

# 16 DAYS AND 16 COUNTRIES ON A BMW MOTORBIKE

Well the first thing you are going to say is “how exhausting”.

My answer is No. The great love of travelling and the thought of another 10 countries under our belt was all the excitement we needed.

This incurable obsession of mine started as a child when my parents had taken me to 8 countries. Then some years later, my husband bought me an Atlas for my 18th birthday. I found that it contained 227 countries and in my mind I thought I can do all of these! Here I am now though, 60 years old and still only having been to 59 countries.

Things slowed down 19 years ago when we bought a dilapidated house in France. Then the big choice came, should we let the big house fall down or travel? No... we are too sensible for that, so only the odd break occurred. Then for the next 9 years my dad was taken over with Alzheimers. He died four years ago now but my 92 year old mother then took his place needing care, she suffering with Dementia.

So one new build, a self contained unit, took over our time leaving France as a second build. The self contained unit came from the area where our double garage used to be and her care now takes up 164 hours a week, as she cannot be left. Legally as a team we are entitled to 6 weeks respite a year. This meant that for the last 4 years of caring for my mother we hadn't been able to do a lot of motor biking.

For my 60th birthday, my gifts were in money, to help towards the fuel for our trip. I knew Pete, my partner could do it but could I? Our lovely friend Mr. West, suggested surgical spirit on our backsides, and yes it works!

Before we could think of the trip though, we had to lay a concrete slab for the shed we were building in France. Friday night with the slab finished and the cement mixer put to bed our magical 16 days could begin. However, because of our situation at home and in France we weren't able to organise anything other than, a tent, 2 panniers, us and the BMW Bike!

We left at 8am the next morning and arrived in Venice at 3.30pm the following day.

Nothing new with the 6 countries we travelled through, having been there several times



before, except for Switzerland, where we were charged 40 euros for a motorbike road tax toll. Thank goodness we weren't driving a car!

We had our second night in Venice (above) and it was a lot shabbier than I remember as a child. It was a Sunday and every shop shutter was closed and graffitied. With such beauty all around, how can the Venetians accept and allow such destruction to such ancient walls?

However, it was still very romantic at night. (above) Anyone looking at a map can see Slovenia is only half a day's ride away, so from now on it was a slow pace for us with no more motorways. We decided to take it day to day, hoping we had the stamina to do the extra ten countries we had not seen before.

The mountains from Trieste (left) in Italy into Rijeka in



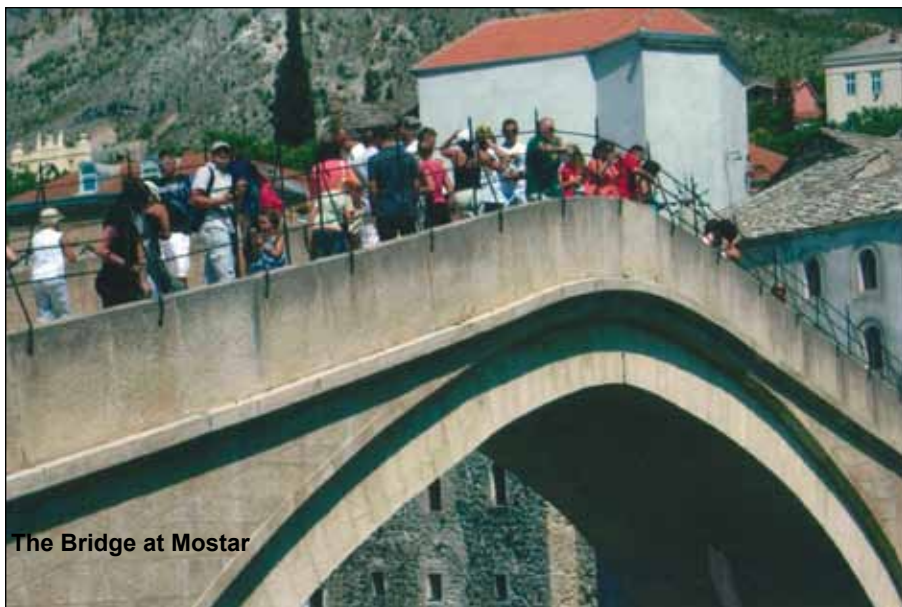
Croatia brought the most fabulous panoramic views of the bays two or three miles down. Then for the next two days we rode along the Croatian coastline to Split, the water being an electric blue and turquoise at every winding turn we made. Nothing can compare, not even the colours in the Caribbean. Along this coastline there are several small islands dotted with sheep, which we learnt, produce the second best cheese in the world because they graze on the salt grass and never get fat.

