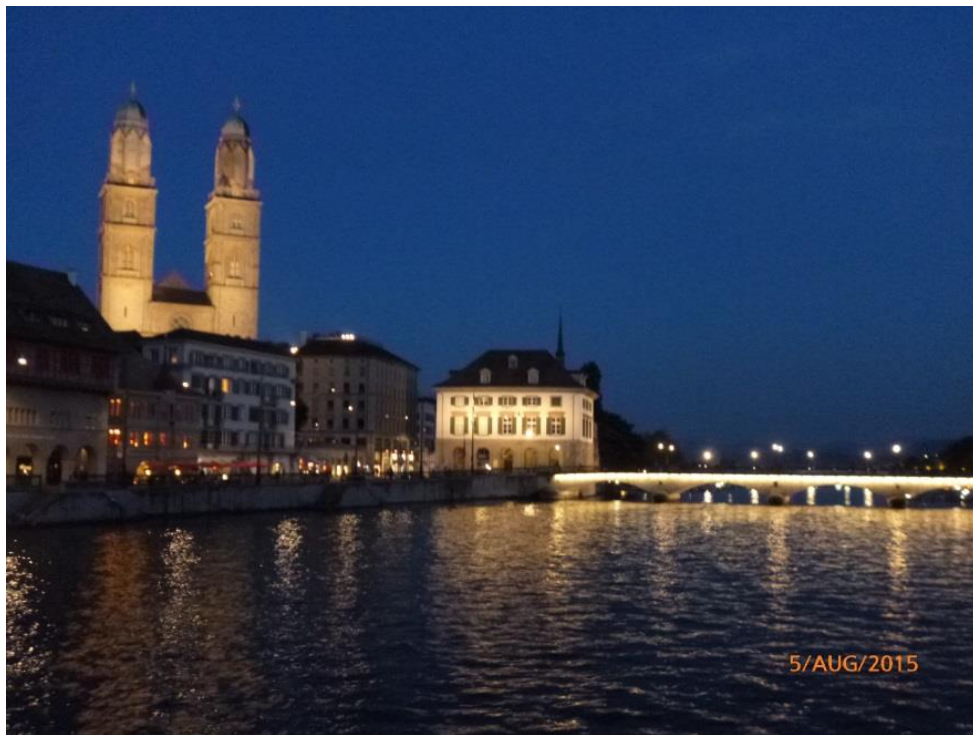


European Escapade

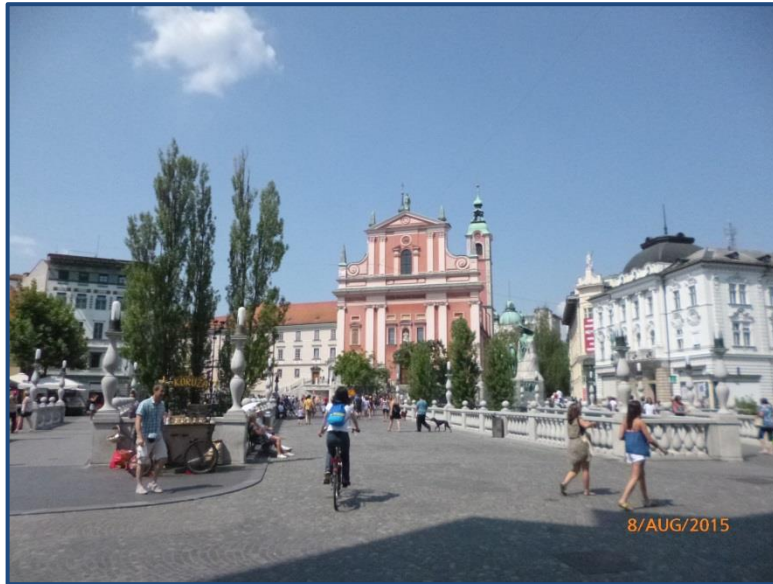
Like many of my contemporaries, I did the “travel around Europe in a Kombi” thing many years ago. At that time a number of tourist hot-spots, including Budapest and Prague, were on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain, and we reasoned our 1.6lit Kombi armed with an intermittent back-firing exhaust was no match against a 38.8lit V12 Soviet tank with 72mm cannon.

Fast forward to 2015, and I decided to complete my European escapade, with the Kombi replaced by a Yamaha MT-07 on an Adriatic Moto Tours “Czech-Hungary” tour. To break up the discomforts of long distance travel, I stopped off for 3 days in Zurich, Switzerland and scratched the itch to travel the cog-wheel railways to Jungfrauoch, the “Top of Europe”. This was also rather convenient at the time as Europe was in the grip of an unprecedented heatwave, and a walk on the snow was sure to give some relief.



