

Foreword

On August 14th, 2001, I left Israel on a 5:50 am flight to Budapest, Hungary, en route to Croatia and Slovenia.

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Hungary

I hadn't planned on staying in Budapest for more than a day, but with so much to see in the Hungarian capital I ended up spending two nights and three days in the city. My roommates were a group of three congenial Australians (the first of many I would encounter throughout the trip) – a middle aged man, his daughter and her boyfriend. Though I had arrived on an early morning flight and gotten little sleep, after checking into the hostel and dropping my backpack in my room I set out for some food and some sightseeing.



I couldn't recall when my last visit to a synagogue had been, and since the largest one in the world (arguably; some say it is in New York) was in walking distance from the hostel, I decided I ought to go. Called "the Jewish Cathedral" for its (deliberate) Christian design, the magnificent building was used as an office by the Nazis and turned into a ghetto, and thus survived the Holocaust relatively undamaged.

Budapest is in fact the conjoinment of two ancient cities on either side of the famous Danube River – Buda to the west and Pest to the east. The historic and cultural heritage of Budapest lies in Buda, while Pest is the bustling Downtown and home of the Hungarian Parliament. Returning from a day in Buda, I walked in the direction of the hostel along the east bank of the Danube, when abruptly the roads and walkways were blocked and a guard was directing everyone away from the river. I followed the line of people, who were just as surprised as I, and shortly found myself among a multitude of cheering spectators on the front lawn of the Parliament building. A military band had begun to play and thanks to my stature I was able to see above the heads of the growing audience what was happening: an armored minivan presently parked itself before the Parliament and from it emerged, to the ecstatic applause of the crowd, the sacred Hungarian crown. After being carried inside the Parliament building, the national anthem (quite dull) was sung and the crowd dispersed.

I had been in Budapest long enough to learn the rhythm of the city and its people. Nevertheless, I still could not get used to the ubiquitous phenomenon of carbonated mineral water. Even when I would be proudly and triumphantly certain that the bottle I just bought was uncarbonated, I would sadly discover that it was in fact "moderately carbonated" or, worse still, flavored. Nor could I help chuckling inwardly at the bizarre sight of individuals drinking coffee or beer or eating a sandwich or a slice of pizza *standing up*. And the subway system, with its turbo escalators and turbo trains and turbo people, was too mind-boggling to even watch, let alone take part in.

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Croatia



Zagreb, on the other hand, was like a breath of fresh air – once I was off the train, that is. In stark contrast to Budapest, the Croatian capital was appreciably calmer and mellower. Though architecturally the buildings in Budapest were undoubtedly more impressive, I found Zagreb to possess a unique kind of charm and a beauty which surpassed that of Budapest. And although some of the streets and people displayed a dreary melancholiness supposedly left over from the war a decade ago, almost all of the locals I met

were bright, pleasant, courteous and friendly. And none seemed to be in any desperate rush to be somewhere else, as in Budapest.

On the train ride from Budapest I shared my cabin with a couple in their late 50's. The husband had evidently never been introduced to anti-perspirant and the wife to the custom of leg shaving. I was much relieved when their stop came and they vacated the cabin. Their place was taken by a man in his 40's and his two young daughters. The whole rest of the ride to the Hungarian border, I watched him entertain his girls with various silly jokes and antics. Regrettably the man knew no English, for I reckon I'd have liked him to include me in the fun.

I had to change trains at the border between Hungary and Croatia, and show my passport to a dozen different unformed men. I always volunteered my American one, though on two separate occasions a Croatian inspector caught sight of my Israeli passport and asked to see it. Upon flipping through its pages, a look of guilt showed on their faces and when they returned the passport they seemed to communicate a kind of sympathy, as if to say, *I'm sorry, we know what it's like.*

On the Croatian train my cabin mates were a nice Italian couple my age on their way to Pula for a romantic backpacking vacation. Their English wasn't the best, but we managed to have a decent conversation, where I learned they were both art students. Unfortunately, the Italian boy made a terrifying discovery some time after the train got moving – his ticket and credit card had been lost. The poor soul had to spend most of the ride in the restroom avoiding ticket inspectors.

As I said, the people of Zagreb were very polite, and when I consulted a tourist information clerk about a certain Medvegrad castle just north of the city, he smilingly encouraged me to visit it. As a rule, backpackers do not believe in public transportation, unless it's to travel between cities; if a place appears on a city map, it can be reached on foot. I was suffering terribly from numerous nasty blisters on my feet, but they would have to take me to the castle. When I asked how long it would take to walk to it, the tourist information clerk merely gave me instructions on how to get there with a bus. "You take a bus from here to here, see? And from here you walk. One hour. I live right here. Very pretty." Although the castle itself did not appear on the map of Zagreb, the bus's final stop looked like it could be walked to. I took the map and set out for the castle.

