New Europe

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Extract

Slovenia

Day One: *The Julian Alps*

THE MOUNTAIN hut has been opened specially. The climbing and hiking season hasn't yet begun. There is snow all around us, but, more worryingly for our purposes, there is cloud all around us. What should be one of the most spectacular views in the eastern Alps could just as well be someone's back garden. I nurse a mug of herbal tea, personally mixed by our guide. It's a dense, intense brew, a grappa of herbal teas. He spreads his hands apologetically, and looks up at where the sky would probably be if we could see it. It's Slovenia's fault, he says, for being where it is. Moist Mediterranean air is meeting cool, dry air from Central Europe, condensing and covering the monumental landscape like dust-sheets over fine furniture.

There's a map on the wall of the hut and he points out where we are. Almost exactly on the border between Italy and Slovenia, and between what I have grown up to know as Western and Eastern Europe.

For forty-five years of my life the Soviet Union, with its satellite states, had turned half the continent into an alien place; unwelcoming, bureaucratic, grey. For forty-five years Iron Curtains and Cold Wars (sustained for the convenience of both sides) sowed division and mistrust amongst Europeans who should have been friends.

It's been eighteen years now since the fall of the Berlin Wall signalled a new direction for the continent into which I was born. Which is why I'm here 8,000 feet up in the Julian Alps, looking optimistically east, waiting for the cloud to lift so that I can see what the new Europe looks like.

Right
Looking east. The alpine valleys lead down into Slovenia.

Opposite
Starting out: on the top of the Julian Alps, with Italy behind me and Slovenia ahead.

Below
Lake Bled and the 1,000 year-old town around it. The church in the middle looks as if it's a ferry crossing the water.

Two hours later, the clouds start to wither, and we begin to make out solid objects: rocks and boulders peeking out above the snow, the outline of slopes soaring above and below us. Then with a sudden, dizzying effect a final stack of cloud falls off the mountain like an avalanche and the sun strikes buttresses of pink-tinged limestone, cracked and jagged and pointing at the sky. I head off along the path that leads east.

Day Two: *Bled*

Wake early. Beyond the trees I can see grey light reflected on an eerily still water. Nothing is moving. There is silence apart from the muted chimes of the clock on the church in the middle of the lake, echoed discreetly by a chorus of more distant clocks in the town of Bled.

Villa Bled, where we're staying, is a beautiful, tranquil spot, the sort of place that monks or dictators might choose as a hideaway from the distractions of the world. In this case it was dictators, for this vast pile was built, in 1947, as a getaway for Josip Broz Tito, a.k.a Marshal Tito, one of the giants of post-war communism.

The hotel manager tells me Tito loved Slovenia because it was as far away as he could get from Russia and as close as he could get to Great Britain. Did I know that Elizabeth II had received and decorated him?

The manager shakes his head. 'Unheard of in a communist leader.'

What's more, she gave him a Rolls-Royce, adding to the already impressive stash

Left
The Church of the Assumption, Lake Bled. Since the break-up of Yugoslavia, the Catholic Church is reasserting its authority in Slovenia.

of cars given him every Christmas by each grateful country of the Yugoslav Federation. Yugoslavia, generally reckoned to have been one of the more successful creations of post-war communism, never stood much of a chance after the charismatic Tito died in 1980. Slovenia was the first to challenge the system. The walk-out by Slovenian delegates in January 1990 made sure that the 14th Congress of the Yugoslav League of Communists would be the last. Two years and a short war later Slovenian independence was officially recognised.

Walking out this morning I have no sense of Slovenia's communist past. A banner slung across the road announces, in English, that this is the 'Month of Asparagus'. History and religion, two of communism's great enemies, are celebrated everywhere, from the impossibly picturesque Church of the Assumption that sits on an island in the middle of the lake like a carnival float, to the soaring ramparts of the seventeenth-century castle high above the northern shore. The language sounds Germanic, lots of 'Ja Ja's, and the boatmen waiting for tourists are decked out in Tyrolean costume. Houses are of the Alpine style, with overhanging roofs, carved shutters and piles of fresh-cut wood neatly stacked by the doorways. It's not just any sniff of communism that's missing here, it's any sniff of the twentieth century. Bled is in Austro-Hapsburg costume.

