

Mike Watling's 2016 Trip to Hungary



June the 6th and it's off again down the now familiar A140 on the way to Harwich. Stop at the ticket booth then through customs where I get stopped and asked if I am carrying any firearms or explosives, turns out the guy doesn't think I am a terrorist, he just wants a better look at the bike. Through the customs shed and into lane one with quite a few other bikes, then the wait for our turn to load and having to make that tricky railway bridge crossing which always makes me nervous although I have never had a problem with it. Onto the ferry, strap the bike down, remember which deck and stairwell the bike is on, grab something to eat then get to bed.

The weather is fair at the Hook the next morning so it is off down the motorways for a 400 mile ride into Germany to Schwartzach am Main. The Hotel turns out to be pretty good with a lovely restaurant about 20 metres down the road and warm enough to sit outside and enjoy a meal, a beer and the traditional Bavarian dress of the waitresses. There was an outside tap in the car park so I unpacked my wash leather and removed the roadkill from the front of my bike.

The next day I have a 300 mile ride into Austria and some familiar roads as I am staying the night at a pension we go to every year for a skiing holiday near Grobming. I have found that if I trundle along at about 60/65mph I can get decent petrol consumption and still average around 50mph so I have time for a breakfast before I get on the road. I would like to avoid motorways and travel on the smaller roads but whenever I have tried this I have found my average speed drops down to around 35mph and it is difficult to cover the distances I need to in a reasonable time.

The following day there is some rain but this clears away later and I have another easy ride of around 260 miles into Hungary and Lake Balaton. I wasn't sure what to expect at the border but it was just a slow down to 20mph and ride through. At this point the place names become absolutely unintelligible, seems like I had just arrived on another planet, and I am totally reliant on the sat nav which didn't let me down. I arrived at the Pension I had booked for four nights and it was great. The owners were really friendly, I had a lovely room, there was a swimming pool, and electric gates for secure parking. There were eight other Harley riders staying there, 3 Americans, 1 Austrian and the remainder German, all great friendly people. I was there for the Hungarian Open Road Fest.

The site of the event was about 3 miles away from the hotel, the edge of Lake Balaton, where there were plenty of restaurants and bars, was around a twenty minute walk from the hotel. Everything was a lot cheaper in Hungary, petrol about 85P a litre, a good meal for around £6.00 and the pension was only £30 a night for bed and breakfast. The currency was Florints (HUF), there were about 400 to the pound, I felt like a millionaire with 20,000 "Huffs" in my wallet until I worked out it was only worth £50.00. The second language was German rather than English and whilst a few people spoke very good English, I mostly had to get by on my small knowledge of German and using Google translate.



Out on the road...

The Fest had started the day I arrived so I missed the first day but apart from the bands at night it was pretty much the same programme each day.



There was a variety of stunt riding, one guy spinning round on a motorcycle inside a steel mesh globe, wall of death style, goodness knows how he knows which way is up, another couple of guys hurtling along one of the pathways then standing it up on the front wheel or riding along on just the back wheel getting as close to the toes of the audience as they could. Health and safety didn't seem to be an issue with these people as there were no barriers in place.

By the end of the display they were riding along on the back wheels of quad bikes with four people from the audience on board. There was also another rider flying up a ramp and performing the freestyle motocross tricks. There were plenty of trade stands selling clothing as well as food and drink Hungarian style and smoking ovens the size of steam engines for the ribs and joints of meat, those guys really do love their meat.

The headline band for the fest was the Sweet. For the younger readers (under 50's) this name will not mean very much but for people of my age this name rolls back the years to when hot blood flowed through my veins instead of a chemical mix of prescription drugs, I was immortal then, Afro hair not absent hair, Pan's people on Top of The Pops, the Glam Rock age. Ballroom Blitz, Little Willy, Blockbuster and Wig-Wam Bam, I almost started Grandad dancing but decided to go back to the hotel for a cocoa and to take my meds.

Harley Davidson had a selection of bikes there for people to go out on test rides and there was a fully equipped workshop for anyone who had any problems with their bike. The bikes for the test rides all had GB number plates and I was surprised to find out that they all came from Oxford and were shipped from one event to the next in a fleet of Lorries. I got talking to some of the English staff and they told me that they travel all over Europe and even further afield throughout the year. I met up with them again in Portoroz at the 25th European HOG Rally.

Having savoured the delights of the Fest I decided to go for some rides to discover what other delights Hungary had to offer. It is fair to say that the streets of Hungary are not paved with gold it is also fair to say, that in some places, they are not paved with anything, not even tarmac.

