The island is also very popular for swimming and sunbathing.

As all over the Adriatic Coast, the water is extremely clear and inviting for bathing. However, it is so clear because the shore isn't sandy but rocky. Mother Nature blessed the Croats with an island dotted coastline that is extraordinary to look at, though almost inaccessible for swimming, as it's dominated by sharp edged limestone. In order to become a popular summer holiday destination, here and there, the coastline got altered a little bit with the help of jack hammer and concrete. At Koversada, this was done with moderation. Most of its extensive coastline is now suitable for bathing and sunbathing though limestone is still visible almost everywhere. In places where the waves don't reach the craggy rocks, soil and plants get hold and create pretty little stone gardens.



In most places where Koversada's water front has been altered, it was "tiled" with flat natural stones of different shapes. Almost the entire coastline within Koversada can be walked on and unlike in Baldarin, where we stayed in June, the front row is public. Campers have to place their caravans, motor homes or whatever, a few metres behind the beach front, so any of the 5,000 other holiday makers can enjoy the seafront anytime and anywhere. Apart from the many sunbathing terraces, several lawns are reserved for worshipping the sun, lazing in the shade, reading etc. Furthermore, there are many sports- and play fields for the young and the old. With the help of a concrete dam, a large bay has been partitioned off, and enriched with a sand floor for easy swimming. Koversada has also a harbour with anchor buoys and a wharf for those holidaymakers who bring their own boat.

## Sight, see- and eat- ing

Swimming and walking around such an extensive ground makes one hungry. At Koversada, you find several shops, including an excellent bakery and two Konzum supermarkets. Though they looked well stocked, their choice was very limited at closer look. Together with the still rather cheap restaurant prices, this might also a reason, why most holiday makers to Croatia opt to eat out and that's what we did too. Economical half-board can be booked, but that's buffet-style. We like to choose a different restaurant every day. There are four additional restaurants, plus several daytime beach bars within Koversada, but as they had sports TV running inside, we deemed them only an alternative when we could sit out on the terrace. Luckily, the pretty village of **Vrsar** is only 15 minutes' walk from the entrance to Koversada, and there are uncountable restaurants lining the marina. Many aimed at those tourists looking for a cheap feed washed down with booze. But who looked carefully, could find some better options.



We got the impression that the restaurants in **Poreč**, some 10km down the road, were generally of higher quality. The many tourists from Italy may have influenced the offerings, and in a few restaurants, the tendency goes already towards gastronomic dining. The mother tongue of many Istrian citizens is Italian and therefore, they grow up bilingual. Most Croats working in tourism, are anyway linguistically gifted and can easily talk to visitors from all over the world.

We couldn't believe how bustling it still was in the middle of September, in Poreč, as well as in Vrsar. Both places have really charming medieval old towns, where hordes of shop keepers hope that the tourists look as fondly at the rubbish

they sell, as they look at the historic buildings. In each town, there are still some fishing boats in the picturesque harbours, though most fishermen realized, they earn better bucks by catching tourists. Dozens of boat trips are offered daily, and the skippers have a good array of reasons, why you should book their trip. We're not sure, whether "naturist sightings" were also promised, but uncountable full boats passed near Koversada all the time. More official, were sunset cruises with sightings of dolphins. Once we were lucky to see a good many of those fascinating animals jumping just off Koversada's beach. What a wonderful world!

## Valalta: naturist campground or five star hotel?

On September 15<sup>th</sup> 2015, we set off to rediscover another naturist ground, we've been visiting 15 years ago: [Valalta](#). Though, the road distance between Koversada and Valalta accumulates to about 35 kilometres, the beeline between the two is actually less than 700 meters (not even half a mile). The beautiful, ten kilometres deep, Lim-Fjord separates the two popular large naturist resorts.

On its 90ha, Valalta can accommodate up to 6.500 holiday makers. Some 2.000 of them can enjoy the luxury offered by one of the 620 apartments, B&B rooms and mobile-homes, the others have to contend with "simple" camping. However, all things are relative. At Valalta, even "simple" equals an "excess of luxury", whether naturists desire it or not. We don't expect everybody to like it, but we highly recommend a few days stay, as it's so different from any other naturist resorts we had seen - and we had seen a fair number. Valalta feels like a five star hotel where guests are allowed to camp in the extensive backyard...



We couldn't believe, how much the place had changed since our visit in 2000. Then, it was aiming at German and Austrian commoners, who were attracted, because it was almost like home, but sunnier and cheaper, and they could bathe naked. All guests were expected to be of German mother tongue. Valalta's own brewery somehow drew the wrong clientele.

The legalized drug is still made here, indeed, but the attached "Biergarten" opens now only once a week for a few hours. Nowadays, all notices are posted in Croatian, German, Italian and English. Most guests still originate from Germany and Austria, though Valalta became also popular among Italians, Slovenians, Dutch and many other nationalities. The former basic eateries altered from canteens, where you got nothing but grilled meat, fries and swiss chard to sedate restaurants. In some of them, also creative cuisine can be found. Think about beef-filet in spicy chocolate sauce, or for dessert: asparagus coated in white chocolate.

Altogether, Valalta has 6 Restaurants, plus 5 snack-, ice-cream-, and drink-bars. In most bars, clients have the option to enjoy their order either on a dry table or barstool, or a wet one, placed inside a swimming- or paddling-pool! If a drink or snack drops into the water, no worries. All pools attached to a bar are emptied nightly, and refilled every morning! Even end of September, all 11 restaurants & bars are up and alive. Every evening, a live band was performing at one restaurant!

## Four kilometres of beachfront lined with sun-beds



You're absolutely right, naturism is not about dining, it's about nude living, or as Valalta probably defines it; about nude bathing and sun-bathing. Therefore, apart from an inaccessible 1 km stretch, its entire 5 kilometres of (former lime-stone) coastline are landscaped like a hotel-pool. Bathers chose whether they prefer to enter the water either from a tailed or cobble stoned concrete platform, or from one of the numerous piers and moles.

Alternatively, there are gritty or fine grained manmade beaches, and large, terraced sunbathing areas.



Sure enough, Valalta's landscape architects know that parents want to educate their children about lime-stone-rocks. Therefore, in three tiny sections, they were left almost intact, meaning flattened out, so that deckchairs can be placed on them. Of course, the precious clientele is not meant to bring their own loungers. Consequently, thousands of sun beds and bamboo-sunshades are placed along Valalta's 4 kilometres of accessible coastline!!! Those who prefer to sunbathe offshore, find a good number of wooden rafts anchored in different bays. That this is far too boring for children, is well known. Hence, about a dozen floating bouncing-castles and a toboggan-waterslide are placed in two bays. Besides, there are numerous ordinary playgrounds too. For big children, there is a large marina with a hefty boat crane. Here, hobby captains can have their toy repaired and many choose to overnight on their boat instead of camping.

Those who prefer manmade bathing possibilities, can find about a dozen pools of any size and depth. Some contain fresh-, others saltwater. Around all of them, it's again packed with uncountable sun-beds and sun-shades. To avoid boredom, a good dozen of activities can be joined daily, even at the end of September. Should a little accident happen, the precious holiday maker does not need to worry. Valalta has its own pharmacy, as well as its own medical practice with several medics! We don't know, whether patients can choose between a traditional doctor, a medicine man, or a homeopath. Now in off season, regular doctors' consultation were "reduced" to two hours in the morning, plus three in the afternoon. Above and beyond, there is always 24h emergency service!

Almost anything at Valalta is provided as you would expect it in a five star resort. The only notable exception is the grocery store. It appears modern and big when you first enter, though you soon find out that in reality, the choice is quite limited. No better than in any other Croatian resort - most holiday makers choose anyway to eat out.

For burning the built up fat reserves, a wide choice of sports-fields is at disposal. Besides, you can walk around the extensive naturist ground and up, on a gravel road leading high above Lim-Fjord. Two wooden view towers offer quite sensational views over the camping, down to the picturesque fjord and the sea.