I take a ride on the lake with an unsentimental, left-leaning theatre director from the capital, Ljubljana (pronounced Loob-li-Ana). Our *pletna*, a stouter version of a gondola, is punted about by a man called Robert dressed in velvet jacket and pantaloons, with a pole in one hand and a mobile phone in the other. He's clearly more interested in what's happening on the end of the phone.

My companion, Zjelko, whilst not exactly nostalgic, misses the artistic contacts which were so easy during the Yugoslav times. People tend to forget that Slovenia is the most westerly Slav nation in Europe. With a population just short of two million,

Above left
At the Villa Bled, one of Tito's palaces, a mural shows the Yugoslav partisans fighting against the Germans in the Second World War.

Above right
With Tito watching from the wall, Lado Leskovar's nostalgic songs have his wife in ecstasy.

they, perhaps more than anyone, appreciated the cultural kinship of Slav federation.

'Is there anything in the old Yugoslav way of doing things that might have been better than now?'

He replies with feeling.

'In those times families spent weekends going walking in the mountains or going out. You know how they spend them now? In the commercial centres, all the Saturdays and Sundays, shopping and kids playing in the kindergarten of the commercial centres. That's how Slovenians now spend weekends.'

The medical care system was better then too. Now it's all to do with money.

'You can get a cataract operation in a week if you have money. If you don't it's a year and a half.'

By the time he's got onto the resurgence of the Catholic Church, which is trying to revive ancient Austrian laws to claw back property and raise taxes, I feel we're in danger of getting into a What Have The Yugoslavs Ever Done For Us situation, but Zjelko concedes that on the whole people live much better than before, and he adds that Slovenians feel proud to have moved seamlessly into the European Union and even prouder that next year they'll be in the Eurozone. I suggest that for the Slovenes this is exchanging one federal system for another, that Europe is 'the bigger country' that Yugoslavia once was before it all went wrong.

Zjelko considers this.

'There's a stereotype saying that Slovenians are always eager for someone outside to rule, like before it was Vienna, then it was Belgrade and now it's Brussels. So,' he smiles, 'they need someone to listen to.'

At the hotel tonight I meet someone who can put a little more flesh and blood on the man for whom the Villa Bled was built. Lado Leskovar is in his sixties, and in a colourful life has been Richard Burton's stand-in, sung the Yugoslav entry in the Eurovision Song Contest of 1967 (Britain's Sandie Shaw won, Lado came ninth) and danced with Tito's wife.

He remembers Tito as 'a very charming man' who liked cars, ladies, movies, food, and the good life generally. Politically he gained great respect for standing up to Stalin in 1948, developing his own mix of socialism and capitalism and for pursuing a foreign policy of non-alignment.

'We used to call him the walking credit card,' Lado remembers. 'He arranged credits for Yugoslavia from West and East.'

Tito was always keen to know what was going on in the world and liked to drink with journalists, cartoonists and writers and hear what they felt about him and what they were saying about him.

On such occasions Tito might play the piano and often, here in the Villa, Lado was called upon to sing for him.

So there's a frisson of nostalgia about tonight, as Lado sings a song for me in the bar, with Marshal Tito's portrait on the wall behind him, and Lado's effusive Serbian wife looking on as if it were the first time she'd heard it.

The song is called 'The Sad Death of a Vagabond'.

It seems somehow appropriate. Tito has been dead for twenty-six years, but for Lado, and I suspect many of his age, the mourning still goes on.

Day Three: *Slovenia to Croatia*

Our journey out of Slovenia begins at the run-down station of Jesenice. It's late afternoon and the three-coach local is full of adolescent schoolgirls, with the outnumbered boys looking wary. This line, built in 1906 when Slovenia was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, linked Vienna with the port of Trieste and it was opened with great ceremony by Archduke Franz Ferdinand, whose portrait was hung in every station and whose assassination in Sarajevo eight years later precipitated the First World War. I don't think he'd be impressed by what has become of his great dream. As the shabby little train rattles through thickly forested slopes there's loud argument, mock fights and smoking in the toilet.

The infant River Sava tumbles alongside. Flowing out of the Julian Alps, it will grow to become one of the significant rivers of Central Europe, forming the northern border of Croatia and Bosnia and swelling to join the Danube in Belgrade. But all that lies ahead.

I get talking to one of the few non-schoolgirl passengers, a man called Boris. He points out a long block amongst the trees. It was a barracks, occupied by the Yugoslav army who tried unsuccessfully to keep Slovenia from leaving the Federation in 1990.

