

E-BIKING THROUGH CROATIA



This little book is dedicated to Shafinaz,
an old friend and colleague, whose cool head we sorely missed
when things looked dire and we needed lightening up and
whom we hope will set up an e-bike holiday enterprise in Sri Lanka
for us all to enjoy.

E-biking : September 2016 - a Holiday in Croatia

The idea was simple: a guide yourself ride with back up & rescue staying at small, intimate, family run hotels selected by B-Spoke Holidays for their food, fine wines and good rooms reached on comfortable well prepared electric bikes pre-selected to fit our height, weight and shape and cope with the quite steep terrain.

Who could resist? Off we went with hearts aglow and head held high.





Vella Vrata, Buzet, which has expanded down the street



Feeding the 400 - Queue early for food at Park Hotel



The palatial Palace Hotel, Porec, with bikes stored in the ball room

Not many were family hotels.

Some were grand and we stored the bikes in their ballroom.

Others were package tour with 400 for supper.

But all had hot water.

And where we had to eat in the hotel the food was good or at least adequate.

Even if it took an hour to arrive and cost a fortune as it did at Vella Vrata where we were stuck for the first two days.



Best rooms were in Novigrad



From our balcony in Novigrad



We wasted a day in Buzet waiting for the bikes to be brought back up from wherever the last party left them.

So we had plenty of time to walk round this fortified hill town built by the Romans.

And much improved in the 1700's by the Venetians when they made it their military centre after they took Croatia.

The Russians/communists let it go to ruin. Now the EU is pouring in money - but there is a long way to go.

We explored the ramparts and town. That's Tipan Konzul who lived in the house from 1521 - 1568. I hope I look as well when I am 500.

A current resident has found a way of keeping cool. Who said always stop the pipe leaking.





13/09/2016



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The bikes arrived mid-morning of the 2nd day. Kim's step through was not available and the cross bar substitute did her tin hip no good over the next week.

The previous rider had gone back to UK with the keys of the large frame bike I had asked for. My substitute was a powerful mountain bike - sadly with its handlebars lower than my saddle. Too much strain on the wrists.

Kim's bike was only half charged. So instead of the suggested introductory ride we did our own explore.

A very good lunch with an honest wine list and cheerful inn keeper at the Opatija road turn off.

And then a very steep climb to a Venetian castle inhabited until 1949 and with a grand view.

With hindsight we should kept the powerful mountain bike for Kim and I should have taken hers.

But we did not know then that my replacement would have a dud battery.



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Early next morning as the mist was rising we left Buzet with my replacement bike and fully charged batteries, past the Toplice resort with its troglodyte caves and rock climbs - until Kim spotted the sign.

The champion olive farm, in the same family for 250 or more years, grew 19 varieties.

And took most of the prizes.

At great price Kim bought a most peppery oil. It still tastes peppery back here at Priors Marston.

Sadly the farmer's wife who kept the shop refused to be photographed.

Not a bad spot.





Back on the cycle path, once a railway line, we came to Levade, a grand spa now dilapidated though one hotel has been restored.

An Austrian couple showed off an old olive press. They have a holiday home close by - just 3 hours drive from Austria which once owned this much fought over country.

A dull gravel road lead past deserted small holdings, past deer hides.

Our old fashioned maps had the edge when there was no signal. The young lost Germans did not believe us.



The old station at the end of the line, now an inn, had a forlorn feel, shut up for winter.

Past this point we had to decided:

- stick to the cycle paths where no rescue van could follow or
- keep to the main road with its traffic.

My battery was flashing empty. We chose the latter.





And indeed my battery did run out.

A young woman from Austria with her bike loaded up with her camping gear stopped to tell us we would never make it and not to try.

She was soon on her way and out of sight.

Kim found a quiet spot beside the new flyover to call in the rescue van.

And we watched the paragliders while we waited.

And soon we were in Novgrad, all done up for the tourist trade by land and sea.

Off Old Novigrad main shopping street, much restored



A very smart Frenchman, one of many yachts and gin palaces. The zoom does not do her justice.



Tabasco, suggested by the owner of the Villa Cittar as where the locals eat and not at tourist prices.

And very good too with the best local wine to that point. The best came later.

Villa Cittar, a family hotel, only did B&B. Breakfast was excellent.



The other B-Spoke clients waived us off early as they came down to breakfast.

The parties did not bike together but did end up in the same hotels if they were on the same itinerary. These were keen cyclists & biked all over Europe and afar.

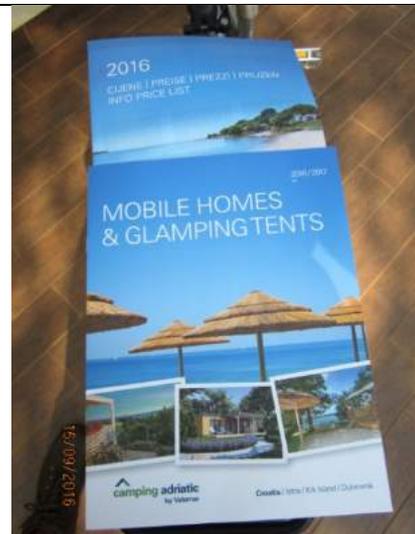
Our ways parted here as they were adding a diversion into the hills north of Novigrad. We ploughed on south to rendezvous with an earlier flight home.

We turned off the road out of Novigrad, heavy with traffic, at Tarska Vale which must have been prosperous not so long ago.

Not all the grand houses were so ruined. The back quarters of some were still inhabited. And some were still fishing.