About halfway there I realized it was lunacy to walk any further. The map lied; it lacked topographical data. I was practically limping on the foot that hurt least, and buses were passing me tauntingly as I trudged up inclined roads of increasing steepness. But I could now see the castle. Nestled atop a wooded mountain, it looked like something from a fairy tale. That mysterious entity called the second wind kicked in and I marched on.

The transition from 'urban' to 'rural' to 'uninhabited' was swift, and soon I was ascending a narrow winding road through a dense forest that let little light through its roof and made noontime seem like evening. Here and there some flying insect would accompany me, examining various exposed parts of my body, until it either flew off or decided to land on one of these parts, whereupon I would demonstrate that it had overstayed its welcome.



At last I reached a clearing – a paved parking lot. The road ended and a footpath took its stead. I followed the path and reached the castle several minutes later.

It wasn't spectacular, but everything else was. All around were breathtaking views of the Medvednica Nature Park, and to the south the city of Zagreb from whence I had come. The pictures I took with the camera fall far short of the glory.

When I returned to the hostel, rewarded but exhausted, I met an Australian fellow my age in my room. He had just arrived in the city and was on

his way out in search of supper. I declined his offer to join him, as I was eager to have a shower. But it was Friday night and when I finished showering I put on a pair of blue jeans in preparation for a night out on the town. I promptly fell asleep in them and awoke the following morning.

I spent three nights in Zagreb. I could easily have stayed another week in the city, but I had less than two remaining and many more places I wanted to see. The Plitvice National Park was my next destination. The bus ride to the park lasted about an hour, passing through the city of Karlovac, famous for its superb beer and abundant in bullet-pierced walls and collapsed roofs from the war, and by picturesque villages with streams and waterfalls flowing between cottages. The bus dropped me off at the park, where I met two Israeli backpackers from Jerusalem. We spent the night at a nearby campsite and returned to the park the following morning.



Any attempt on my part to describe the intoxicating beauty of the Plitvice National Park, its lakes and waterfalls within an endless forest, just wouldn't do the park justice. The exquisite turquoise waters, pure and calcium rich, an all-you-can-drink reservoir of genuine uncarbonated mineral water, were a marvelous sight to behold.

After another night at the campsite, the three of us boarded a bus to Zagreb, which was where Baruch and Ami were headed. I bade them farewell and got off in Karlovac. From there I took a bus to Rijeka, a port city on the Adriatic coast of Croatia,



and another to Opatija, a popular resort town also on the Adriatic coast. I didn't particularly like Opatija, which was where I had planned on staying so I made a rather spontaneous decision to go to Krk, the largest of the Croatian islands. I returned to Rijeka and boarded a bus to Punat, a small town on the Krk island.



I arrived in Punat with some prejudices from my Lonely Planet guide about the island of Krk being overdeveloped and commercially exploited, and found instead a very small, relatively quiet town, with warm, hospitable people. Granted, the main beaches were crowded, but a 15-minute stroll away one could find his or her own peaceful niche in the rocks along the shore. I quickly learned that the

further one got from the concentrations of tourists, the less clothes individuals would have on... Though the water was a tad cold, it was clean and clear and refreshing and very enjoyable to swim in.

I spent two nights in Punat and it was very tempting to stay longer, as I found the town's rhythm to be most agreeable and had begun to make acquaintance with some amicable locals, including an invitation to participate in a certain tort. I had only one week remaining, however, and so I returned once again to Rijeka, where I boarded a train to Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Slovenia

I had very little knowledge about the region I was traveling in, but I had read that of all of the former republics of Yugoslavia, Slovenia had suffered least from the war and had integrated most successfully with the West. I think that even phonetically the words Slovenia and Ljubljana suggest a kind of optimism and grace. And indeed, my first impression of the Slovenian capital was of a modern, cheerful society, which had achieved a harmonious balance between globalization trends and the preservation of its past.

My stay in Ljubljana was regrettably brief, as from here on events seemed to unfold of their own volition. I went out with two of my hostel roommates in the evening to buy some food supplies. Pablo was an intriguing Spanish backpacker who had just completed his studies in molecular biology and looked like a common bum. The other fellow was a pseudo-backpacker tourist from Singapore, whose name I hopelessly forgot the moment he told me it. We returned to the hostel and dined on our purchases at a table outside the entrance, whereupon a group of young females began dragging their backpacks out the hostel. Our Singaporean friend had meanwhile gone inside to check his e-mail. "Where are you going at this hour?" I inquired. "We have a train in a few hours," they answered. Suddenly, picking up a Spanish accent in their words, Pablo came to life. They struck up a rapport, which my two years of Spanish as a second language were of absolutely no help in understanding. But presently a jovial American backpacker, whom I had very briefly spoken to earlier, joined the table and engaged me in a dialogue about life in Israel. Valerie, a Canadian backpacker bearing striking resemblance to the popular singer Nelly Furtado, soon took up a seat at the table and joined our discussion.