## Mid September at Valalta: Busy, but quiet



To make sure, holiday makers get the upmost of peace and quiet, dogs are banned all over Valalta. Motor traffic is smartly reduced by the rule that normal motor vehicles are only allowed to drive in and out of the resort. Within, you have to resort to electric vehicles, bicycles or manpower. We were amazed, how popular the place still was in the second half of September. Though school holidays were over, there were still families and certainly more young couples than you normally see on a naturist place. People walked everywhere, be it to the daytime activities, or to the restaurants that filled up nightly. We sometimes wondered how early some people set off for dinner. They probably wanted to enjoy the sunset from their

table or go dancing afterwards. Live entertainment always stopped at 11 P.M., considering others who wanted to sleep. Given that the resort was still pretty busy, we had a very quiet time. Ironically, we had heard the sound of Valalta's nightly music more often, while we stayed at Koversada on the opposite shore of Lim-Fjord.

Off-season accommodation at Valalta was not that cheap, but as there was only a modest price difference between the smallest and the largest mobile-homes, we opted for the latter. It was really well equipped, including air-con, two bathrooms and TV. To rescue us from the temptation to put our own house in order, neither a broom nor any other cleaning equipment was provided. At Valalta, apartments and mobile-homes are cleaned daily. As common in a 5-star Hotel, your rubbish disappears with the cleaning lady. It doesn't stop there; the extensive network of paved roads is being swept with the company's own street cleaning vehicle!

Needless to say, guests who prefer camping, are provided with superior sanitary facilities. All new sanitary buildings are divided into generous private "convenience-apartments". Behind the private "dwelling door", campers find a hallway and three partitions, all equipped with designer appliances: one with a toilet, one with a sink and one with a shower! To give little children early training for independence, tiny triple compartments with smaller designer appliances are provided - but who hasn't heard crying little ones, who locked themselves in?

We're not sure, whether those luxury sanitary facilities were implemented for the benefit of naturists, or just to improve Valalta's 5 star rating even further.... Most naturists we know, would prefer big communal, and family friendly shower halls with much elbowroom, where you don't have to queue because somebody shaves or pees.

## Dining in picturesque Rovinj: as decadent as the luxury at Valalta?

Once you're neat and tidy, you might want to visit the historic town of **Rovinj**, only five kilometres from Valalta. Similar to Poreč, also Rovinj attracts hordes of summer holiday makers, as well as busloads of world heritage site chasing tourists. The picturesque town occupies a hill that actually is a peninsula. A bold church on the hilltop guards over rows of tall town houses that reach all the way down to the waterfront.

Rovinj has also a nice fishing harbour, but at least during summer, the fishermen are more after tourists than after fish. Even Valalta tries to earn some additional bucks wherever they can! In Rovinj, we saw two fashion boutiques, and a discount grocery store, bearing the Valalta logo. The same was seen on a truck used to sell food and drinks on a village fair. This all might help to make the naturist resort more acceptable among locals, but the current construction of a textile camping next to, and run by Valalta, is certainly only meant to access some additional income opportunities...



Even at the end of September, the flow of tourists hardly ceased, and for the best eateries, it was still necessary to queue or to reserve ahead. Rovinj's waterfront is lined by restaurants and ice-cream parlours, whereas souvenir shops abound in the old town. As in many Croatian places, the alleys are paved with cobble stones polished by generations of pedestrians.

To our big pleasure, Croatia and especially the Istrian Peninsula offers now a wide array of exquisite dining places. Though simple and cheap meals are still available, competition and demand created by ever more pretentious locals and Italian visitors, gave first class eateries a real boost.



Meanwhile, Rovinj and its surroundings, can be proud to have several Michelin-starred restaurants. The Austrian edition of the gourmet-bible Gault Millau, includes some of the empire's former possessions, like Croatia. It lists 20 awarded top-class eateries on the Istrian-Peninsula alone. We remember Restaurant Monte from our visit in 2000. Then, it was good by Croatian standards, but nothing to write home about. In 2015, Gault Millau awarded this small dining place, not just as another top class restaurant, but as **THE BEST** address all over Croatia! So we couldn't resist to eat there again. At 750 Kuna (~ € 100) each, it was not cheap at all, but at least, we could afford to eat at Croatia's best gourmet-temple, whereas France's top address is (and remains) just unaffordable to us.

Restaurant Monte's 7 course set meal turned out to be a very creative affair with altogether 15 small dishes, served in 13 stages. Also the quality and presentation were really top notch!!! As the chef felt, 16 different dishes would sound a fair bit better than just 15, we got also some apple cake as farewell present.

Our Lonely Planet Travel Guide remarks that the fanciest restaurants on the Istrian Peninsula are almost a bit decadent. To some naturists, decadent is also what they might think about the luxury at Valalta. Simple naturist life and five-star resorts are somehow in contradiction. However, it seems that Valalta managed to find a clientele who seek just that: Nude living in a posh environment with extravagant services.

## Solaris: end of season at a pleasant naturist resort

On September 27<sup>th</sup> 2015, we changed back to the north of Lim-Fjord. We wanted to experience [Solaris](#), a naturist resort on the Lanterna Peninsula, where we visit for the first time. Initially, we intended to check it out already in the beginning of September. However, Solaris is the only Croatian naturist resort we found that has off-season prices that really deserve to be called off-season prices. Consequently, all apartments were booked out long ago, and this until September 24, ten

days before they went hibernating. So we took the chance to stay here at least during their last week. We chose a spacious unit in the newly renovated part of their two-storey apartment blocks.

Only the 128 B&B rooms were not let anymore, but the bigger part of the 156 apartments, were still taken. The pitches on the campground that can accommodate 4.000 "campers", was thinning out, apart from the beach front locations. Those pitches do not only offer the best sea views, but each is equipped with a large brick-built BBQ, and a grass covered sun shade, besides electricity and water. We got the impression, Croatian resorts are competing each other in providing an excess of luxury. Otherwise, Solaris felt much more

down to earth than Valalta. Again, you can walk along its entire 3km of coastline. As almost anywhere in Croatia, the sharp edged limestone on the waterfront had to be altered to create a beach suitable for bathing and sunbathing. Similar to Koversada, Solaris found a good compromise between making it accessible but still leaving the natural appearance. Holiday makers find a good choice of sunbathing terraces, tiled with natural rocks and manmade gravelled beaches.

On its 49 ha, Solaris offers many sports- and playgrounds, as well as a nice swimming pool. From the attached restaurant you can overlook the pool and the sea. As on the beach, sun beds and sunshades can be rented. We had been talking to people who come here for years, after day, and sunbathing always perfectly understands this week packages that include rental RESERVED spot on the beach.



eating in the same restaurant day in the same spot. Solaris primordial need and offers one-of a sunshade, 2 sun beds plus a

As the season was ending, three of the four restaurants were already closed. Luckily, Solaris' guests are allowed to enter the adjoining textile resort Lanterna with a magnetic card. Several additional restaurants and a network of nice walking paths can be found around this huge holiday village. Other than that, some more eateries could be found in, or on the way to Tar-Vabriga, but foodies may prefer to go the 12 kilometres to Poreč.

The sun and the sea were still inviting to enjoy naturist life and we walked daily along the 3 km stretch of Solaris' beachfront. The tidal inlet on the southern end was particularly charming. To us, it was entertaining to see how quick the caravans disappeared from the camp ground. Well, quick is relative, and many didn't really disappear! Some owners of caravans rented an apartment for a few days, to have enough time to stow all their camping gear into the trailer. Many holiday makers didn't take their summerhouse on wheels home. For Istrian farmers, towing thousands of caravans with their tractors away, and storing them over winter, got a reliable business. Then they're looking forward to collecting another fee, when they bring the trailers back to the camping, the next season.

One of the three grocery stores at Solaris was still open every, and all day, until the end of season. The choice of bread and cakes was amazing but other than that, the store didn't really offer what you need, to cook a wholesome meal. Or in positive words: this shop was better than those in the other Croatian naturist centres we have been visiting!