P1140176: Zurich by night

Adriatic Moto Tours (www.adriaticmototours.com) is based in Ljubljana, Slovenia, a very pleasant city of 280,000 with a vibrant café culture in the old, traffic-free city centre straddling the narrow Ljubljanica River. I arrived on Sat 8th August, one day before the tour was due to start, and took this opportunity to explore the town square and castle. These were relatively uncrowded, as most of the city’s 60,000 university students were away on their summer break. Or maybe they knew somewhere cool to escape the heat.



P1140591: Ljubljana town square

Other tour participants were 4 Aussie couples, 5 Yanks, and Ozzy from UAE, and I met up with most of them in the tour hotel before the next day's briefing. Tour leaders were Tilen and Rok, with Luca driving the back-up van. After the briefing we collected the bikes and went on a familiarization ride on the outskirts of town before setting out the next morning for Graz in Austria. Most riders had selected BMW R1200RT tourers, along with a Tiger Explorer 1200 and Ozzy on a T-max scooter due to a left foot injury suffered before the tour.



P1140636: helping Ozzy extricate himself and the scooter from bushes on the way to Graz

Unfortunately the European heatwave showed no signs of relenting, with temperatures hovering around 37°C for the first 5 days. The ride to Graz provided some relief, with slightly cooler temperatures as we rode some fabulous roads over the mountains between Slovenia and Austria. I think one section on the Slovenian side was called Macquarie Passjska, while a section on the Austrian side sounded something like Macquarie Passenegger (*with apologies to language purists and non Illawarra residents*).



P1140641: Over the hills and far away

Adriatic usually have no more than 10 bikes for each tour leader, so we generally divided into 2 groups, with Tilen leading the Aussie contingent, and Rok leading the rest of the world, including myself. The tour group became better acquainted that night during an evening walk through Graz and dinner at an outdoor restaurant below the Schlossberg (Castle Hill), where an imposing fortress once stood until a gentleman named Napoleon Bonaparte intervened. Naturally dinner was accompanied by a few beers and wines.

Next morning there were more mountain sections as we headed towards Hungary and an overnight stop at Tihany, one of many popular tourist resorts on Lake Balaton. Unfortunately Joel from USA came to grief on some loose gravel while turning left at an intersection in the mountains. He was able to continue a short time to a rest break, but collapsed after getting off his bike and was helicoptered to Graz hospital for observation. He was released after 2 days but could not continue the tour due to severe bruising, and returned home.



P1140667: Loose gravel at the 4-way intersection. The sign is only visible to straight through traffic!



P1140686: Farewell to Joel

The accident had delayed our arrival at Tihany, so we took the obligatory swim in the shallow lake the next morning before setting off for Budapest. Some bikes showed 40°C ambient temperatures on the flat bumpy roads, so several refreshment stops along the way were well received. The BMW riders didn't see the humour when some wag (not me) asked if they had their hand grip and seat heaters on. And I really thought BMW's were air-conditioned!



P1140747: 40°C in the sun, and not much better in the shade

Travel through Europe is much simpler these days with no passport checks required at borders. In some cases it wasn't obvious when we had crossed a border, with road conditions, advertising signs, and the style and quality of housing the main indicators. However, Hungary, Poland and Czech Republic do not use the euro as currency, and even though I used plastic where possible, I now have a collection of mysterious small coins.



P1140864: Budapest by night

Our hotel in Budapest was across the Danube from the magnificent Parliament House, and included a car lift (4 bikes at a time) to reach the underground car park. Despite the early swim at Tihany, we arrived in time to take a late afternoon tour of the Royal Palace, home to Hungarian monarchs for over 700 years, and spent the next (rest) day using a hop-on / hop-off bus to tour the city and markets. This was followed by a river cruise at night, gliding past the illuminated Parliament House just like the more expensive river cruise ads on TV. Budapest was even more interesting and attractive than I had anticipated, although our exploration of the city was somewhat curtailed by the oppressive heat.



P1140990: Budapest's iconic Parliament House

Budapest had suffered major damage during World War 2 when more than 1 million Soviet troops surrounded the city in a 50 day siege against defending German and Hungarian troops. In addition, the 5 main bridges spanning the Danube were destroyed by German troops retreating to Citadella fortress on the Buda side of the river. Fortunately the major buildings and bridges have been rebuilt to essentially original designs.