Whilst I was told the motorways are excellent, most of the roads I used were pretty bumpy and some of the little roads around the smaller hamlets turned into gravel and dust tracks, which was not very comfortable on a half-ton bike. There were however sights to be seen, I rode into a town called Sumeq with its magnificent castle, Through some lovely villages and towns, the Balaton area, the lake is delightful. I noticed everyone kept strictly to the speed limits and there is a zero alcohol limit for drivers so stopping for a beer was not on the agenda.

Much of Hungary is fairly flat and uninteresting so I tended to keep to the hilly areas around Lake Balaton. The weather was a bit volatile, it could be very warm, around 30 degrees, in which case I would come back from a ride and jump in the pool to cool off or, as on several occasions, thunderstorms and torrential rain. I got soaked a few times both on the bike and walking down to the lake.



Out on the road...

After Hungary I worked my way through Slovenia to Portoroz. I was in no hurry as I only had three hundred miles to cover and three days to do it in.

My first stop was a town called Ptuj (pronounced Toey, would you believe) which I was informed was the oldest town in Slovenia. It was a lovely place, traffic free in the centre and I spent a great afternoon and evening there looking round. The next day I went on to Ljubljana, the capital. This again was a great place full of history with the famous Dragon Bridge, Triple Bridge and castle which can be reached by a funicular railway for the less energetic like me.

The architecture was wonderful and plenty of restaurants in the traffic free centre. The weather was generally warm and sunny but here again I got caught by a thunderstorm walking back to my hotel in the evening.

Now it was on to Portoroz for the 25th European HOG Rally. I found the hotel I had booked for five nights at a cost of £110 Euros per night, and for the first time on my travels I had picked a hotel nightmare. According to my booking I had early check in and the hotel was just 500 metres from the sea with fantastic views of the bay. The reality was a handwritten notice on the wall saying that check in was between 17:00 and 19:00 the 500 metres to the sea was in fact a lot further and down a 1 in 3 hill which meant



cardiac arrest on the way back up if you walked it, the place was broken down and smelt of damp. I had arrived at around 13:00 and the only person there was a cook who made a phone call, gave me a key and took my passport for registration. Having carried my bags down 50 steps and discovered the state of the place I took the liberty of using their wi-fi to hunt round for somewhere else.

I booked another hotel but as the cook had disappeared and locked up the office, I then had to wait until 17:00 to cancel my booking and get my passport back. This cost me 110 Euros. The new hotel turned out to be perfect, more like a holiday park than a hotel with shops and restaurants on site and a twenty minute level walk along the sea front to the event in the centre of town. Judging by the number of bikes parked around the site it was the choice of many Rally visitors. This was also cheaper than my original hotel so even with paying the cancellation fee I was no worse off, one of my better decisions.

The town had been well prepared for the event with traffic being diverted away from the main drag so there were plenty of bike parking spaces. The HOG area was busy with people registering for the guided tours and others picking up their special pins etc. The Harley area had plenty of event specific tee shirts and clothing and there were the ever present trade stands and Jeep test drive area as well as the Harley test rides and custom show.

The Lipa Chapter were organising the guided tours and parade and they had done a fantastic job. I joined the tour to a vineyard with a stop off for some Karst ham and bread washed down with a local red wine. I love these rides through the countryside when you don't have to stop at any junctions and road marshals guide you all the way. It was a brilliant ride and in the following days I fell in love with Slovenia. As well as my rides through Slovenia I took a ride into Croatia down towards Pula and this was another country that I would love to go back to and explore. The countryside was lovely as were the coast roads. The Slovenian people were so friendly and helpful. In general the weather was very warm although I did catch some rain on a couple of occasions.

Out on the road...

I would usually walk into town in the evenings and stop and have a chat with the test ride guys who I had met in Hungary. I met some people from the Bridgewater Chapter and another couple from the Scunthorpe area so although I was on my own I had plenty of conversation. The parade was another great ride with hundreds of bikes taking part and a really great atmosphere between the riders. Well done Lipa Chapter.

From Portoroz I travelled back into Austria to the pension I had visited on my way down. This time I did take the back roads through the mountains. I followed the coast up to Trieste then I headed for the 102/203 which follows the river Isonzo up to Bovec then on to Tarvisio through the Triglav National Park and into Villach. It was a sunny day and this ride was so beautiful. The river was an intense turquoise blue and lower down lakes had been formed by the dams and hydro-electric plants then as I got higher into the mountains the river ran into a deep gorge with white water rapids and all around the mountains were green with lovely villages dotted along the route, it was fabulous.