'They were helped to leave,' he says, modestly. 'But our army is not very big now. Most of them go home at weekends.'

I tell him I'm heading for Istria, a peninsula on the Croatian coast. It was part of Italy between the wars but handed over to Yugoslavia by the Allies in return for keeping nearby Trieste a free port. After the break-up of Yugoslavia the Croatians took most of it, allowing Slovenia a minuscule share of coastline. Boris admits there are tensions over access and fishing rights but he feels the politicians make too much of it and basically they are brothers and sisters.

He taps Istria on the map.

'They are smart people. They didn't get involved in

Below
High jinks on the school special, on the line from Jesenice.

the war. Fabulous blue waters. It's a rare combination, normally you get beautiful waters and barracks.'

A few hours later, I'm on the Slovenian border and it's quite a shock to realise that as we cross it we'll be leaving the European Union behind. For all her diminutive size little Slovenia is the only one of the countries of former Yugoslavia to be admitted to EU membership. I reach for my passport and Nigel reaches for the carnet – a list of all the equipment that must be declared at the frontier of any country outside the European Union, and that, for the foreseeable future, includes Croatia.

Croatia

Day Four: *Istria*

Istria is famous for its truffles. The truffle is an unprepossessing, misshapen off-white tuber which grows in the soil around tree roots and which is considered so good to eat that men risk imprisonment to smuggle it across national borders. My guidebook describes the taste so many desire above all other as 'part nutty, part mushroomy, part sweaty sock'. And Istria is famous for them. Truffles, that is, not socks.

We drive through a sedate and timeless rural landscape that reminds me of Tuscany, with crops growing from deep-red earth and small towns growing from the tops of the hills.

In the Mirna valley is a stretch of thick oak and birch wood where we are to go truffle-hunting with Damir, a tall, rangy old hippy with a goatee beard, Guinness baseball cap, ex-army jacket and baggy trousers, and his eighty-six-year-old uncle Zdravko. Zdravko, who has a ruddy, outdoor complexion, wears an old forage-cap and carries a small stainless-steel spade slung across his shoulder like a rifle. Damir laughs when I worry about his octogenarian uncle.

'He's up every morning at four and in the forest until nine!'

But the two most important members of the expedition are Betty and Dick (a bit of a shock here as they're the names of my aunt and uncle), a four-year-old Labrador and a seven-year-old Retriever respectively.

Lovely, lively dogs that they are, I can't disguise my disappointment that they're not using pigs to nose out the truffles as depicted on the folklorique postcards they sell in France. Apparently pigs tend to eat the truffles as soon as they find them, which cuts down profits. So off we go into the forest. Betty, Dick, Damir, Zdravko and me. (And, of course, Nigel, Pete, John, J-P, Uncle Tom Cobley and all.)

It has taken two years to train Dick and Betty. They can now sniff out a truffle at 50 yards, even one buried an arm's length below ground.

Dick and Betty hare around among the silver birch saplings like children just let out of school.

Damir's honestly not expecting much. For the last two years it has not been obligatory to have a licence and there are various cowboys who come in, buy up

Left
In the forests of Istria, Dick and Betty try to get me, Damir and Zdravko as excited about truffles as they are.

what they can't find themselves and smuggle the truffles (*tartufi* in Italian) across the border into Italy where they have plenty of black truffles but few of the highly prized Istrian whites. Their other concern is for the delicate ecosystem of this part of Istria. Truffles thrive in unspoilt forest and they need the minerals from unpolluted rivers, but Croatia is on a building spree, with twenty-three golf courses seeking planning permission in Istria alone. Just then Zdravko calls across. Dick has dropped down beside a beech tree and is nuzzling into the earth, using his nose and his paws to uncover something. Damir kneels beside him and together they pull out what looks like a soil-covered stone. He rubs the soil away and holds it up to the dappled sunlight.

Dick, duly rewarded, races after a ball. 'That's about, well, 15 grammes.' Worth around 14 euros he reckons. The biggest he's ever found was over 300 grammes.

The largest truffle ever recorded was found by a local man, Giancarlo Zigante, though there are muttered reservations about the claim, and rumours that Zigante took the credit for someone else's discovery.