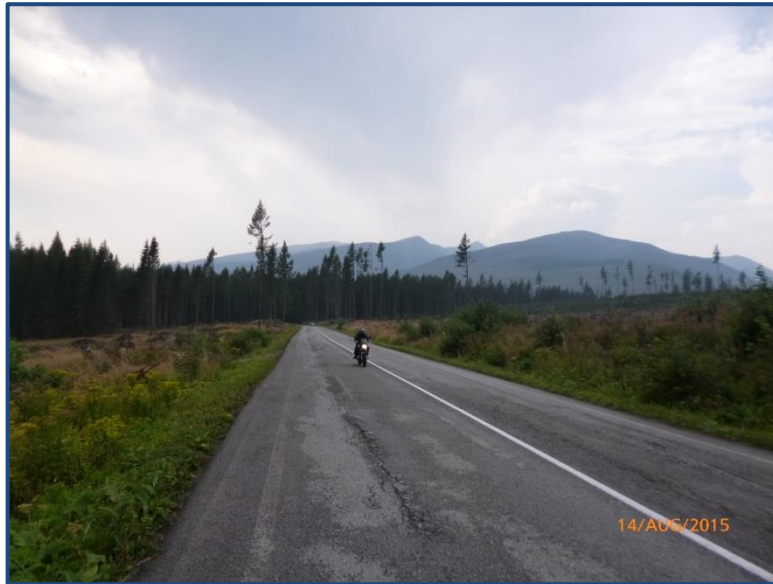
Next day again started out hot as we left the flat terrain of Hungary and headed towards Slovakia and the High Tatras mountains. One interesting stop along the way was 13th century Visegrad fortress on a steep hill overlooking a bend in the Danube River, near where we would catch a ferry before riding another 50km of forestry roads to the Slovakian border. The weather cooled as we climbed more fabulous mountain roads, occasionally slowed by timber trucks seemingly intent on converting their loads to “old growth timber” judging by the slow pace they were setting. Accommodation that night was a stately hotel in Stary Smokovec, a popular Slovakian ski resort in winter and the hub of hiking and cycling trails during the summer.



P1150092: The Danube River, viewed from Visegrad Fortress



P1150123: Forestry roads in Hungary



P1150166: More forestry roads in Slovakia, and a change in the weather

Another rest day in Stary Smokovec gave the opportunity to explore the mountains, with several of us catching a local train and unwittingly going the long way round to the ski area before riding a chairlift then cable car up to the intermediate ski level at 1750m. I had asked for tickets to “the top” and was told they were sold out, so we bought the next best option. When we arrived at the intermediate level and saw the cable car to “the top”, I was glad we took the wrong train earlier and arrived late at the ticket office!



P1150177: Our home at Stary Smokovec in the High Tatras mountains

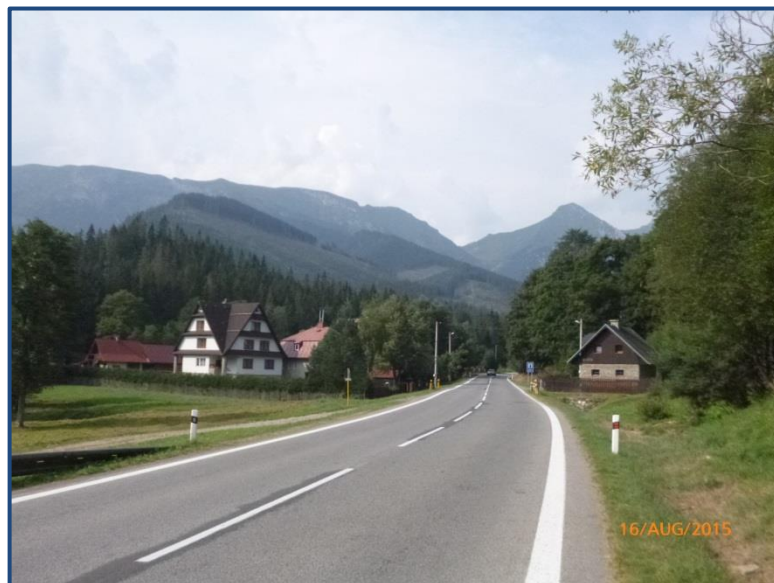
After a couple of beers for lunch we caught the cable car back down, only to be suspended in both meanings of the word after a lightning strike cut power for 15 minutes. Thunder and lightning were followed by a few showers as we caught the train back, but eased sufficiently for a wander around town and dinner that night.