We couldn't believe that the reception was open 24 hours until the very last day. Despite this, when they close they close. October 4<sup>th</sup> was Solaris' closing day, we had to leave by 10 A.M. not 10 past 10; there was no way around!



## Discovering Croatia in the warmth of autumn

After lazing in the sun for 5 weeks, it was now time, to discover Croatia's southern regions. The country's fascinating coastline, its many pretty islands, historic towns, as well as the autumn colours in the interior, were just waiting to be explored.

However, our enthusiastic discovery tour started with a little obstacle. Due to a car race, the curvy road to Lim Fjord was partly closed. As the authorities didn't see a need to mark a detour, we tried to find an alternative over small countryside roads, as did lots of other motorists, including many Croatians.



Anyway, when we finally reached **Pula**, one-and-a-half hours later than planned, by cast of fortune, we found parking just besides the town's chief attraction, without even realizing it. Only upon leaving the car, we caught sight of the bold Roman amphitheatre just in front of us. Though past generations left some parts of it to crumble, what remains from the imposing structure of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, is still amazing. The 105 metres wide and 132 metres long oval consists of two- or three levels of arches, and has a height of 33 metres. During times of gladiator fights, Pula's amphitheatre

could accommodate up to 26'000 spectators. Even nowadays, the arena is sometimes still used for public events, though who's on stage doesn't have to fear death anymore and the terraces don't fit that many bottoms in modern junk-food times.

## Krk Island: bus tours prolong the season

As the rest of Pula didn't impress us that much and furthermore, because it rained, we continued to the island of **Krk**. During summer, it attracts mainly beach bums and water lovers, but even now in October, it still had a fair share of tourists. Bus-tours and independent travellers visit now the historic towns and villages both, on the islands in the Adriatic Sea, and along the coast.

We had briefly stopped in **Krk Town** in June, but now we had plenty of time to dive into the charming old town. We based ourselves in a "Sobe", a B&B without breakfast. Most restaurants were still open and though the simple ones remained empty, the better ones proofed very popular also among locals. We felt, this was the perfect time to travel, as we weren't surrounded by (other) tourists only.

The next day, the sun was out again, and we drove about to discover more of Krk Island. In the very south, we strolled around the village of **Baška**, where tourist businesses were already closing. Baška lies in a green valley, framed by very barren rocky ranges. In southerly direction, you see the totally barren island of Prvić, the biggest uninhabited island in the Adriatic sea.

In the east of Krk, we visited the charming, but not very touristy village of **Vrbnik**, perched on a bold limestone cliff, fifty metres above its harbour. Traditional life can still be seen in the narrow alleys of its old town. To our big surprise, even this small place had a restaurant with a very creative menu.



## Rab Island: a picture perfect town and sandy beaches

Now in October, the frequency of the direct ferry between the islands of Krk and Rab is reduced to commute. Instead, we decided to take the two short hops, between the mainland and the respective islands. Arriving in **Rab Town**, we were lucky to find a holiday apartment with a lovely view over the harbour and the old town. As the weather was not always as perfect as the view, we ended up staying 6 nights, as we were keen to discover Croatia's coastal landscape in perfect weather conditions. So for now, our highlights were dinners at the restaurants, recommended by the owner of a good place that had just closed when we arrived.

Tourists after charming villages still abounded, but the masses of summer holiday makers had left. Eateries, aiming at feeding them with something quick and greasy, had mostly closed for the season. The few restaurants that remain open, were all of very high quality and also popular among locals. To us, eating in Croatia was an unexpected highlight. It's amazing, how much creativity had been added to the dishes during the past 15 years! Nowadays, it's often possible to find something that matches French "Haute Cuisine". Only fish dishes, we're reluctant to praise in the same manner.

Surprisingly, raw fish dishes like carpaccio or tartar are always excellent, but if it comes to grilled fish, Croatians seem to have another taste than we do. Fresh scampi in contrast, we liked all the time; they were always very tender and available at a good price.

We enjoyed Rab's charming old town, as well as the long walking paths following the shoreline. In stark contrast to the prevailing limestone shores, Rab is famous to have the most sandy beaches of any Croatian island. One day, we drove to Lopar in the very north of the island. Because some bays are not that easy to reach without a taxi-boat, we had only seen the sandy town beach. Though it was a wonderful lonely beach right now, the summer vacationers might experience it quite different, judging by the many closed tourist businesses.



As anywhere on the Croatian side of the Adriatic Sea (not on Italy's), bathers can decide whether they prefer to go to a textile- or a nudist beach. After a modern era legend, British King Edward VIII and his lover, Mrs Simpson, were the first naturist tourists to Rab. It's assumed (...) they had been bathing naked at Kandarola Bay. Well, we assume, the local authorities may have taken British humour a bit too serious. The Royal may have said something like "make sure nobody disturbs us, as we might bathe naked...".

## Pag Island: half barren, half green

On October 12, 2015, the autumn storms ceded, the sun re-appeared and the ferries to the mainland could sail again. So we continued our trip, as planned, in the best of weather and admired the blue Dalmatian Sea with its many islands. We only drove half an hour southwards, and then boarded another car ferry. This time it was the 15 Minutes' sailing to the **island of Pag**. Some Croatian islands are very barren; no more than giant treeless dry rocks. From the mainland, Pag looks exactly like that. To our surprise, its north-west coast is quite green and on the tip, there were big olive orchards with ancient trees. Later, we visited **Pag town**, which is located on a huge natural harbour, roughly in the middle of the long island. After passing the crest of a hill, the town suddenly appears in front of you. Its setting is just spectacular! A natural peninsula and an artificial dam with the access road, separate the large harbour from the extensive salt pans behind it. The quaint little town has cobble stoned alleys, lined by charming old townhouses, made of the same type of limestone as the sett.



## Zadar: a pulsating town steeped in history

On Pag's southern tip, there is no need to wait for a ferry, as the 300m long bridge "Paski Most", connects the island with the rugged coast on the mainland. From there, it's only 30km to **Zadar**, a town of 75'000 inhabitants. After 5 weeks in Croatia, it was for us the first place, of which the economy is not predominantly relying on tourism.

We were lucky to find a nice room just outside the fortified old town. The historic part is situated on a long stretched finger-like peninsula. The bay between the "finger" and the mainland forms a natural harbour. The bustling old town is perfectly restored and on its western shore, two attractions of modern time have been added: the "sea organ" that is played by waves and wind, and just next to it, "Pozdrav Suncu" the so called "sun salutation". It's basically a walkable glass panel of 22m diameter, fitted with solar panels and LED's. The energy collected during daylight hours, gets converted into a fascinating light show during the dark hours. Glowing patterns appear, changing colours and shape at random, and alter the glass circle from a colourful mosaic to a monochromic surface.

Every night at dawn, busloads of tourists, especially from Asia, arrive to see and hear the two attractions, powered by nature and created by men. The sea organ and the sun salutation are fascinating gimmicks, but the old town with its cobble stoned alleys, flanked by many historic buildings, is the real attraction!



As we took the privilege to have four days to explore Zadar, we stumbled also into newer parts of town. Thereby, we saw surprisingly many leftovers from the depressing civil war. Devastated and abandoned apartment- and company buildings are still witnesses of the senseless and barbaric act of "ethnic cleansing". Nowadays, the law "not to touch anybody else's property", is respected, regardless of the owner, but they should rather have abided by this rule before they shelled everything to pieces! At least, it was the first time, we noticed damage from the civil war. We had seen much more destroyed and abandoned buildings during our first stage in 2000.

## Plitvice Lakes National Park: powerful waterfalls and crystal clear lakes

On October 16<sup>th</sup> 2015, we headed northeast to get in touch with nature. We had a fond, yet receding memory of **Plitvice Lakes National Park**, and therefore, went to see it again. Visiting in autumn, bore the advantage of available guesthouses literally at the doorstep of the entrance to the National Park. However, once inside, we were all but alone... Uncountable coaches brought tourists from all over the world, to see the lakes and cascades which are very beautiful by all means!

