

How I Lost my Heart to the East and a big grey Bavarian twin – a 6 week voyage of discovery in the Balkans

You've never taken a bike abroad before and you are going where! On what?

The voices of disbelief and concerns that I would never be seen again came through thick and fast when I announced to friends and family that I was heading off to the Balkans on a 6 week study tour – images of bandits, Serbian militia, gypsies and non-existent roads (potholes littered with small sections of road) passed in front of them. Working in the Peak District National Park I had been lucky enough to secure a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship to fund a trip looking at sustainable tourism work taking place in the Balkans. After major hassles trying to set up a more conventional travel method – for some strange reason no hire car company would allow me to take a car into Serbia! The excellent crew at World of BMW – Andy and Kylie stepped in to the rescue and provided the loan of an R1150GS. At this point I will finally own up to having been a confirmed Japanese rider – BMW's are boring and don't handle do they!

Churchill Fellowships have a habit of turning into major life changing experiences – as I started building an intimate relationship with the GS I knew that mine was going to be no different! What an amazing piece of technology – riding the lanes of the Peak District I found that it would do everything I asked of it, scratching along and scaring 600 sports riders on my favourite bumpy corners, eating the green lanes and putting a huge grin on my face.

Confirmation really came the day I loaded the bike to depart – ohh no – it will never handle with all that weight I thought – wrong yet again. The GS was hugely overladen with full panniers, topbox and a huge dry bag but as I set off for a trial lap of the village the bike did not feel any different. The unique suspension that BMW has developed took my over enthusiastic packing in its stride without the hint of complaint.

After a smooth ferry from Hull I started the long journey through Germany down to the East. The GS excelled its self on the manic autobahns - long days in the saddle left me feeling fit and fresh – something wrong here, my Yamahaha encourages regular coffee breaks and a need for a chiropractor between Derbyshire and Bristol. Despite carrying most of my worldly belongings the GS paced along happily with the Mercedes and BMW saloons.

As a gentle introduction to Eastern Europe, I landed in Budapest in Hungary. A safe haven was provided by BikerCamp (www.bikercamp.hu). This is a little oasis of calm on the edge of a manic but beautiful city. An amazing character known as Zolst runs this guesthouse and campsite aimed at bikers. Zolst is vice president of BMW Europa owners and is one of the leading lights in the organisation of the Transdanubia Rally. A mature gent – Zsolst rides a fully kitted out R1100GS with an F650 Dakar for those extreme moments! BikerCamp has been running since 1992 and the guest book pays testimony to the welcome and hospitality of Zsolt and Zsuzana. A well-stocked beer fridge works on trust to help with those warm summer nights. Beware if you turn up on a problematic bike – whilst you walk away from it and become a tourist to forget your woes – it is highly likely that you will return to find it mysteriously fixed!

Sitting in the queue at the small border crossing into Romania – all the apprehensions and fears of my friends came flooding back! What are you doing? Why didn't you simply go to Australia and visit the parks there? Will I return? How long before the bike disappears? The highly entertained reaction from the border guards made me smile – it was evident that they do not see many British let alone a biker on such a space age looking machine as the 1150GS.

But those fears were still nagging as we rode onward. Western Romania is very flat with large expanses of derelict farmland, disintegrating factories, impoverished farmers scratching a subsistence living from the land with horse and carts as the main transport. The quality of the roads were as I expected – rough and well potholed. When the **Ceausescu** regime fell, the economy of the country collapsed overnight – the collective state owned farms and factories closed and unemployment rose to record levels. Slowly the country is rebuilding itself but it is a long process. My fears were still there – where people are poor....

Stopping at the first petrol station – a very surreal glass and plastic western style emporium my frown was exchanged for a grin. The welcome from a small group of locals was so genuinely warm – insisting on us stopping and sharing an alcohol free beer that I started to melt. I was not going to lose this grin until I headed west again.

Heading into the mountains, as darkness descended – no light pollution here, I eventually arrived at a small village called Borlova for the first official visit of my tour. This area is home to a local sustainable development project that will bring disbelief to my colleagues in England! Enduromania –off road motorcycling and sustainable tourism that really works! www.enduromania.ro A German/Romanian called Sergio who spent time working overseas in South America and there developed an off road passion returned to his home village after the transition. He realised that a key attraction for the area was the total lack of infrastructure, the ruined roads to the old communist ski resort, the decaying forest tracks combined with a magnificent mountain landscape. Aware that there were many riders in the west – especially Germany who would love the opportunity to ride here, he started recruiting a small Romanian team to discover and negotiate routes, and persuading some of the more entrepreneurial locals to develop small scale guest houses to accommodate visitors (this is a major step as private enterprise was none existent in communist times). Over the years this has grown to the point where now 3 villages are involved and on 8 weeks a year up to 120 mad German off road fanatics come, paying fair western prices to stay and take part in an orienteering style enduro event. All the income stays locally and as well as local economic development the project has worked to provide toilets and hot water in two of the local schools.