With some persuasion from me, Pete's main reason to follow this route was to visit Mostar in Bosnia Herzegovina and to visit a 14th century bridge bombed in their last war.

This has now been rebuilt in the exact same mode with the original materials and looks absolutely magnificent!

In Split we stayed in an apartment, which meant we could off load our luggage and free ride the 70 miles to Mostar. Five miles away, was Medjugorje, a holy town with thousands of pilgrims making a visit to their Holy Lady, much like Walsingham here in Norfolk. Being 37°C, we had our jackets off and wound our way up the mountainside with views to die for. Thousands of feet below lay the beautiful turquoise blue sea. That night we returned to





The Bridge at Mostar

but we only travelled through, stopping for just one night and having a meal that took us four hours to devour, heaven!

The next morning, we headed up the mountains with the GPS not working (not EU), so we had to use our map reading skills. When we got to Podgorica, we came across a serious road accident and hundreds of us were diverted via a small road by a solo policeman. 5 bikers, mostly from Italy, thought they could sneak through past the accident but 20 minutes later came back with horror stories. At this point the policeman completely lost the plot with these bikers and what a spectacle. The problem then got worse with a big camper van being sent down the small mountain road, which blocked it, although no problem for bikes! Often our GPS would come alive and show in the corner a road we should be on so we headed that way and eventually we met up with all the bikers involved at the Albanian border.



by it turned into a total white out! We were also conscious that we had to drive very slowly to protect the condition of our bike tyres. When we reached a bridge, I felt I had to get off as there were more holes in it than wood. This made the bike a bit lighter but once we were over to the other side, the road came to a dead stop and lead on to grass! (above)

When we reached the first small town, it looked as though it might have been a market day, with skeletal horses pulling traps carrying whole families, trying to make a living. Then occasionally you would see a brand new Mercedes, which showed there was no middle class here at all - fascinating.

Now we had the mountain roads like goat tracks to contend with. One was 5.5km long, which brought us down onto a B road, passing such dilapidated but delightful villages along the way. The Albanians take such pride in the decorations on their house walls and around their windows, which were a myriad of colours. To avoid going into Serbia too soon, we detoured and although we were only 72 miles from Greece, a country Pete hadn't been to, we didn't realise that until we reached Budapest. However,

our room, which was just yards from the sea, so at 8pm a dip in the Adriatic was called for! It was still 31°C with a gentle warm air, so we decided to sit in our hotel on the beach, ordered some beers, coke, lasagne, ice creams and the whole day cost us no more than £35! I say this to let you know how affordable Croatia is.

The next day we headed for Montenegro. We took the 1.50 euro ferry across the bay to save a 35 mile round trip, which was delightful. Our next shock though was no green card needed in Montenegro but a charge of 50 euros! However, Montenegro was lovely and so were the people



To get to Albania we had to use the commercial ferry which took us along The Danube River for 40 minutes, which was another lovely trip. We met a lot more bikers coming the other way, who exchanged with us helpful tips on where and where not to go. Funny, a British Passport will get you everywhere and you would be surprised at how many other nations were not allowed through, like the Argentinean travellers, who were not allowed into Serbia.

To us, Albania was a complete culture shock. We came in from a small border point and there wasn't any road system for the first 2 hours of travelling. We often saw groups of people by the side of the road breaking up white rocks into hardcore to lay out to construct a road of sorts and at one point, as a speeding car went



on reflection, Budapest certainly didn't let us down.

Now it was time to get back onto the bikes and head towards Skopje in Macadonia. We were also heading home from now on, having completed 5 countries with another 5 to see. Macadonia was a beautiful country with delightful people and the landscape unchanged. It was also a joy that this was our seventh night away and we had still not had to camp, having had rooms, apartments and hotels, as everything was meagerly priced.