To us, Plitvice is the perfect example, how marketing and a bloated infrastructure can change a place. Fifteen years ago, despite visiting already at the end of August, we felt then like being the sole visitors. There were no restaurants in this lonely area. Luckily, our landlady could provide some simple meals, after a carload of neighbours had gone shopping to the black-market in Bihać, in nearby Bosnia.

Today, the situation is more than just slightly different! Ten restaurants and fast-food stalls within Plitvice Park, compete with dozens of eateries in the vicinity. In nearby villages, uncountable hotels have sprung up and the owners of single family homes let thousands of rooms to an ever growing number of individual tourists.



Plitvice Lakes National Park covers an area of 300km<sup>2</sup>, which are habitat of wolves and bears. What is made accessible to tourists, and what they mainly want to see, is along an 18 km network of board walks and hiking tracks on both sides of the Korana River gorge. Quite unusual for the season, the river was swollen due to heavy rains the week before. In various areas, boardwalks were flooded and closed. Therefore, we couldn't access the western shore but had to contend with shorter hiking paths. Never the less, it was breathtaking to admire the powerful waterfalls and fast flowing cascades. They connect 16 lakes tumbling a total of 153 meters, between the highest and the lowest lake. Looking here and there and everywhere, and putting lots of miles on our hiking boots, we spent the whole day in the park. If all walking tracks would have been open, we would definitely had spent a second day. Weather conditions do certainly affect your visit a lot. We had the privilege to wait for the perfect day to see Plitvice without fog and in the best of autumn light. With such brilliant autumn foliage, and such powerful waterfalls, it was just fantastic!



The national park department knows that especially visitors on bus-tours want to see it all, in no time at all. Therefore, a sophisticated network of tourist-trains and electric boats, both included in the entrance fee, provide easy access and cut the visiting time. In 2014, 1.2 million entrance tickets to Plitvice NP were sold, 100'000 more than the year before! October was particularly popular with Asians. We heard that somebody smartly marketed the Balkan region among South Koreans. The Chinese come anyway, and even more so, because some partisan movies, popular over there, were recorded in former Yugoslavia.

Something similar we learned, while visiting the hamlet of **Rastoke** near Slunj. Evidently, a *Winnetou* movie was recorded at Plitvice in the sixties.

Rastoke is an assembly of old farmhouses and watermills on a hillside, sitting at, or better, in the confluence of the rivers Slunjčica and Korana. Within the resulting cascades, there are several islands which had been utilized to locate grain-mills. Today, the remaining buildings are open to visitors as museum-village.

# Bosnia and Herzegovina: still suffering from self-destruction

Bosnia and Herzegovina, locally abbreviated BiH, is one of the countries that emerged from former Yugoslavia, after it proclaimed independence in 1992. During its eventful past, the country experienced periods of independence, as well as being conquered by foreign powers, like the Ottoman and later by the Austro-Hungarian Empires. After WWII, there were a few decades as Republic of Tito's Yugoslavia. In the years following his death in 1980, populist and nationalist upstarts fuelled tensions between the three ethnic, or religious groups respectively, which accumulated to a civil war in 1992.



It's still disputed how the conflict erupted, but depending whether you talk to a Bosniak (Muslim), a Serb (Orthodox) or a Croat (Catholic), you get a different version "of the truth". Sure enough, the Vatican, exactly as the two other major sects, supported their sheep! Altogether, more than 100'000 lives were lost and 1.8 million people displaced.

Even after the civil war ended in 1995, "ethnic cleansing" continued for several years. An agreement allowed displaced people to return. Yet, those who dared to, were mostly met with aggression and they often had to witness, how their house was burnt down. Unbelievably as it is, this became standard practice. To us, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a horrible example, how easy it is for nationalist and religious leaders, to manipulate commoners with populist arguments, so much that they found it perfectly all right to destroy their neighbours house. It's even more shocking, if you know that intermarriage and friendship between the different ethnic groups has been common during the Tito epoch. The reasons stated for this hatred (that started already a few hundred years ago), are even more absurd, if you know that all people in the Balkan in fact share the same ethnic, meaning Slavic background. The opposing ethnic groups only emerged, after various occupation powers rammed some new religions in to their newly subjected subordinates, and this not always peacefully!!!

Later, the people of BiH attempted to outline ethnic "differences", like the Serbs who started using Cyrillic letters, though their spoken language is no different to the one used by Bosniaks and Croats. Not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but all over the Balkan, ethnic differences are certainly made in the heads only!

Bosnia and Herzegovina's current borders were mapped in the Dayton-Agreement 1995. Today's 3.9 million inhabitants share now an area of 51,197 km<sup>2</sup> which is again sub-divided:

quote from Wikipedia +++ ... *Bosnia and Herzegovina has a bicameral legislature and a three-member Presidency composed of a member of each major ethnic group. However, the central government's power is highly limited, as the country is largely decentralized and comprises two autonomous entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, with a third region, the Brčko District, governed under local government. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is itself complex and consists of 10 federal units (cantons)...* +++ unquote



A truly complicated affair and unfortunately the hotheads still didn't calm down for good.

Meanwhile, Bosnia and Herzegovina wants to join the EU, but the way we experienced it, the country is still a world apart from Europe!

## Bihać + Bosanska Krupa: our first impressions

Even after 20 years of theoretic peace, witnesses of destruction from the civil war are still ubiquitous wherever you go. We got our first impressions of this war torn country after entering Bosnia and Herzegovina on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2015. We entered the country in the north west, near the town of **Bihać**. The weather reflected the atmosphere; foggy, damp and grey. Bihać has a small centre with (of course) several churches and a mosque. On a few buildings, war damage had been renovated, others were still destroyed, and many had clearly visible shot holes. Even statues had signs of bullets. Much more people walked on the roads or waited for a bus than in nearby Croatia. Yet there were traffic jams. The cars were maybe not the newest, but inexplicably often of rather expensive makes like Audi, BMW or Volkswagen.

Nature is quite lovely. We followed the good road along Una River from Bihać to the small town of **Bosanska Krupa**, where we got a hotel room. Its setting on an island in Una River was just marvellous. Unfortunately, the same cannot be

said about the town itself. Several churches and mosques stand shining, in contrast to many houses. Almost half of the apartment- and commercial buildings were still destroyed or abandoned. Many of the inhabited houses are still "decorated" with gun shots and often the business premises in the basement were used alienated. As many shop keepers didn't survive the war, or were chased away during "ethnic cleansing", many shops are now used as emergency dwellings. Behind lots of display windows, we noticed under which basic conditions many Bosnian families dwell. Behind others, we saw piles of fire-wood, tyres or hay being stored. Obviously, the war destroyed also the economy and as tensions still exist, financially strong investors don't queue. Logically, also unemployment is extremely high - above 40% in many places! Jobs are assigned

after the hight of bribes, rather than qualifications, and those who got work, are met with jealousy. Furthermore, it's rumoured that almost every government job is held by three employees. It's open to dispute, whether this is good or bad. It's obviously a waste of taxpayer's money, but an efficient administration would increase the unemployment even further...

In general, we experienced Bosnians as warm hearted people, and seeing so much poverty could make us to feel pity for them. However, knowing it's their self-made misery, it does not! If commoners rather believe their ethnic- and religious leader's populist slogans of hatred than putting their thinking caps on, they have to face the consequences. Could they ever expect something better, by shooting around them? The only pity is, that those rogue ringleaders get away with it, and once more, it's only the common herd that suffers. Depending to which ethnic or religious group they belong to, they're all rock solidly convinced of THEIR version of what has happened.