The area provides well-planned and co-ordinated routes for all abilities from gentle green lane type touring to full-blown extreme enduro riding. Night time back at the village is always a party and a chance to recount the days events with ever taller stories washed down with the local palinka (a very smooth but potent brandy, every house has its own still). Whilst there and with no previous off road experience I joined a group of psychopathic German riders for an 'easy' ride up the mountain. The 1150GS coped ably – its ability far excelled mine. The BMW suspension and the TKC80 off road tyres sailed along the well rutted and stepped tracks. Deep mud was no problem with the Telelever eating up the bumps.

Near the edge of the forest – I decided to let wisdom get the better of valour, roll a cigarette and enjoy the view whilst the serious crew headed to the top. The peace was broken by a Dacia – the Romanian national car bearing a close resemblance to a 1970's Renault 12, that merrily picked its way down the track that had got the better of me –The old boy driving does this trip every day! ouch.

For a week of mad off road riding in good company, pure hospitality and enjoying a magical place – a visit to Enduromania is thoroughly recommended!

My solo journey onward took me into the heart of Transylvania – with huge surprises. As I rode the quality of the roads got better and better, soon far exceeding the poor excuse for tarmac that my local council provides! In the last few years huge amounts of European funding has poured in to improve the network linking Europe with the rest of the world. Through the twisting foothills of the Carpathians I got a chance to discover the scratching capabilities of the GS. This bike is an all round dream, even fully laden it rode smooth and fast. Occasionally and often round a blind bend a set of serious corrugations would appear – the 1150GS's suspension ate these with out missing a beat. Every kilometre further on the trip I realised how hard it was going to be to go back to my Japanese bike – this was not going to be a mere holiday romance this was rapidly becoming love.

In Transylvania there are wealth of small-scale heritage projects that are working hard to develop sustainable tourism. My favourite is the Carpathian Large Carnivore Project www.clcp.ro. Based in the heart of Transylvania it has linked the study of wolves (over 80% of European wolves are in the Carpathians), bears and lynx with a whole raft of initiatives to help develop the local economy. In this area the fall of Ceausescu brought closure to the so-called 'bicycle' factory – creating almost total unemployment. If you are looking to recruit skilled munitions engineers this is the place to go! The Carnivore project has worked with members of the community to develop eco-tourism programmes, small guest houses, an education programme, an economic development fund and a scheme to provide the shepherds who spend the summer on the high pastures with electric fences to provide a nasty shock for the wolves! The farming is very traditional resulting in high quality organic food – no body can afford the agrochemicals. Travelling in Romania in early autumn was a food lover's delight – wonderful fresh produce, meat that was alive the day before and wonderful local spirits.

Whilst in the area I had the joy to meet the two wolves that had been rescued from a fur farm. Far from being tame, they are used to humans and like any big canine the male Crai is very partial to that spot behind the ear being scratched. A magical moment though he is always in charge – taking the opportunity to 'scent mark' my rucksack to make his point. Wait till the village dogs at home smell that! The Carpathians are a magnificent untouched range of mountains – marvellous opportunities for walking and some sensitive riding. Next years release of Cold Mountain with Nicole Kidman will give you an opportunity to see it on the big screen. They were filming nearby in a well-guarded valley and even the BMW would not persuade the security to let me through.

On the road so far I had not seen any other western bikes, only the odd local CZ type machine usually being pushed through lack of fuel. A visit to Brasov – a wonderful historic university city that is a real contrast, the centre being more stylish than Milan – brought an encounter with a Dutch rider on an old K75. He was touring the region in the opposite direction to myself, travelling light and camping under the stars. Our two German steeds generated much interest from the locals.

The biggest impression of Romania is the hearts of the people. They have the biggest hearts of anybody I have met in the world. The welcome you receive is exceptional and without condition. I stayed mainly in either small guesthouses or family homes and the quality of welcome, service and cleanliness far exceeds anything you will find here in Britain. Romania has got to be one of the best-kept

secrets in the world –and the Romanian girls are the most beautiful I have ever met but that is another story!

On the road south I attempted to find the ring road around Bucharest, it is marked very clearly on the map however does not really exist on the ground! This led me into Bucharest itself – more of a test of the dual-purpose nature of the GS than any mountain track. The roads have the most spectacular potholes, the remains of the old tram network leave deep channels more than capable of swallowing the back wheel of the GS added to this manic drivers and wet diesel covered roads really put the 1150GS and my riding to the challenge. As we headed deeper into the city all signs disappeared – I was heading for total despair until around a corner a vision appeared. A brand new police R80 in the process of checking the numbers on a Romanian taxi! Pulling up nearby, the officer soon gave up on interrogating the taxi driver and showed amazement at finding a british 1150GS in his city. With the help of the much relieved taxi driver now acting as translator a passionate discussion about the virtues of BMW followed.cateva

Heading south for the bridge over to Bulgaria, my heart felt sad at the prospect of leaving Romania behind. I approached the border carefully as through the excellent bike travelling website www.horizonsunlimited.com I had received a warning about fake police trying to extort a 'tourist tax' – again my fears were unfounded and I safely crossed.