P1150244: the cable car to “the top” – Lomnický štít at 2634m

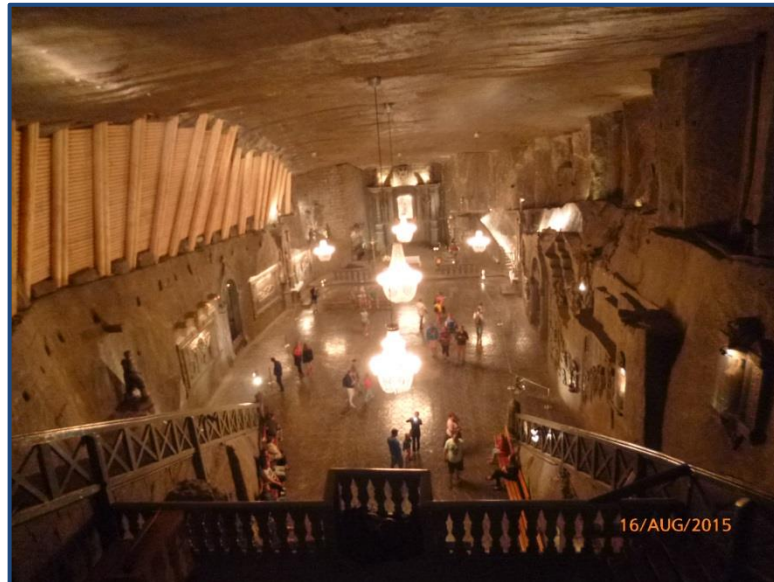
This tour had been modified from the normal Czech-Hungary tour (at the request of the Aussie couples) to include the rest day in Starý Smokovec, an additional rest day in Prague, and a rest day in Salzburg, and I found the additional days gave a good balance between riding and experiencing the sights and cultures at each stop.

The cooler weather continued the next day, with good roads down the mountains, then increasing traffic as we crossed into Poland heading towards Krakow. All the numerous small towns had a 50kph speed limit, and every town seemed to have a church located on the main road. Being Sunday, these were well attended, and with the churches built in a time when most parishioners walked to the service, it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between the road and the parking lot.



P1150276: Delightful villages through the Slovakian mountains

We stopped for a 2 hour walking tour through the Wieliczka salt mines outside Krakow, and saw only 1% of the almost 300km of mine workings, first established in the 13th century and commercially operated as a mine until 1996. The mine has numerous carvings and statues in the rock salt, and has hosted many famous personalities, as well as social events and weddings. Heavy rain had started while we waited for the tour, and continued during the final 20km ride into Krakow.



P1150326: The "Cathedral" in Wieliczka Salt Mine

Fortunately the rain held off for dinner that night in the Cloth Hall building adjacent to the expansive Rynek Główny, the largest medieval town square in Europe, and occasionally sprinkled as we took a tour of Auschwitz / Birkenau concentration camps the next day. Seeing photos and the belongings of people interned in the camps and descriptions of their treatment was very harrowing.



P1150392: Auschwitz concentration camp



P1150449: Birkenau concentration camp – most buildings were destroyed as the Nazis retreated

Our earlier whinging about the hot weather was further punished by more rain the following afternoon on the ride to Olomouc, although we did manage a nice ride up to a mountain-top restaurant for a coffee stop. The rain not only restrained our riding through some nice forested areas, but fog also restricted the views, and I was reluctant to get out the camera with water everywhere. Several of us had borrowed one-piece rain suits from Adriatic but these were no match against the forces of nature, and I was becoming increasingly concerned that even one misplaced Velcro strap could leave me cocooned for eternity.



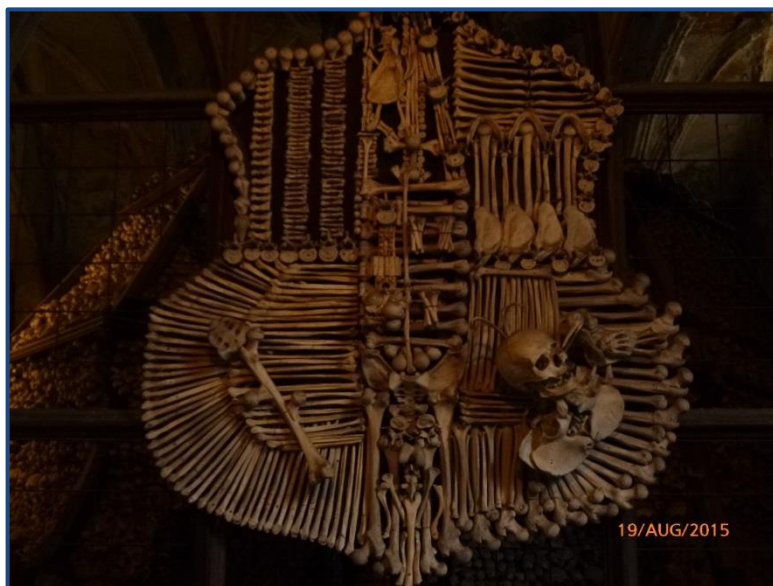
P1150560: Lush greenery despite (because of?) the hot summer



P1150565: and then it started to rain during the afternoon coffee break

Dinner that night was only a short distance from the hotel, but taxis were in order as the rain persisted. This was the only night of the tour where we were unable to wander around freely and act like a tourist. Legend has it that Julius Caesar founded the town during his touring days, but more reliable sources have the town founded in the 7th century. The large town square had a number of vacant tables setup outside the many restaurants, and I can only assume they would have been crowded and exuding the same ambience as all the other stops if the weather had co-operated.