It seems nobody has learned a lesson! In 2015 Kosovars demonstrate against an EU-brokered deal, meant to ease tensions between them and the Serbs. And what happens now in the heart of Europe? in Germany tens of thousands demonstrate in favour of the racist Pegida movement, and in Switzerland 30% vote in favour of the right populist party SVP. In Bosnia and Herzegovina it all started similarly harmless - or naive - too. Maybe soon, our Swiss compatriots have to face the consequences as well...

Back to Bosanska Krupa; finding a restaurant was rather difficult. Though there were countless café bars, fast-food stalls, and even dozens of discos and night clubs. It seems, the population is willing to treat themselves often to something that only costs a small amount of money. Coffee and cake could be had for as little as 1 KM (2 Konvertible Marks=1 Euro). To us, it seemed also that locals tend to believe in destiny. At least, we found an unbelievable number of lottery and sports-betting offices, a phenomena we later found throughout the country.

## Una National Park: small but beautiful

Also navigating on the road was a bit wilier than in other countries. On most roads, GPS navigation systems for example, were of no help at all! We were lucky that our Croatian map included BiH. As we had heard a lot about bad roads, we decided to stick to the boldly printed "red" main roads. Well, on our second day of driving, our selected main road turned out to be a small forest track, but with superior signposting. At least, the landscape was beautiful, the forest spoiled us with the best autumn colours and there was hardly any traffic. It took some time, but finally we reached a sealed road again and continued soon to the almost a bit "touristy" **Una National Park**. Perfect, we thought. So it should be easy to get a small feed for lunch. Ok then; the first few restaurants we stopped, either seemed closed or abandoned. In a café bar, we were proposed to get ingredients for a sandwich from the next-door supermarket. Just a pity, they had run out of bread. Therefore, the barkeeper proposed another restaurant, some 5km down the road. After ringing the bell there, the

host cooked some Čevapčići for us, and served it with rather dirty cutlery, on a rather dirty plate, placed on a tablecloth in the same state...

Never mind. We were now very close to the National Park's chief attraction at the River Una: the waterfalls at Martin



Brod. Have you read what we said about Plitvice Nationalpark in Croatia and the 1.2 million visitors they receive? Those are all dealt with on two entrance-gates. Here, at Bosnia and Herzegovina's Una National Park on the other side, we hadn't seen any other tourists. Besides, nowhere we could find any statistics about their numbers either. However, those who come, can choose between five staffed entrance-gates. Unfortunately, we could neither give the statistic nor the finances a boost, as we arrived minutes after the Rangers had left. So we got to see the impressive waterfalls for free. Here too, the water mass was rather like in spring than in autumn, meaning the cascades were really powerful.

## Drvar: immature citizens at their worst

Following the rim of the Unac River Gorge, we had a scenic drive to **Drvar**, where we spent the night in the only hotel. This three-star hotel looked posh from the outside, but was rather run down at closer look. They tried to save money wherever they could and honestly, we assume they might be bankrupt before winter is over. There were hardly any functioning light bulbs, and our room was mouldy and very cold.

Drvar was one of the hardest hit towns during the Bosnian war. We didn't even need to leave the hotel, to see the bad state in which the town still is. There were not many buildings in the vicinity, but almost all were destroyed and abandoned - except the church of course. If you re-build a country after a civil war, you have to set priorities! But had anybody been pious at all, during the war?

In Drvar, ethnic cleansing continued even under the eyes of hundreds of UN peacekeepers. In 1998, two and a half years after the Dayton Peace Accord, the UN had to resort from peace keeping, to peace enforcement. What else could the UN do, after the deputy major choreographed a "popular uprising"? It culminated in the beating of the major, and the burning of houses of the displaced citizens trying to return. Also vehicles of the peace keeping force were vandalized. An article, written by a Canadian Professor, gives an interesting insight what the (Canadian) peace force had to deal with during their 8 years on duty in Drvar: <http://peacemagazine.org/archive/v20n3p16.htm>

What came into sight on the next 100 kilometres from Drvar to Livno, was again very nice and varied, judging the landscape, but very ugly, judging the civilisation! Especially in this area, you still see lots of signs on the roadside, warning of land mines, which still cause several fatalities annually.

Despite being a rather lonely region, in all villages and hamlets along the way, some 90% of farms, homes and factories were still reduced to rubble, just as they looked after having been burned and shelled to ruins during the civil war. We were confirmed that most of the houses had purposely been destroyed AFTER the peace accord had been in effect. Also here, nationalist "leaders" of any couleur put so much oil into the fire that manipulated citizens continued with "ethnic cleansing" until almost every house was destroyed - including their own! Those trying to return, were sometimes just slaughtered like animals.



Around **Livno**, the picture changed for the better. Thanks to foreign aid, most of the demolished houses had been restored, at least from the outside. Talking to a young lady, we heard the unbelievably ironic sentence: "now we have a big lack of employers and consumers, we should have more pro-active people here". Who has started expulsion? It's all home-made problems they face now! Sorry, we don't feel sorry!

## Mostar: what is a bridge good for?

Passing various karst mountain ranges, elevated plains, moors, and along various rivers and big lakes, we reached **Mostar** in the evening. We were lucky to find a newly renovated hotel, which was closer to the old town than we had hoped for. Mostar was the first place we visited in BiH, to attract large numbers of foreign tourists. Not many stayed overnight, but came rather on a bus-tour from Croatia. The crowd drawer is "Stari Most". The name translates to old bridge, but it was actually brand new, when it got World Heritage listed in 2005. Like many other cultural assets, the 427 years old "Stari

Mostar got completely destroyed 1993 during the civil war. With financing from all over the world, the bridge, as well as the rather small old town, got re-constructed.



Mostar has a long history of occupation and hostile action, but one of the ugliest chapters was written only during the Bosnian war between 1992 and 95. In the first stage, Croats and Bosniaks fought side-by-side against the Serbs. Victory over the Serbs was celebrated by initiating a new war; this time between the former allies: Bosniaks against Croats. At the end of these conflicts, Mostar looked like Dresden after WWII.

Even though the famous bridge is restored, it was not able bridging the gap between the ethnic groups. Since the end of the civil war, Mostar's 110.000 inhabitants are divided by the Neretva River; Croat People live on the west- and Bosniak people on the east-bank. Of the formerly 19% of Serb population, less than 1% remains.

The two-district "apartheid" was "formally" lifted in 2004. Since then, Mostar is divided into 6 districts that should form one unit. Divided are the people to this day. So much that they still have quarrels about a common administrative structure. Therefore, no local elections could be held since 2008. However, BiH's local authorities seem to be more interested in visiting their uncountable sister-cities, than solving their community's problems. The places we visited, had up to 16 twin-towns.

Strolling around Mostar, we got the impression that the town progresses very slowly only. Even though we got used to see destroyed buildings meanwhile, the number of such "memorials", only around the corner from the renovated centre, is still shocking. Among them, were big apartment complexes, schools, hospitals, community and shopping complexes. On the other side, what has been restored, has often been done very lavish, not only churches and mosques, which shine out as everywhere. In contrast, we got the impression, Bosnian Muslims practice a very moderate Islam, even erotic advertisements could often be seen.

## Republic Srpska: Ljubinje and Trebinje

On 24.10.15 we left Mostar and continued to **Ljubinje**, a village in BiH's semi-autonomous Republic of Srpska. Here, village life appeared placid with many people strolling and chatting on the pavement. Sure enough, there were some remnants of the civil war, though even the abandoned buildings were masked with a minimum of renovation. Only who looked purposely for imprints of the war, could recognise them. In this Serb town, the most shiny buildings were a huge Orthodox Church, next to a small mosque and a little chapel. Also here, coffee bars, betting offices and discos abounded.

Continuing our journey, we passed karst mountains and the fertile plain Popovo Polje near Strujići. The character of this plain is quite special in the respect that big volumes of the water sink into the cavernous limestone ground and re-appear as springs in many spots. Even more capers conducts River Trebišnjica, as it's a classic sinking river. It's magical energy is considered to be harvested for a cross-border underground power-station that uses the water flow inside the karst; the "Systems Gornji horizonti" project. At present, River Trebišnjica's water is only used a more simple way. Huge wooden mills harvest water for irrigation.