The following morning, while waiting for my clothes to be washed, Valerie and I walked to the Ljubljana castle, where we almost literally bumped into Baruch and Ami. And whom should I run into back at the hostel, but the Australian from Zagreb, waiting for a Visa to go to the Czech Republic.

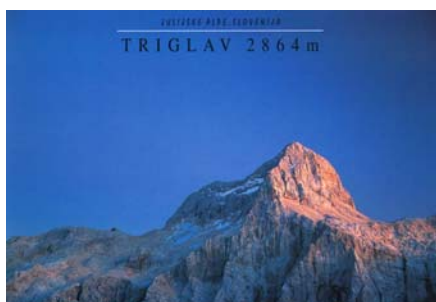
When my laundry was ready, Valerie and I headed to the bus station and boarded a bus to the coastal town of Koper in the south. We spent one night there and then went to nearby Piran, where we spent another night. Next we went to Portoroz, where we rented the cheapest car *AVIS* had to offer. Since I'm rather insecure driving manual gear, Valerie did all of the driving, and satisfiably so.



We drove to Skocjan, world renowned for its karstic caves and part of UNESCO's World Natural Heritage Sites. After a fascinating guided walking tour through some of the extraordinary caves, we proceeded to the karstic caves of Postojna. I was prepared by Lonely Planet to be somewhat disappointed by the Postojna caves after visiting the ones in Skocjan. In fact I found

the ones in Postojna to be absolutely incredible, as the pictures I took do a fair job illustrating. (And I got to see the mysterious *Proteus anguinus* – the Human Fish –, which I had long been anticipating.) From there we went to see the nearby Predjamski grad, an interesting mediaeval castle built into a mountain.

Our next and final stop with the car was Bled in the northwest. While Valerie contemplated continuing to Austria, I met an English fellow named Chris, whom I had actually already been introduced to at the hostel in Ljubljana. I asked what there was to do in the area and he mentioned a two-day hiking expedition to Mount Triglav (2,864 m / 9,393 ft.), which he was going on the following morning. Fifteen minutes and 90 dollars later, I was going too.



Ultimately, Valerie decided against Austria and joined the trek as well.

After a very comfortable night's sleep at the hostel, we hit the road at around 8 in the morning. We rendezvoused with a second group, had the climbing gear – helmets and

clip-ropes – distributed to us, and at 9 o'clock the trek commenced.

From where we began our hike, the mountain looked impossibly high and inaccessible. I imagine I wasn't alone in doubting we'd ever conquer the lofty jagged summit.

We were a heterogeneous group of ten climbers and two guides – an assortment of various ages, sizes and nationalities. We had representatives of Australia, Belgium, Canada, England, Slovenia, and of course me. The youngest member of the team was a keen and witty 11-year-old English boy named Alex, who often came in handy when the going got tough. Alex's parents were the oldest, being somewhere in their late 40's.

The hike began in a lovely valley, with a forest to our right, the bare gray rock of Mt. Triglav to the left, and a gentle stream running through the middle. We walked at a moderate pace along the wooded side of the stream for a time, and then crossed over to the foot of the great mountain. And the ascent began.

At the risk of sounding immodest for a moment, I can, I trust, attest to having been dealt my fair share of experience and adventure in life theretofore. Excitement, in any event, was certainly not new to me. On Mt. Triglav, however, every sensation and every emotion were so pure, so intense and so inspiring, that for the first time ever I felt alive. The awesome thrill of height and distance, compounded with inimitable beauty – alas, the literary challenge is nearly as great as that of the climb itself, so I forgo expanding on this aspect.

Indeed, the climb was trying. Progress at times could only be made vertically. As we gained altitude the vegetation became increasingly sparse until it vanished altogether, leaving us clambering over smooth slippery slopes of limestone. A momentary lapse of concentration could mean a miscalculated step, a loss of balance and possibly tragedy.

Occasionally we passed by patches of snow, which grew in size and prevalence as we rose. Before long we were hiking through the snow and tossing snowballs at each other.

It was about 16:30 when we reached the mountain hut where we were to spend the night. I had by then begun to recognize the sore throat and runny nose that I was experiencing as precursors of a rapidly oncoming cold. At 17:00 we were served soup and tea and soon afterwards I went to lie down.

I awoke later in the evening feeling sick and miserable. About half of the group was sleeping and I found the other half in the dining hall playing cards. I ordered a bowl of noodle soup and played a few rounds of black jack. Then I ate and went back to bed.