The next day was a continuation of wet weather riding, with some clear roads but mainly wet, foggy and frustrating. We stopped to visit the Ossuary Chapel at Kutna Hora, where the remains of over 40,000 people, many victims of the “Black Death” plague, were buried in a cemetery. Many skeletons had been exhumed in the 15th century during construction of a church and the chapel in the centre of the cemetery, and several centuries later bones from these skeletons were used to make rather macabre decorations.



P1150577: Human bones make a grim decoration in Ossuary Chapel

Fortunately the rain cleared for the ride through afternoon traffic into Prague. I don't think cobblestone streets were designed with motorbikes in mind, and they would have been particularly hazardous in the wet.

Prague, the historical capital of Bohemia, was founded in the 9th century with construction of a fortress on a hill (of course) above the Vitava River. Construction of St Vitus Cathedral within the fortress walls commenced in 1344AD under the reign of Charles IV, and construction of the Charles Bridge commenced in 1357AD. During this period, Prague became the third largest city in Europe, after Rome and Constantinople.

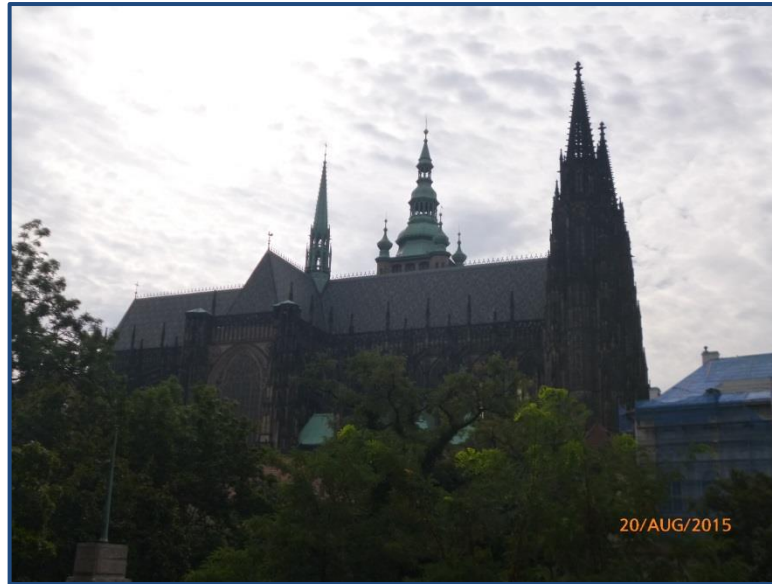
We had 2 rest days there, giving time to explore the highlights of this fascinating city, starting with a guided walking tour on the first morning. There's not many places in Australia where you can wander around the "Old Town" with a recorded history dating back to the 11th century, then wander around the "New Town" with history dating back to 1348AD.

Prague also escaped relatively unscathed during World War 2, as Germany expected to keep the prize city when they won the war, and Russia expected to keep the city after they liberated it from Germany in 1945. The "Velvet Revolution" of 1989 saw the communist party relinquish power, and in 1993 Czechoslovakia dissolved into the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