The town of **Trebinje**, still in the Serb dominated Republic of Srpska, was our last stop in Bosnia and Herzegovina. To see it, we had opted for a detour, as our travel guide mentioned this is one of the prettiest places in the country. Well, from a distance, it might look appealing, but at closer look, we weren't impressed very much. The modest prices in the many cafés and restaurants, are probably attracting mainly residents from nearby Croatia.

## Final thoughts about Bosnia and Herzegovina

To us, Bosnia and Herzegovina was more of an eye-opener and a shocker than a charmer! As mentioned before, it's shocking to realize how easy populist and nationalist leaders can spread hatred, so much that long-time neighbours believe, they are now enemies. So much hatred, people don't flinch from demolishing their neighbours property, or even killing them brutally! More than 20 years after the end of the war, too many do business within their own ethnic group only. We know now, even more than before: populism must be choked off, not only in the Balkan, but all over the world!

Under pressure from the UN and the EU, the followers of BiH's different religions live now again in relative peace together. However, deep in their hearts, they're still infected with racist thinking.

On our last day in the country, upon leaving the hotel, several employees told us really warmly, how much they hope, we would come back. For the time being, we don't feel like doing so, because it's too frustrating to realize, that in too many people's heads, the resentments against the other ethnic groups are not smoothed down. And besides, there are nicer places to visit than war-zones.

We can only hope, future generations will become more mature, can forgive and forget prejudices. More than 20 years after peace has been imposed by the global community, a new generation has grown up already. Only sad to see, how from the lead-car of a wedding-convoy, an oversized flag was waved. It wasn't the flag of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but of their own ethnic group. Strictly speaking, it's of a neighbouring country, they'd love to belong to... All over BiH, in Croat dominated regions, you see Croatian flags only, in the Srpska region, Serb flags only, and of course in the Bosniak area the flag of Bosnia... We sincerely hope, the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina will find freedom and peace, but they have a long way to go!

## Croatia: from Dubrovnik northwards through Dalmatia

On October 24<sup>th</sup> 2015, we crossed the border and returned to Croatia where we headed to **Dubrovnik**, in the very south of the country's Dalmatian Coast. This town was severely hit at the beginning of the civil war in Croatia, lasting from 1991 - 1995. When we visited in 2000, the old town had already been properly restored. Since then, the old fortification wall had also been restored, making Dubrovnik an even more attractive town. Its beauty is getting admired by tourists from all over the world. The flow of visitors never seems to cede, even in winter. During our 6 days, Dubrovnik was packed every day, and still very lively in the evenings, when many locals dived into the old town as well.



The town's popularity has also its downsides. Parking fees e.g. were by far the highest we had paid all over the country! Sure enough, many restaurants offer average food at not so average prices. If you look carefully and don't let an "animator" talk you into a tourist trap, you can find a good choice of excellent restaurants among the hundreds of eateries.



Now in autumn, most visitors arrived with cruise-liners and bus-tours, of which the latter stayed in large hotels on the outskirts. Private accommodation was therefore not so much in demand anymore. We were again lucky, to find an excellent "Sobe", a room let by a local family. Our 80+ years old landlords spoiled us with little extras, like freshly brewed morning coffees, as well, as cakes and juices in the afternoon.

## Korčula Island: how the Queen changes a faraway place

With good memories, we left Dubrovnik on 30.10.15, continuing northwards. Along the coastal road, we were almost by ourselves. However, in the village of **Ston**, on the foot of the Peninsula Pelješac, this suddenly changed again. Because a 5km long fortification wall on a hillside above the village looks a bit like the Great Wall of China, it attracts busloads of homesick Chinese visitors.

Continuing out to the peninsula, and taking the car-ferry to the island of **Korčula**, we were more or less the sole foreigners again.

We liked the cute little fortified town of Korčula a lot. Though, the town with the same name as the island is dubbed "Mini-Dubrovnik", visitors seem to have abandoned the place after the summer holidays. Again, there was a big choice of private rooms and apartments for rent. On the other side, there was almost no choice, when we tried to find a place for dinner. It wasn't because there weren't many restaurants, it was simply because most were already hibernating. On the next morning, out of a sudden, this changed. At least twenty eateries had opened up again, and by lunchtime, they were all bustling with people. We didn't see any red carpet, yet: the Queen had arrived in town. To be precise: the cruise liner Queen Elizabeth.



After the Royal invasion had left, peace reigned again and on the next day, Sunday All Saints November 1<sup>st</sup>, it was even more quiet than on the day we arrived. Climbing up a hill behind Korčula, we enjoyed wonderful views to the fortified, dome-shaped town, situated on a headland. At the top, we stood in front of a bold donjon; the Forteca. It was built in 1813, during English occupation, and named Fort Wellington.

As we were curious to see more of the island, we drove over forest clad mountains to the interior. Like most sizeable islands of the Adriatic sea, also the 270km<sup>2</sup> island of Korčula has some ranges. Of Croatia's 60-88 islands (depending from which size a rock is being considered an island), fourteen are bigger than 50km<sup>2</sup>. Many have about 300-600 m high mountains. Vidova Gora on Brač, is with 780m altitude the highest "peak" on any Adriatic island.

We were surprised to find a flat planted plain in the middle of Korčula. After reaching the south coast at Smokvica, we came across a very lonely area, dotted with holiday houses that seemed to be inhabited by Scandinavians. Bigger villages included Blato, in the green western half of the island, and pretty Vela Luka (translated to Big Port) in the far west.

On our last evening in Korčula town, we were the only guests in, what we think, is the town's best restaurant. Talking to our host, we learned that the demand during the last five months was so high, it was impossible to get a table for one of the two sittings, without reservation.

## Hvar: reputed as upmarket holiday island

Our next destination was the island of Hvar, which could either be reached by taking a long drive and two short ferry crossings, or by taking two short drives, two short, plus one long ferry crossings. With a 10 min. sailing, we left Korčula to Pelješac Peninsula, where we had breakfast at Orebić. While we were sitting in a coffee bar, the wind picked up and the sea got quite rough. Surprisingly, on the other side of the peninsula, the sea was totally calm, so we took the one hour trip with a second car ferry from Trpanj to Ploče on Mainland Croatia. This spared us some 150km of driving and two border checks, as we avoided the Neum-Corridor through Bosnia and Herzegovina. Instead, we had to drive only half an hour until reaching the harbour in Drvenik, where we arrived just in time for the 20 minutes hop to Sućuraj. Now, we were on the island of Hvar. After lunch, we had 80km of mostly very narrow and slow road ahead of us, before reaching the **town of Hvar**, the largest place on the namesake island.



As many of the island's 10'000 inhabitants were currently busy harvesting olives, we were referred to one of few places to stay, where the landlady had time to accommodate tourists. Economical private rooms and apartment are available all around the country and an excellent way, to explore Croatia.

Hvar's old stone houses nestle around a large cobble stoned main square, besides a horse-shoe shaped bay. It was very pretty, but Croatia has many exceptionally nice places. As the island is well connected to the city of Split, it's at times crowded with visitors. In November, we still saw bus- and boatloads respectively, of Asians, despite most holiday businesses already being closed.

As Hvar seems to attract a rather well wheeled summer holiday crowd, it has a fair share of upmarket and rather pricey hotels and restaurants. However, dining didn't break our bank, as the eateries still open, were rather those offering good quality for a good price. Travelling in off-season reveals how prices are inflated in season. Now, we got discounts and freebies with almost every meal. Drinks were offered, or half-price, the ordered puddings were not charged, or we got 10% discounts on the bill that was accompanied by a music CD as souvenir.