By now I had also got the currency rates before and after a border down to a fine art. It's a bit disconcerting when you take money out of an ATM and it doesn't give a receipt. One day it would be 21.000 and the next country 69.000 and each time we hoped we were getting the equivalent of 60 to 80 pounds worth of notes! The method I used to break down the equation was how much a litre of petrol was working on to one pound a litre and this method seemed to work wonders.



As we drove through Macadonia to Bulgaria, our stamina was still fine but it was sad that we were heading home. We stopped in a town called Montana. Wow! It was like going back to the 40's and 50's. Very shabby and just frozen in time, with fountains (above), mile long squares with statues, showing a prosperous community built for the working man. What a beauty. In years gone by it was free healthcare, housing, education, a bike and a job for life, what more could they aspire to? From Montana we drove up to Bucharest. What an amazing city. I am a Paris lover, having done 50 visits but this city tops it for the Prussian/Austrian Empire architecture (left). The buildings were magnificent and the quantity and quality of the buildings is unbelievable. We decided to stay in an apartment two miles outside of the centre for one night and after dumping the luggage, we returned to the city to see more. We rode along both sides of the river path for well over an hour and the palaces and bridges just blew us away. We ended by driving

up to a palace on a hill, so that we could look down onto this city of splendour.

We left Romania the next morning and without exception, everyone we spoke to advised us to go into the top of Serbia. Up until now every border we had crossed there were, maybe up to three or four cars and us waiting, so it was a surprise to be greeted at the Serbian border with a 3.5 mile 4 lane traffic holdup. However, with a bike we were able to queue jump, so that there were only 5 cars in front. At the border we were met with explosive experts galore, checking every vehicle and asking all passengers to get out, so that the insides and outsides could be thoroughly checked. However, when it was our turn and we showed our British passports and told them where we had been and our next destination, we were waved through. I cheekily asked what they were looking for; they said "explosives of course!" It cost us 70 euros to get into Serbia. When we reached Novi Sad (right), we decided to stay in a 5 star London type hotel, which was ultra modern





but with nothing quite right, like all the electrics, we found, were back to front! At 10.00pm, it was still lovely and warm at 33°C.

Novi Sad was a city as big as Norwich, bustling with thousands of families looking around the affordable shops. The food was so reasonable, certainly a 24 hour metropolis and it was very sad to leave. It was not just inexpensive, but very inexpensive.

The next day we drove into Hungary and to another Swiss chalet look alike hotel. Budapest was another beautiful and flamboyant city with architecture like no other, on the same level as Paris. After a wonderful breakfast, we headed off to Vienna (left) in Austria. It took such a short while to get there and we made it in time for a late lunch. From now on though, the weather got colder and we had to put our jackets back on. In Vienna, we stayed in another lovely hotel, which was just a couple of miles outside of the city. After dumping our baggage we went back in to sightsee, stopping off at the Cathedral. My one mission as we stopped outside the Cathedral was to buy a piece of strudel or lemon cheesecake but I couldn't make up my mind, so had a piece of both, something my two friends will tell you I often do on our visits to Paris! Pete had his usual ice cream. The horse drawn carriages were the main tourist attraction here.

Then it was time to travel on to Linz and to a nights stay in Mannheim, Germany. It was about this time that the headlight started to play up. We had two more nights to go



before getting home and it is of course illegal to ride without them and we had already passed the BMW showroom in Austria. But, whilst looking for the place we had to book into for the night, I said wouldn't it be lovely if there was a BMW shop nearby and can you believe it, there it was, Klaus Mayer BMW! After inspecting the bike, they said that the part we needed wouldn't be there until the next morning and that would have been too late for us, so the staff went to so much trouble, even though it was then 6pm, to fix it. What a breath of fresh air.

Our journeys end involved us driving through Belgium and then home. On arrival we were met by our friend John and his friends, who had spent the week at ours and while there had cut at least two years of firewood for us. What a lovely return. They told us they had so enjoyed themselves and could they return next year and do the same?

Well, we have seen a million new sights. Bulgaria and Albania was a culture shock, the Croatian coast (above and below) was as magnificent as the Grand Canyon but for us, Serbia came top. We have seen another 10 countries and that now makes 69. I believe there are 272 now, so I can die happy that I have seen a quarter of the world!

As the cement mixer comes out and the rows of breeze blocks add up in the next two weeks, I think, wherefore next year? Maybe Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