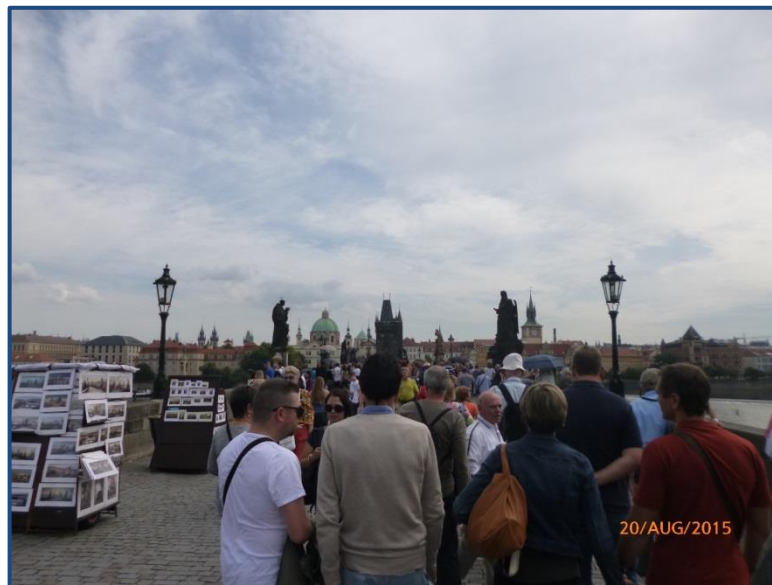
St Vitus Cathedral and Charles Bridge may be two of the tourist hot-spots, but one gets the impression that virtually every building has an interesting story to tell. On the first night we had dinner in a brewery dating back to 1499AD and probably many of it's stories would be censored in this age of political correctness. We took a liking to it's specialty beer, and to honey shots (on the house). To top it off, our enjoyment of Prague was further enhanced by fine, mild weather instead of the extremes we had been experiencing.



P1150591: Dinner in a 1499AD brewery - and the beer was good!



P1150622: Magnificent St Vitus Cathedral in Prague Castle



P1150734: Charles Bridge on a quiet day

Next stop was Cesky Krumlov, riding some great country roads, some hilly sections, one great run beside a river and another through a National Park. Cesky Krumlov is another magnificent medieval town presided over by an imposing castle, with meandering cobblestone streets and lots of character (as well as lots of tourists). We dined in a restaurant that was originally a water mill, and took time out from wining and dining to inspect the owner's collection of old paintings, furniture, industrial equipment, and vintage motorbikes. Most bikes were JAWA including a speedway model which we would normally associate with the brand. But we were in the Czech Republic, and they did have a prosperous manufacturing sector before the communist take-over.



P1160047: Another fortress on another hill in the Czech countryside.

And we think the world is dangerous today!

I should also mention the significant number of Skoda cars on the roads. Years ago Skoda may have been associated with unreliability, but pushbikes on the roof of many cars had nothing to do with helping the occupants get home after a breakdown. Cycling and mountain biking seemed to be the national sport, and lots of Audis and BMWs were similarly adorned. Classic cars were also regularly spotted on the roads, particularly on weekends, driving in groups or individually.



P1160051: Another forestry road

There were also plenty of motorbikes on the roads, particularly sports bikes and tourers in Slovenia, Austria, Slovakia and Czech Republic, and the locals and tourists alike were obviously taking advantage of the summer holidays to enjoy the great roads on offer.



P1160097: The delightful town of Cesky Krumlov, viewed from the castle walls



P1160110: and the Castle, viewed from one of the many al fresco restaurants in town

Adriatic Moto Tours include dinner on riding days, and all the restaurants chosen had a good mix of history, culture, great food and great location. On rest days we were left to our own devices. This was a good arrangement as we didn't need to rush if we were on an excursion, and could experiment or play it safe with restaurant and food choices depending on circumstances. It was perfectly acceptable to have a beer in a restaurant, then move on if we felt so inclined. And we never ran out of restaurants!



P1160151: the restaurant owner's collection of Jawas

After Cesky Krumlov we rode to Salzburg, another great ride with sweeping bends and mountain passes. Dinner that night was in St Peter Stiftskeller, founded in 803AD and considered the oldest restaurant in Europe, partly dug into the cliff face beneath Hohensalzburg Fortress.

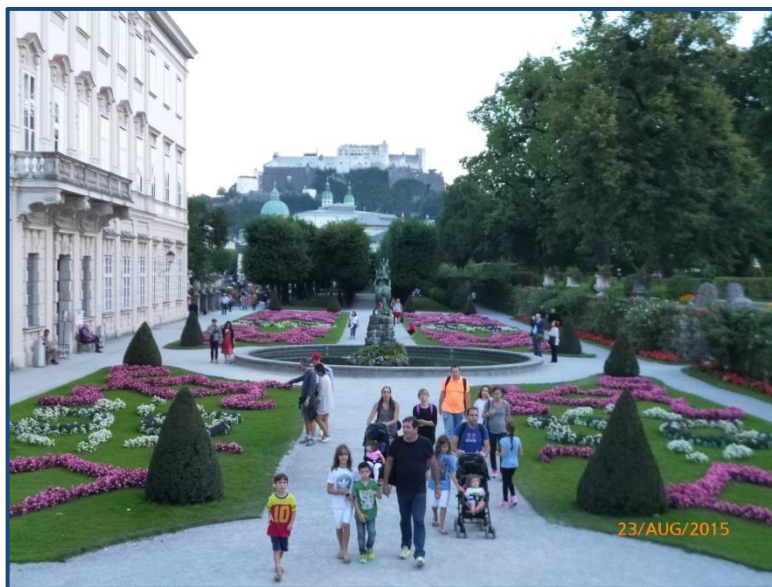
I never did figure out the difference between a Fortress and a Castle, but the words seemed to be interchangeable. Perhaps the title used depended on whether the inhabitants were at war, which seemed to be a fairly regular occurrence over the centuries. I'm also not familiar with the UNESCO World Heritage Listing, but throughout the tour there was no shortage of establishments with the coveted rating.