As all over the country, locals love to meet at café bars daily, and some near the harbour front, were very popular. They were busiest in the mornings, but in fact, they filled up until late at night. It seems, Croatians (as most Eastern Europeans - except Polish) socialize rather over coffee and coke than over booze. It's nice to see, there are still countries, where people have enough common sense to realize that they can have a good time without wasting money just to get a headache. We suspect that the snifters, commonly offered to foreigners in Tourist-eateries, serve the sole purpose of generating higher tips.



We were lucky that summery weather with warm temperatures persisted for weeks into late autumn. Just a pity that nobody on Hvar sold homemade ice cream anymore. At least, nobody can "close" the beaches, so we took advantage and went sunbathing twice.

For sight-seeing, we visited the nearby town of **Stari Grad**. Because most shops were hibernating, the place appeared really quiet. While wandering the streets and alleys, we discovered the beauty of its medieval old town. In Croatian "stari" means old, and "grad" means town. So we wonder, whether Stari Grad had another name, when it was new.

## Split: a cheerful harbour town

On November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015 we left Hvar, and went back to the mainland. The state run ferry company [Jadrolinija](#) connects the many Croatian islands of the Adriatic Sea with a large, efficient network of passenger-, cargo- and car-ferries. One such car ferry brought us, after a calm two hours sailing, right into the very centre of Split. As always, unloading the car ferry was done so efficiently, we would call it rather chaotic. The exit ramp is already being lowered while the ship is still manoeuvring in the harbour. The engines of the cars get started and a second after the ferry docks, passengers and the vehicles on all lines, get the "clear" sign from the staff to rush off the vessel. All at once! As the ferry unloaded right into downtown, the first ones were stuck in a traffic jam, before the last ones could disembark.



With its 350,000 inhabitants, Split is Croatia's second-largest city. From a distance, you only see a big concrete jungle. Yet, in the centre, you won't see nothing of that. Split's promenade is lined with nice coffee- and cake shops. Everywhere, it was bustling with people, taking advantage of the good weather. In several places, we could buy homemade ice cream again. Being a large town, Split is up and alive whether tourists abound or not.

We were very lucky, to find a guesthouse with parking just outside the old town. Well, parking meant, the owners had one family car, plus an old bomb that was solely used to reserve a space for their clients' vehicles on the few public parking lots just outside the guesthouse! At Kuna 375 (€50), it was the most expensive room we had in Croatia, but considering its location, view and high standard, it was certainly not overpriced.

Split's charming old town with its many plazas, is world heritage listed. Half of the historic centre is occupied by the "Diocletian's palace". While walking around, you don't realize this huge Roman "palace". Today it's nothing more than a

walled section of the old town, housing apartments, shops and restaurants, etc. The buildings in this huge complex, erected in the year 305 AD, were used as retirement residence for former emperor Diocletian and his Garrison. In the following centuries, the houses had been remodelled and renovated to serve contemporary needs of commoners.

Split is not only attractive in its centre, but also along its extensive seafront. Walking paths along the water lead in both directions. Whenever we passed a town-beach, it was rather popular and there were often a few brave bathers, who took advantage of the exceptionally warm November sun. It was nice to see that also locals like the beach, and not only tourists. Coincidentally, we stumbled upon a naturist beach. So we spontaneously joined in, enjoying the privilege to be the sole foreigners. During our travels along the Dalmatian Coast, we noticed favourably that the next naturist beach is never far away. Never the less, we wouldn't have expected one so close to the city. After lunchtime, all the younger folks disappeared, as they had to go to work. We realized once more, how privileged we are, to live a life as roving spirits.

Apart from gourmet cuisine that was also easy to find in Split, we got fond of the Marjan Forest Park. A large tunnel has been built to keep the park free of motor traffic. Kilometres of former main road, are now enthusiastically used by pedestrians and cyclists. The 3km long park comprises a hill that forms the tip of a peninsula. South facing, there are high rock faces with old cave dwellings.

## Trogir and Šibenik: two charming towns en-route north

When we left Split, it was November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015. In bright sunshine, we drove along the coast northwards, to the fortified town of **Trogir**. Like at other touristy places, craftsmen were at work all over the place, renovating and upgrading the historic buildings in the centre, and the tourist businesses. Commonly in Croatia, the last holiday maker can almost shake hands with the first builder. Local businesses re-invest money earned with tourism, long before the next season starts, or as one landlord put it: "we all have adopted a bit of the German mentality: schaffe schaffe Häusle bauen" (work hard, work hard, build a wee house!).

We walked through the neat alleys of Trogirs age-old centre, admiring the bold medieval buildings. To get a view of the entire fortification, we crossed a bridge to Otok Čiovo. Trogirs historic part is situated on a small island, sandwiched between the mainland, and the much bigger island of Čiovo. Walking past the harbour, we noticed the many luxury rental yachts, awaiting well heeled clients. We had seen before that boat rental is a big business along Croatia's coast. However, who is really rich, does not rent, but own a yacht of course. But the wealthy know also, how to save money. Therefore, many proud yachties have their toy serviced and wintered in an economical Croatian wharf.



As we drove on, we caught sight of the silhouette of another pretty village: **Primošten**, glued around a hill on a peninsula. As the sidewalks had been rolled up for winter, we continued to the town of **Šibenik**. Here, we found a wonderful apartment for Kuna 225 (€ 30), including a garage.

This town of ~50,000 didn't hibernate, but delighted us with a genuinely Croatian feel. It's not a spruced up tourist town at all, but still beautiful and history-charged enough, to attract tour groups from Asia, even in November.

Šibenik has a pleasant promenade along the seafront. A fishing competition was held at the end of the beach, though the organization committee didn't expect the contestants to be too successful. Otherwise they would have prepared a BBQ, instead of providing Risotto...

On the same day, we came across another event. Different choirs and folk dance groups performed on a square, yet they attracted disappointingly few spectators. So WE clapped hands as loud as we could. We are glad, having visited Šibenik, for two days, as it really feels like a native Croatian town.

On Sunday the 15<sup>th</sup> of November, we attempted a long drive northwards, bypassing many places we had been visiting on our way south. As there was little traffic on the coastal road, and the misty weather didn't tempt us to many stops, we made it all the way to **Opatija**, right on top of the Kvarner Gulf. That's where we had started our discovery of Croatia on June 5<sup>th</sup>, so our circle was now closed. Since then, we had not only discovered big parts of Croatia, but visited also 8 other countries in Central- and Eastern Europe.

Now in 2015, we experienced Croatia as much more delightful than during our first visit 15 years ago. As a good farewell to the country, we treated ourselves to a last gourmet meal, before we continued to Slovenia the next day.

## Slovenia: a modern, well developed country

On November 16<sup>th</sup> 2015, we crossed the border from Croatia into Slovenia. For more than a thousand years, Slovenia had been disputed between the Romans-, Byzantines, East-Frankian. Later, it was subdued by the Habsburgs, the Austrian-Hungarian-Empires, as well as Tito's Yugoslavia.

On June 25<sup>th</sup> 1991, Slovenia declared independence, provoking a 10 days war with the Yugoslav army. In stark contrast to most other Balkan countries, there were NO "ethnic cleansings" in Slovenia. Thanks to this, the country developed much quicker than other states emerging of former Yugoslavia, where ethnic tensions still exist to this day.



Nowadays, Slovenia covers an area of 20.273 km<sup>2</sup> and is home to more than 2 million inhabitants. Since 2004, the country is member of the EU and could adopt the Euro already in 2007. Of the 10 new EU-members that joined 2004, Slovenia was the only one, that fulfilled the criteria's so swiftly. Meanwhile, the Gross National Product (GNP) has risen up to EU average.

Already 15 years ago, when we visited Slovenia for the first time, it gave the impression of a proper and neat country, economically well ahead of other former Eastern Bloc nations. The architecture of homes and the mentality of people resembles much more those of the Alpine regions of Austria, and Italy's South Tyrol than the Mediterranean. In fact, German and Slovenian speaking communities live on all sides of the borders.

