A VISIT TO HUNGARY SEPTEMBER 2013

Hungary, that rather mysterious, landlocked country somewhere in the middle of Europe. Wasn't it one of those places overrun by son of Genghis Khan? Budapest, the Danube, frenetic Liszt piano pieces and Bulls Blood wine. Our knowledge was limited. Enthused by reports from a small group of NH ramblers who took up the challenge to visit a remote part of the country in spring 2012, more of us wanted to explore the trail less travelled in Hungary's Aggtelek National Park so Wizz Air-ed off to Debrecen, Hungary's second largest city in September 2013. Throwing off our spare layers we enjoyed our first al fresco meal followed by a freestyle exploration of the city centre and dive into the murky depths of a money changer's for some, battle with an ATM for others. Like India, the name of the game was 'find the small change'. En-route to Szogliget, our village destination, a stop at Tesco's for bread was planned – did we buy our wine here? No, there were 10 bottles at the 'cottage'. Well it was obvious that wouldn't go far in a week. A raid next day on the village store cleared them out so Tesco's was fair game on the next bread run. Some actually paid over £2 a bottle!



The 'cottage' was a long house, traditional to that area, which had been restored and modernised hostel style, to make it suitable for groups. It was basic but clean and the beds comfortable. The idiosyncratic hot water system resulted in a minor shower war but diplomacy, negotiation and the stiff upper lip prevailed.



Zsolt our host, guide and interpreter and his sister sourced and prepared our food. Lashings of home grown grapes and tomatoes, fresh yoghurt and cheese, other fruit and home preserves, cereals plus the full English gave us a good start to the day. Thick and hearty home made vegetable soups with a Hungarian speciality dessert were enjoyed at lunch times and another hearty meal in the evenings sustained our daily exertions. Well, what exactly were they?

A morning trip to the UNESCO accredited Baradla limestone caves to see Europe's top tites and mites ended with an impressive and atmospheric light and sound show in 'the Hall of Giants'. On top of the limestone for an afternoon stroll to see the hardy Hucal horses, native to the Carpathians, preceded an open carriage ride round the locality with an unexpected bumpy, full pelt crossing of the village stream.

The post WW1 territory changes chopped and sliced so much of Hungary's borders that in this area we were criss crossing into Slovakia to visit important places of Hungarian historical interest. It is hard for an island head to get around the ambiguities of such a concept. Imagine visiting a Burghley House under the control of France. This thought added an extra dimension to our visit to the palace of the Andrassy family, a long standing, influential Hungarian noble family, which is now under the care and control of Slovakia. An amusing feature of the interior was the 'job lot' of ancestral portraits which an aspirational Andrassy had commissioned for the walls. The faces were slightly different but poses and costumes all but identical. 'Never mind the quality, feel the width'. And what was that about Sir Thomas Lawrence's portraits of George IV? Enough banter.

An afternoon walk along a limestone gorge started well with good views of the high cliffs between the trees as we walked up but disappointingly the views petered out in favour of thick forest and

undergrowth both sides until it was time to turn back. However, the excursion was redeemed by close encounters with the symbol of the national park, the black and yellow fire salamander.



Miskolc, the nearby town, provided a morning's sightseeing, some visiting the local cake and coffee shop, modern shopping mall, others heading for the local winery where Zsolt came to the rescue as interpreter. Along one gallery were posted photos, liveries and maps of the country's regional wine drinking clubs. The members all looked very impressive in their group regalia and as though they had had a very jolly time. The serious business of quality control was for another body altogether. Some nearby caves with thermal pools had been turned into a leisure amenity, very popular with the locals. The outdoor pool on a rather chilly September afternoon attracted only one brave Jenny, the rest preferring to stay with the naturally heated warm water inside the spa complex. The warmest and least attractive pools were those designed for hydrotherapy, providing a quick warm up before another turn around the cave pools. One can imagine how popular it would be on a hot summer's day.



A walk up to a ruined hill top fortress gave the legs a good stretch fortified by a water fill at a mountain spring soon followed by a stop for an archery lesson. For no apparent reason, the 'southpaws' proved the best shots at hitting the target with the others close also rans. (Personal bias creeping in here!). Zsolt's home village being in the cattle raising area around Debrecen, he treated us to an impressive demonstration of 'cracking the whip' as practised by the cattle farmers. Those in the group who had a go managed some good cracks. On the way back we passed through the deserted village of Derenk. The Poles who inhabited the village had been displaced in 1943 to neighbouring towns and villages to make way for a hunting forest by the country's then leader some making their way across to North America. Wooden posts along the track marked where the old homes had been. The displaced and their descendants hold regular reunions to maintain cultural and ethnic links.



Our final excursion into Slovakia took us to the cathedral town of Kosice. The cathedral holds the tomb of Hungary's great hero Rakoczi, prince of Transylvania who led the Hungarians against Austrian rule in 1848. It was quite moving to see from the piles of ribbons and wreaths on his tomb how much he is still revered and to see people placing their flower tributes. Yet it is in a town no longer part of the country he won back from foreign rule.

Saturday was mass wedding day. It seemed as though brides and grooms were emerging from every Kosicean doorway and gently perambulating meringues accompanied by a small entourage made their way towards a

suitable photo spot. Our final treat of the day was coffee and cake in a typical coffee and cake shop. Cakes, ice cream and confectionery. A vast array and so much choice. The décor reminiscent of a 50's chrome and formica coffee bar for those who might remember!

One thing particularly noticeable in the towns was the lack of people. In all three towns, even on a Saturday with a street market and arts festival going on, there were folk about but hardly a heaving throng as one is used to. I certainly found it quite disconcerting. However, it was interesting to note that having hit the eurozone, prices were more recognizable!

The region's village smallholdings, renowned for their orchards and vineyards since the middle ages, still predominate. An extensive orchard behind 'our' cottage provides fruit from May to October. Preparing the local liquor – Palinka – from home grown plums is still very much a local speciality with the plums being packed into large barrels and left to ferment before distilling and bottling. We were told it is customary for householders to prepare their plum jam in huge cauldrons over a garden fire - it could take all day. The preference, going by our breakfast jam, is for a very thick, treacly consistency, so no wonder!



The village museum was our last port of call. At the other end of the scale to a 'stately home' this showed us how 'the real people' made their way in life. We read poignant letters home from the owner's father who was killed in 1943. We squeezed into the dark and overcrowded living room with a double bed for the family, a small bed for granny, table and chairs, the room left as it had been in the father's time by a grieving widow. The space was in the spruce parlour, only used when visitors arrived and on special occasions. Outside, Carolyn modelled village dress for us and the owner/curator's demonstration included a variety of child containment devices: early baby bouncer and walker prototypes. A home made Palinka toast sent us on our way wiser, and I suspect, thankful for our lot.

Zsolt's obvious and enthusiastic passion for his country's history and culture made our excursions especially interesting and personal. The opportunity to experience – however limited – something of a country off the beaten track was something special and memorable.

Pat Rumpus
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