P1160166: on the road to Salzburg



P1160204: view from a lunch stop in the Austrian countryside



P1160247: Mirabellgarten, with Hohensalzburg Fortress in the background

Next day in Salzburg was another rest day, and I resisted the temptation to go on a “Sound of Music” tour and instead several of us took a bus trip into Germany to visit Adolf Hitler’s “Eagles Nest” hideaway, where Hitler regularly entertained his generals and foreign political figures before and during World War 2.

Why he chose a mountain top retreat accessed by an eight storey lift inside the mountain when he was scared of heights and claustrophobic are further examples of this deadly yet perplexing character.



P1160326: Eagle's Nest

We arrived back in Salzburg with sufficient time to catch the funicular up to Hohensalzburg Fortress for more sight-seeing, before finding a café in town for dinner and rehydration.

The last riding day to return to Ljubljana started out wet, and unfortunately didn't improve as the day progressed. Early in the tour the leaders had told us the return route leaving Austria and crossing the mountains into Slovenia was the best series of roads on the tour, and this knowledge made the wet weather even more depressing. Nevertheless we opted to ride these roads in the wet rather than take motorways, but again found the rain and fog restricted the enjoyment of the ride.



P1160428: These hills were alive with "here comes the rain again"!

Fortunately the coffee stops were in ski resort areas, and the proprietors were used to serving hot soup to cold customers wearing wet clothing and heavy boots. Possibly the only section of dry road that day was the border crossing between Austria and Slovenia, located midway through a lengthy tunnel.

As an encore, it absolutely bucketed down on the last 20 km into Ljubljana, easing off just as we made our way back to Adriatic Moto Tour's garage, where champagne corks were popped to celebrate the trip and our safe return. Naturally this was washed down with several beers to complement our external wetness, before taxis arrived to take us back to the tour hotel and a hot shower. Total distance travelled was 2880km.



P1160445: Tail-end Charlie's vest didn't stop the leaks into my one piece rain suit

The farewell dinner that night was held in Ljubljana Castle, a fitting venue to celebrate a wonderful tour with lots of new found friends and an even better appreciation of the delights of European travel.

Half the tour group stayed on in Ljubljana for a day or two, and several of us went to visit Postojnska Jama, exploring part of the 21km of limestone caves on a mini underground railway. This was followed by a visit to Predjama Castle, a fortress built into a cliff cave, where the robber baron Erasmus of Luegger held out in a siege lasting a year and a day back in the 15th century. During the siege, the castle was supplied with food and arms via a secret passage through the cliff. Erasmus was eventually betrayed by a servant, and killed by a single cannon shot while attending the poorly protected loo. There must be a moral to this story.

The last night in Ljubljana was spent having dinner and a few more beers with Dennis, Mike and Clay from the USA, reliving the highlights of the trip, feeling jealous of Mike who was staying on for Adriatic's Croatia tour, and floating the possibility of a ride down America's west coast next year. One of the joys of being retired.



P1160513: Predjama Castle

For this tour, my anticipation of visiting Budapest and Prague was surpassed by the real thing, and I thoroughly enjoyed the unexpected delights of experiencing Ljubljana, Krakow and Cesky Krumlov. In fact, all the stops along the route were very enjoyable, even the rain affected Olomouc.

On the way home, I stopped off in Bangkok for a few days, just as I had done after the Kombi trip around Europe almost 40 years ago. This time I visited the Grand Palace, and travelled the 130km to see the Bridge on the River Kwae. (In most reports, the river is called the Kwai, but I noticed the Thai spell it as Kwae, and they should know, shouldn't they? In fact, the river was originally known as the Mae Klong River, and was renamed the Kwa Yai River in 1960 after the movie made it famous. Apparently the author of the book got it wrong, and the mistake wasn't picked up when the movie was being made).