Also during our three short stages this year, we recognized how friendly, linguistically gifted and well travelled Slovenes are. It's a very nice country with lots of style and we had planned to spend a few weeks here, as we did 15 years ago. Unfortunately, the weather forecast predicted the end of this "endless summer", meaning heavy snowfall, followed by an extreme cold spell. Normally, we wouldn't consider this a problem, but with our old summer tyres, we wouldn't get very far. So we concluded it smarter, we make sure we fetch our winter tyres in Switzerland, before getting stuck ...

Therefore, we pulled up our socks and covered the 700km to central Switzerland in 4 (four) days only! Our only overnight stop in Slovenia was in the mountain village of **Kobarid**. In summer, it's popular with rafters and foodies. The former enjoy to tickle their nerves whilst rafting on the Soča River, the latter enjoy to tickle their taste buds whilst eating at the nice restaurants, of which two are listed among the country's best. Sure enough, on night, a November Monday, all of them enjoyed their resting day. Our landlord advised us to go to the Pizzeria very early, as it might close, if nobody shows up. Never the less, the premise was stylish, the food was good, though the salad was sold out, but coffee and dessert were being offered.

## Austria: across the mountains to Switzerland

The next day, November 17, 2015, we left Slovenia and drove into Italy. On a very narrow (one lane) road, we traversed Val Resia, before heading north over the super wide and super fast Plöcken Pass road into Austria. Soon, we reached the charming town of **Lienz**, where we would have loved to spend a few days too, if we wouldn't have felt chased on, by the predicted snowfalls. So we contended with a good meal and some excellent cakes, at our favourite coffee house. Now it was just convenient that Austrians built almost highways across the mountains. That way, we got quickly to the glitzy winter resort of **Kitzbühel**. It was a pleasantly nice village, but when we asked around for a room, we got a price shock! We didn't see any justification why a B&B room, in the absolute off-season in mid November, should cost twice as much, as an equivalent room in Salzburg during August. At least we found something a bit cheaper in a village 5km away.



On the next morning, we continued over the mountains to nearby **Innsbruck**. We have visited this town already a few times, but this time it had a different character, due to Christmas markets. We couldn't believe, how commercial



Christmas got. Several Christmas markets were held simultaneously. Most started around the beginning of November, non closes before December 24<sup>th</sup>, and some go even on, until January 6<sup>th</sup>.

We were lucky to get a room in the same guesthouse we had stayed 20 years ago. Meanwhile, it was nicely renovated, though remained economically priced.

November 19<sup>th</sup> 2015, was the "last summer day", before the predicted snow was due to fall. So we wanted to take advantage and intended to conquer some more mountain passes. Our favourite, the "**Silvretta Hochalpenstrasse**", was already closed, if we believed the website. However, at the turn-off to the valley that leads to the foot of the pass road, it was indicated as open. A bit reluctant, we took the turn off, but

after 50km, there was another sign stating: closed! So we went asking at the desk of the nearby luxury hotel that was marked closed too, but had an open office. A newly hired girl phoned around on our behalf. The responsible tourist office told her, we should ignore the driving ban, as the road was officially meant to be open until 6PM the next day. Up on the summit at Bielerhöhe, it was quite busy with families, as well as builders altering a power plant. Sure enough, somebody collected a toll for the private Silvretta road, and the Lady couldn't believe that the road was "closed" on the other end.

We spent our last night in Austria near the pleasant town of **Feldkirch**, almost at the Swiss border. The next day, it was dull, misty and rainy, and at higher altitudes, it had certainly snowed. We made it back to central Switzerland safely and had our winter tyres mounted the same afternoon.

After a few days with Heinz' sister and Brother in law, we continued to **Immenstaad** on the German shore of Lake Constance, and that's where we will spend the winter!

## Final thoughts about our summer in Central and Eastern Europe

Well, our expectations weren't all that high, when we decided to venture once more to the countries behind the former Iron Curtain. From previous visits, we remember unmotivated staff, ramshackle towns and food, as bad that Brigitte got a "fryolator trauma". In this respect, we were prepared for the worst, but hoped to get compensated by the region's fascinating land- and seascapes. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Our trip rewarded us with six extremely pleasant months, plus six extremely mind boggling days!

Apart from a month in Austria and Germany, many things were quite different from what we expected. Altogether, we've spent almost 5 months in the former Eastern Bloc countries of Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and Czechia.

Wherever we went, it was just fantastic. Friendly, helpful locals, made us feel welcome in their countries. They might speak another language, but from their mentality, most didn't seem much different to the people of German speaking Europe. Soon, it became obvious: the money the EU invested in the former Eastern Bloc countries, comes back several fold to the Western Economy.

Fascinating, often world heritage listed sites, were awaiting. Time and again, we could enjoy them all to ourselves. Somehow, we got aware that clever marketing, a famous son of a town, or the filming spot of a famous movie, is much more able to draw crowds than "just" the sheer beauty of a place.

In all visited countries, eating out was a big pleasure too. There is something for everyone. In today's Eastern Europe, you can eat simple and cheap, or as good as "God in France". The quality of food and creativity of dishes has improved dramatically. Particularly Poland and Croatia, have meanwhile a fair share of award-winning chefs.

In contradiction to preconception, we felt very safe everywhere. Ironically, people always said: "here, we don't have crime, only further east". It didn't matter how far east we went, still, they all said "only further east..."

We truly enjoyed our trip through Eastern Europe and all but one of the visited countries, tempts to go back, indeed.

Only Bosnia-and-Herzegovina, doesn't tempt to go back! Locals were very friendly and warm hearted too, but what we witnessed there, was an interesting and eye opening, yet very mind boggling experience. It was just shocking to realize, how easy populist and nationalist arguing can manipulate people so much that peacefully cohabiting neighbours become enemies, just because they have different ethnic backgrounds. The resulting cruel civil war didn't stop hatred. Every ethnic group rather stuck to their version of the truth and continued fighting, instead of joining forces and start rebuilding. The war lasted four years and would probably still go on, if the UN hadn't forced the hot heads to agree on a peace accord. Yet, it was totally half-hearted.

Subsequently, "ethnic cleansing" went on for years. House shelling and burning were common practice. It didn't bother the self-named patriots, whether UN peace keepers were watching or not.

People didn't learn a lesson. Now, twenty years later, the electors still vote politicians into power who propose to give convicted criminals of war the status of "popular heroes" by naming streets and squares after them. Populist election speeches seem to impress electors more than the uncountable destroyed houses and factories that still stand in silent witness to horrors of the country's self-destruction.

The recipe, nationalist politicians use to spread and/or keep hate between the ethnic groups, is simple and efficient: skilful speeches with simple words which easily convince everybody who is too sluggish to forge a personal, and maybe critical opinion!

- Those speeches spread on angst and fear from anything unknown
- Those speeches ask smartly worded questions that impulsively have to be answered with YES
- Those speeches suggest the audience, that WE first have to take care of OURSELVES
- Those speeches play the card, that everybody fears to miss out, whereas others get everything for free
- Those speeches spread angst to become/remain unemployed, because others take the jobs, as they work cheaper

Those who think, the Balkan is faraway, and this could never happen in the West, are unfortunately totally wrong. The same, skilfully worded cants, are spread by populist parties around the world. Everywhere in Europe, popular parties are currently very successful with this simple, yet effective trick. French Prime Minister Valls, who alerted in December 2015, that an election victory of Marie Le Pen's Front National, could spread a civil war, is absolutely right. Sad but true!

If a political party that wants to abolish the human rights and advertises with slogans like "Kosovars slash open the Swiss" gets 3 votes, its 3 too many. If such a party gets 30% of the votes, like in Switzerland, its more than just frightening! Where do decency, solid sense and high education deadlock?

Terrorism is a threat, indeed. However, after visiting Bosnia and Herzegovina, we know, a bigger threat to Europe comes from within: populist parties and other racist movements. Luckily, this danger can be subdued without bloodshed: we just have to learn to put the thinking caps on, before we go to the polls, instead of getting led by big words!

Brigitte & Heinz



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