Crossing the Danube into Bulgaria I met the start of the autumn rain. Bulgaria also brought the challenge of navigating with Cyrillic signs, bearing no resemblance to the names on my road atlas – this resulted in a major detour that led to me discovering a beautiful town hidden in a gorge. This was the old capital before the power moved to Sofia. The presence of a doctor's convention in town relegated me to a motel up in the hills surrounding. Travelling with a bike security is always an issue – to reassure me the owner arranged for the bike to spend the night in the bedroom of the caretaker underneath the motel! Everywhere else I had ensured that the GS was safely tucked up in a locked courtyard – here it had central heating!

Bulgaria is a beautiful country of many contrasts. It is developing economically stronger than the other Balkan countries and has a huge commitment to its environment. Rather than making the mistakes made in the west the government is working proactively to protect its special areas, especially the magnificent mountain parks of the Rila Mountains and the Pirin. As part of my formal visit I attended a 2-day National Forum working on an eco-tourism strategy for the country. Every session was led by either a Minister or Deputy Minister from the government – where else would you find this level of support.

Bulgaria is an amazing country to discover by bike – the roads are good, again many new roads as a result of the EU transit road system. But beware the new roads have brought with them new police cars and shiny new radar guns. Speeding infringements are dealt with by means of a stamp on your card and a £10 fine at the border, gone are the days of police corruption. There was much more evidence of bikes within Bulgaria – usually older Japanese bikes that are being imported in from the west along with all our old cast off cars.

Bulgaria brought the only truly scary moment of the journey. Coming round a sweeping corner I was confronted by a lorry and a car side by side with nowhere to go. Choosing between a hope of them parting or leaving the road and hoping for the best – I chose the off road route. Expecting to be in pieces – I was shocked to discover the GS had sailed over the verge, across a ditch and into a field of maze.

We ground to a halt upright – testimony to the GS because in all honesty I just held on and let the bike do the work. With any other bike we would probably have been in pieces – me in an ambulance and the bike in a crate for the journey home.

Starting to head north west again I crossed the border into Serbia – again with disbelief from the border guards. Especially when they discovered that this mad british biker had an invite from the government!

The first leg of the journey from the border took me through a dramatic gorge. A spectacular but incredibly poor road cut through the side of the mountain with a series of 12 unlit cobbled and potholed tunnels. Again the GS provided me with a tireless ride through this marvellous landscape. Joining the motorway to Belgrade, a apparent lack of police and fading weather encouraged me to up the pace – however half way along out popped a traffic cop frantically trying to stop me. Pulling over with a sheepish look I discovered that my speed was rather in excess of the limit – the officer being suitably impressed parted me from £15 and then invited me to share coffee and chocolate while the storm passed. Trying getting that from a Gatsos!

After a short and formal stay in Belgrade I moved north to Novi Sad. Care should be taken when route planning as not all the bridges have been repaired since the troubles. In Novi Sad I was lucky to discover that it is the biking capital of Serbia. During a sorty into the city centre in search of a bank I was rescued from the one way system by a young couple on an immaculate 22yr old Boxer. This bike was worthy of a being a collector's piece but was ridden daily. Goran and Alexandra took me under their wing and introduced me to the local bike scene. The local club – Novi Sad Riders MC have a wonderful pub opens at 10 then closes in the early hours! After 10 years of political isolation they were very surprised to find a british biker who had ridden all the way from the UK to Novi Sad and the 1150GS was the first one they had ever seen. The welcome extended was huge as was the following mornings hangover! The bike scene is building up again though with a total disdain for plastic japs. One guy was even working on a Boxer lowrider. The hospitality of the Serbs was huge, with a real genuine warmth. Yes, the area has had a lot of issues but now is a time to look forward to the future. I think anyone who makes the effort to visit will be rewarded by the surprises I found. The history of conflict was brought home though just after crossing the Croatian border when I was held up for an hour whilst mine clearance was carried out along the roadside!

Heading north and back into the West was a real culture shock – the decadence and lack of soul made my heart feel very heavy. I have a real fear for the heart of the Balkans as the European Union spreads its wings. My journey opened my heart and eyes – a real life changing experience but that is for another story. My love affair with the 1150GS has grown to such a peak, the journey would not have been the same on any other machine, BMW please can I have my baby back? ! My Yamaha will have to go and by the time you are reading this I will hopefully be the proud owner of a GS.

Thank you to Andy Duke and the amazing Kylie for their support on this journey of discovery – I owe you and BMW a big one!

Smallpiece for inset box – please include.

Gavins trip was funded by a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship. The Trust awards 100 travelling fellowships each year for British citizens to undertake chance of a lifetime trips aimed at personal and professional development, learning new skills and discovering other cultures. Anyone can apply, the application process is straightforward and the application categories come out each June with an October

closing date. For more information contact the Trust on 020 7584 9315 or
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