Having decided I was on a roll I headed for Salzburg from Villach then turned off to take the Solkpass from Murau through to Rattling. The clouds were getting darker as I approached the turnoff and by the time I got up into the mountains it was raining and then near the top I was into the clouds. I would imagine this is a gorgeous ride on a lovely day but since I could barely see ten yards I will never know. The sat nav was again my saviour, at least I could anticipate the hairpins and see the shape the road was taking in front of me on the screen, the only thing I couldn't know was if there was any oncoming traffic on these very narrow roads but fortunately I was the only one fool enough to be up there that day. Once over the top I gradually descended out of the clouds and breathed a sigh of relief when normal visibility returned and I rode on into Grobming.

My destination for the weekend was the Hamburg Harley Days event but as I had some spare time I took a detour the next day to do a recce on the Puttgarden Ferry which I would be using on my next trip. I stayed the night at Grossenbrode. Having had a very long hot journey I pulled up at the hotel and stripped my jacket off with beads of perspiration on my face. There was a lady sitting outside who spoke to me in German, I recognised the word "beer" at which point I just nodded profusely. The lady disappeared inside then returned with a lovely cold beer, having sat me down outside she went off again and this time came back with a cold wet towel to wipe my arms and face. Following this I was shown to my room and given a cup of coffee and was told it was all on the house. I have never had a welcome like that at any other hotel in my life.

With great regret I left the next day, Thursday, to travel to Hamburg. Having checked in to another lovely hotel, one of the Scandic chain and with my bike safely tucked away in the underground car park I decided to walk across town to the Grossmarkt where the main part of the event was taking place.



I didn't know what to expect but boy was

I surprised, this was by far the biggest event I had been to in the sheer number and variation of trade stands and exhibits. Someone told me later that this is now the biggest Harley event in Europe. The next day I again walked down to the site through the very vibrant city and past the Alster Lake in the centre. There were thousands of visitors bikes parked on the site which was ideal for this kind of Rally.

I spent the day wandering around the stands, looking at the custom bikes and listening to the music. On the Saturday it rained and fewer people turned up but the evening was a bit drier so I headed off to the Reeperbahn where another part of the event was being held. This place was manic with bikes parked all along the road and bars filled with bikers.

Out on the road...



Occasionally a bike would pull up in front of one of the most crowded bars and do a burn out, clouds of rubber smelling smoke obscured the rider and many of the audience who hooted and cheered wildly. I was told that when this happened one of the girls standing round would bare her chest but I couldn't see through the smoke so I don't know if this was fact or fiction. I do know that most of these bikes sounded as if they had illegal exhausts.

The Sunday was the day of the parade which was to begin at 12:30 and to start queuing from 11a.m. I arrived around 11:30 and could not get into the gate because of the queue of bikes through the site. I would guess that by the time the parade started I was about half way down and I didn't move until 1:30. This was the time when the Brexit result had just been announced, a few people had spotted my GB number plate and commented on their disappointment so I decided discretion was the better part of valour and refrained from flying my England flag on the back.

They were expecting 10,000 bikes in the parade and I don't think they were far wrong. The route was 33Km long, through the harbour, over the Köhlbrandbrücke, (bridge) along the jetties then along the Reeperbahn. We all filed off with the police closing the roads for us, we took no notice of red lights, being on the wrong side of the road or any other rules that normally apply. Sometimes 3 bikes wide and at others around 10 bikes wide. Finally congestion caught up with us and many of us stopped on the bridge while the traffic sorted itself out then off againto the Reeperbahn. Thousands of people had come out to wave and cheer and some probably throwing abuse butwe all waved back and generally had a great time.

The following day it was time to pack my bags and head for the ferry at the Hook. The trip had been a real adventure; I had covered around 3500 miles and enjoyed every single mile. I would love to go back to Slovenia and Croatia to do more exploring, maybe next year. In the meantime my bike needs to be cleaned and serviced ready for the next trip.

Recommended Hotels:

Hotel Schwarzes Rosse,	Schwarzach am Main - Germany
Pension Eidelweiss	Mitterberg - Austria
Gold House Pension,	Balatonfured – Hungary
Hotel Poetovio,	Ptuj – Slovenia
B&B Slamic,	Ljubljana – Slovenia
Hotel Vile Park,	Portoroz – Slovenia
Pentahotel	Leipzig – Germany
Hotel Grossenbrode,	Grossenbrode – Germany
Scandic Hamburg Emporio,	Hamburg – Germany

Don't touch with a barge pole:

Maestral Residence,	Portoroz - Slovenia
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