At the village of Livade, a few miles away, a replica of the truffle, looking like an inflated brain, stands proudly on a plinth at the entrance to Zigante's restaurant, together with the citation from the *Guinness Book of Records*. 'A White Truffle (Eutuberaceae Tuber) weighing a world record 1.31kg was found by Giancarlo Zigante of Pototoska on 2nd November 1999.'

Giancarlo, an ordinary-looking middle-aged man with black hair brushed forward and a belly pushing at shirt and belt, has prepared us a special menu. Truffle cheese and ham is followed by home-made truffle pasta, which in turn is followed by truffle ice-cream. I personally feel that each dish would have been better without the truffles, but many, including Marilyn Monroe and Winston Churchill, would think me an unsophisticated lout.

I wish I liked them more, if only because there's no escaping them. Tonight, at a town nearby, Giancarlo Zigante will try to claim another place in the *Guinness Book*

Right
Buzet, Istria. The world's largest omelette takes shape. I consolidate my reputation as a bit of a stirrer.

of Records as he personally supervises the making of the world's largest omelette.

A truffle omelette, of course.

In the centre of the small town of Buzet, a circular tent has been constructed to house the omelette pan, which measures 20 feet in circumference, 7 feet across, with a 6-foot handle sticking out from one side and getting in everyone's way. It rests on a mesh of radiating gas jets and an earnest young man I talk to says that the hardest problem of all was providing consistent heat over such a wide surface area. It was a problem he personally solved and he's now Mayor of Buzet – further evidence, were it needed, of the truffle effect.

The evening's ceremony is quite surreal. Crowds gather as night falls. Zigante, brow shining in the harsh strip light, fusses about, nervous in a suit and tie, whilst his team, in matching white T-shirts, fans out around the pan like Formula One mechanics at a pit stop, each clutching a large bottle of cooking oil. When the signal is given, they upend these into the pan, to be followed by blocks of butter which they move around with long metal rods like those croupiers use in a casino. Then, with TV cameras whirring, the signal is given and three large milk churns filled with the contents of 2,006 eggs, broken earlier, are tipped into the pan, to be followed by 10 kilos of white truffles.

Croatian TV and film stars step modestly forward to help stir the mix, and just when you thought it couldn't get any sillier, four musicians and a singer, in blue and white striped T-shirts and red-bobbled nightcaps, leap into the ring to play jolly omelette-making music.

The mayor offers me a glass of wine, Giancarlo's son offers me a glass of wine, and to cap a day of dizzy madness I am called forward by the Truffle King himself to be a stirrer.

The mayor winks as I step forward into the limelight.

'You are a big star in Croatia.'

Day Five: *Rijeka*

Spend the night at Opatija, at the north-eastern end of the Istrian peninsula. Once a favourite watering hole for the rich and successful of the Austro-Hungarian empire, it has the languorous, stuffy air of a place that will change only reluctantly. My guidebook damns it with faint praise. 'Attracts an elderly clientele of middle-class Europeans.'

The next working city down the Croatian coast is Rijeka (in Italian Fiume – both words meaning 'river') and I have a special reason for stopping here. When I was making *Around the World in Eighty Days* I remember a slow and rather magical voyage across the Bay of Bengal aboard a Yugoslav freighter called 'Susak', captained by a man of infinite, if lugubrious patience. He, like the rest of the crew, viewed the Madras-Calcutta-Singapore run as some sort of punishment and the only time I saw him cheerful was when he talked of his home and family, back in Rijeka. The name didn't mean much to me then but now I'm looking at it on the road signs ahead, and Captain Sablic has agreed to meet me again, eighteen years on.

With some difficulty we find a place to park in the busy port area, and as we're a little early I walk around a nearby fish market. It's like a small cathedral. Built by an Italian the year the First World War broke out, it has an apse, a gallery and a fine timber roof through which the sun filters onto glistening slabs of tuna steaks, nine inches thick, squid, shrimp, mackerel, sardines and mountains of conger eels. Business is done in traditional fashion. No computerised cash tills here. The fish are weighed in standard-size brass buckets and measured with brass weights.

Round the corner from this piscatorial palace, I find Captain Sablic at one of the outdoor cafés. Any worry that I might not recognise him is quickly allayed for, even without the uniform and with a few more pounds on him, the face and the posture are unmistakable. The captain had a way of occupying a chair that suggested he might be in it for ever, and his face betrays the same grave world-weariness that I

Left
The market at Rijeka. A cathedral of fish.