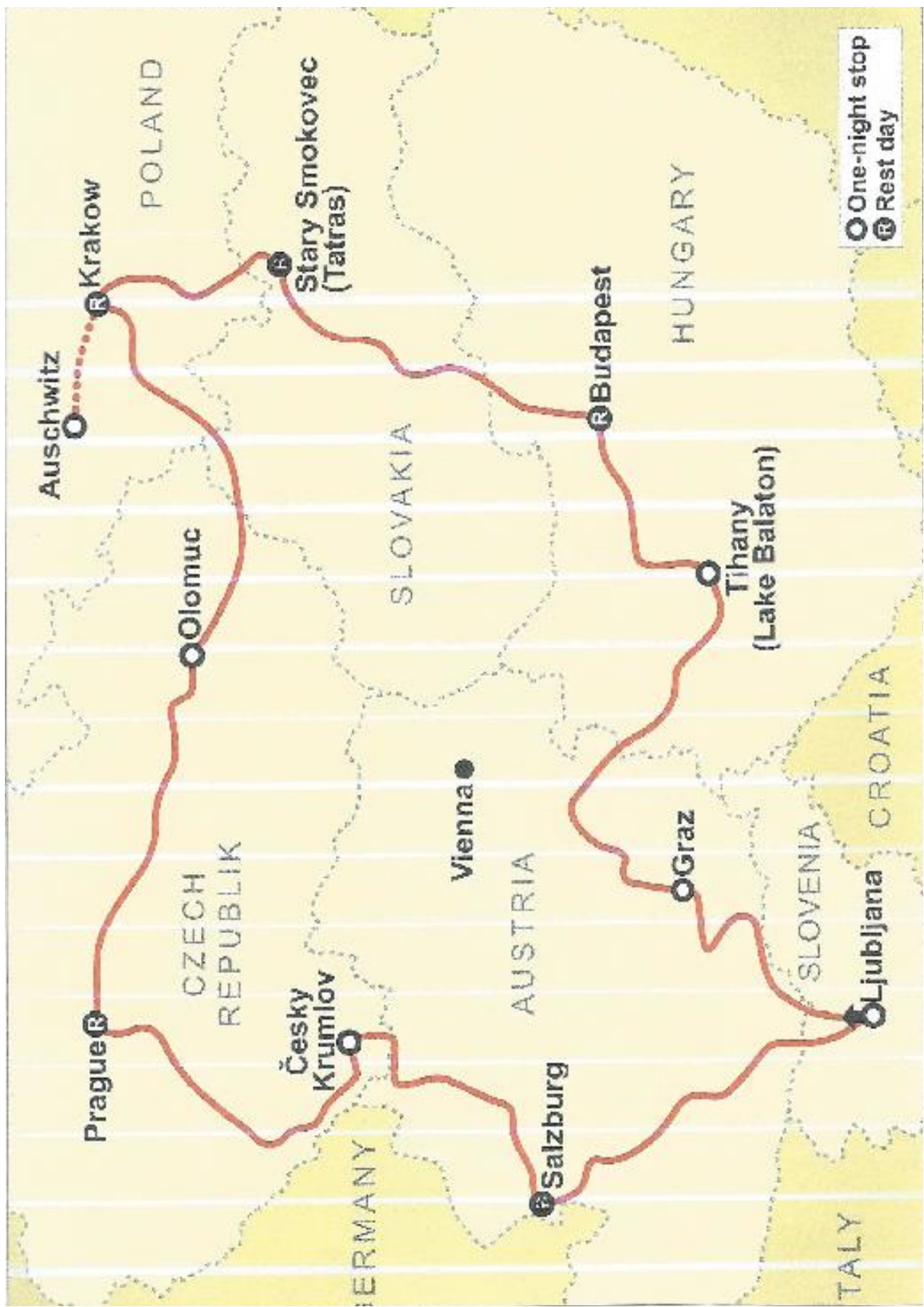


P1160733: The (iron) Bridge on the River Kwae. The wooden bridge has been removed.

After the pleasant, relaxed times in the European cities, I found I didn't care too much for the hustle and bustle and humidity of Bangkok, and was happy on the final night to sit back in a bar and watch Valentino Rossi win a rain soaked British MotoGP. I wonder if he got as wet as we did.



P1160752: and finished the trip in a bar in Bangkok



Auschwitz

Ⓡ Krakow

POLAND

Stary Smokovec
(Tatras)

SLOVAKIA

HUNGARY

Ⓡ Budapest

⓪ Olomouc

⓪ Tihany
(Lake Balaton)

CZECH
REPUBLIK

● Vienna

AUSTRIA

Česky
Krumlov

⓪ Graz

SLOVENIA

CROATIA

Ⓡ Prague

GERMANY

Ⓡ Salzburg

ITALY

⓪ Ljubljana

⓪ One-night stop
Ⓡ Rest day