I got no sleep that night. My pillow had become a sponge of mucus and no matter what I put over me I just couldn't get warm. By dawn I thought I might be getting better, but the worst was yet to come.

At 7 o'clock one of the guides began waking everyone up. After breakfast we gathered outside the hut, fastened up our gear, and by 8 o'clock or so we were moving again.

Two grueling hours later, we were at the top of Mt. Triglav. The wind chill was brutal and unrelenting. We could not stay at the peak for very long due to the frigid weather. We huddled for some group photos and took turns being "christened" – a certain initiation ceremony that all climbers undergo upon reaching the summit – and shortly thereafter began our descent down the side of the mountain opposite the side we came up the day before.

With aching quadriceps we hiked down Mt. Triglav, through fog so thick that one could hardly see the person walking ahead of them. Fatigue was taking its toll on me and I lingered in the back of the group, with a young Belgian couple (who, like me, had also endured a sleepless night at the hut) and Alex's parents.

At about 16:00 the ordeal was over. Shannon, a vivacious Australian backpacker, Chris, Valerie, and I were driven back to the hostel in Bled. After showering we had a festive dinner, caught half an episode of Seinfeld on TV, and hit the mattresses.

In the morning we said goodbye to Chris, who left for Italy, and hooked up with three guys from Ireland and New Zealand. The six of us took a walk to the impressive Vintgar Gorge and then went to the Bled lake. We rented rowboats and rowed to a small island with a church in the middle of the lake and later went tree diving.

I had to start making my way back to Hungary for my flight to Israel and Shannon needed to arrange a visa to Bosnia-Herzegovina, so the next day the two of us went to Ljubljana. We watched an awful movie with Richard Gere and Winona Ryder at the theatre and spent the night at an inn in the outskirts of the city, since all of the hostels had been reverted to college dorms.

In the morning I said goodbye to Shannon and boarded a train to Zagreb, where I spent my last night in Europe.

After missing two trains to Budapest from Zagreb due to waiting at the wrong platform, at 15:50 I finally got on a train scheduled to arrive in Budapest at 21:00. My flight was taking off at 23:10 and I was starting to get worried I wouldn't make it in time. With me in the cabin on the train was a benevolent Hungarian couple in their late 20's who had been vacationing on the island of Krk and had gotten into a car accident that wrecked their car while leaving them unharmed. When they heard of my plight the husband began making arrangements over his cell phone for transportation for me from the train station in Budapest to the airport, whilst the wife continually reassured me that everything would be ok. I was just starting to believe her when the train abruptly stopped and an announcement in Hungarian was made.

"There's been an accident on the rail. They don't know how long we'll be stopping," the wife translated. The husband went to speak with one of the attendants to find out where we were and when he returned he said, "We're not far from Budapest. I think we should call up a taxi and have him come get you from here." I concurred. But as he was talking on the phone, the train started moving. We breathed a sigh of relief and a minute later the train stopped. And a minute later it jolted forward, only stop again a minute later. We thusly inched our way to Budapest, finally arriving at the train station just after 21:30.

We hurried outside and located the taxis. After a few minutes of haggling with a narcotic-looking driver, they turned to me and said, "20 dollars." I expressed my sincere appreciation for their help and got in the cab.

And never in my life was I so relieved to get out of a car. With 60's rock n' roll music playing on the radio, we raced through the streets of the city like there was no tomorrow. I held on for my life to whatever my hands could grab as my driver swerved through traffic with unbridled ferocity coupled with phenomenal skill. At 22:00 we reached the airport.

I handed him the well-earned 20-dollar bill and shook his hand, and he smiled a proud yet humble smile, as if to say, 'just doing my job.'

I ran to the Malev check-in desk and handed the lady my passport and ticket. "The flight is full. You'll have to wait on Standby. But you're the first one, so I wouldn't worry." She took my backpack and told me to wait at the gate until boarding time. At 23:00 boarding commenced and I was issued a boarding pass. I boarded the plane with the rest of the passengers and scanned the ceiling for row 1E. And what do you know? First Class.

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Epilogue

While backpacking alone has its obvious shortcomings (and they are not many), for those who cherish their independence and autonomy it is the ideal method of travel.

When I was walking around Ljubljana with Shannon, she quoted the poet T.S. Eliot: "We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started...and know the place for the first time." And how true it is!

Photos

- 1) **Dohány Street Synagogue**, Budapest, Hungary (Postcard)
- 2) **St. Mark's Church**, Zagreb, Croatia
- 3) **Medvednica Nature Park**, Croatia
- 4) **Plitvice National Park**, Croatia
- 5) Rijeka, Croatia
- 6) Punat, Croatia
- 7) **Postojna Cave**, Slovenia
- 8) **Predjama Castle**, Slovenia
- 9) **Mt. Triglav**, Slovenia (Postcard)