Then over the hill, round the bay and down to the sea and a long ride through camping sites with Austrian, local and many British caravans.

Time will tell whether this will bring in enough to restore the depredations of the communist era.



Lest you want to book for next year.



15/09/2016



15/09/2016

Una grande cisterna (10 m x 10 m) è ancora visibile sulla baia di Santa Marina.

A big cistern (10 m x 10 m) is still visible on the bay of Santa Marina.

Amphorae telling the story of a great estate

Loron's oil amphorae's rim are stamped with their owners names. Firstly senator Sisenna Statilius Taurus, son of one of emperor Auguste's close friends, then Messalina emperor Claude's first wife who was killed for adultery, finally Calvia Crispinilla mistress of emperor Nero's pleasures. At her death Loron becomes imperial property with emperors Domitian, Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian. Small amphoras without stamp were probably used for fish sauce.

15/09/2016

And where there were no camp sites there were new holiday homes going up. But much of the coast was marshy.

It has been popular for a long time. The dig is of Nero's holiday cottage where he came to recover from fiddling while Rome burnt. Some cottage. Lots of shards.

The track was not always smooth. There were a lot of cyclists on this section. Our bikes got up this bit easily.

Some Germans who live there showed us the way through back streets of Cervar-Porat, a small port along our way.



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15/09/2016



15/09/2016



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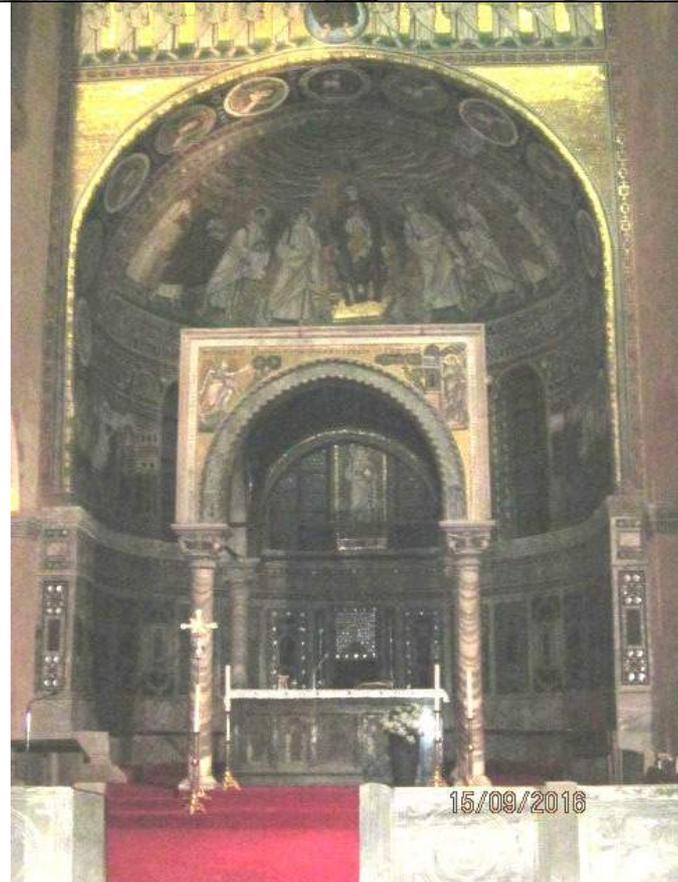
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Kim would not let me go on all detours that offered, though one seemed to be getting its fair share of traffic.

But the old Benedictine monastery, another post war ruin, was one sad diversion.

With someone's very smart sarcophagus discarded nearby.

Help may be at hand. Let's hope it will be money well spent.



And so to Porec (pronounced Porridge) the Roman and later Venetian, French and Hungarian regional capital before it was part of Yugoslavia.

And now the old lady hopes for a new lease of life as tourist town inside her old walls, still not very modernised.

The Venetian buildings are very grand but many are dilapidated.

It is being done up, especially along the sea front.

But the pride of the place is one of the earliest surviving complete basilica from c.500: still in use and now a World Heritage Site.

Is the atmosphere a place exudes just our burden of history or something else? There was that pre-history sacrificial alter high above Petra where we hid and climbed down another way to let an Arab pray in quiet. Who to?

Odd to think that Napoleon prayed here. One thinks of him more as cutting off the Sphinx's nose.

Or was that just an Astrix story?



A school restored



Restored Venetian buildings on the sea front with one eatery after another.

We wished Porec well with its booming night life and good restaurants.

An elderly local suggested Cakula as one of the best.

It was in a back street away from tourist traps. Cakula means food in Swahili - my mother tongue I suppose. The owner said it meant chatter.

We had the best local wine there. A very good 2012 Pestigia. No we had not heard of it before.

Breakfast next morning at the Grand Hotel Palazzo was very posh - and none the worse for that with carved pineapples and melons.

It was there in the ball room where we stored the bikes that we discovered that the handle bars could be raised after all. Someone else had done it. But we did not have the tools.



Sunset at Porec from the hotel sea front.





The way out of Porec was all main roads so we tried a diversion and took to the verges as others had too by the look of it.

The maps were not so clear but we were saved by a local who said "follow me to Fuskulin". Stunning creature.

There, at the war memorial, she went on and we made our way across country to the Klitu at Fleng where they were preparing lunch.

Though early, they fed us while my batteries charged for the 1st of several times that day.





Deserted farm at Bubani , soon to be a ruin.

It is hilly country south of Porec.

Above Limski Ford the boats harvesting the mussels seem underneath you.

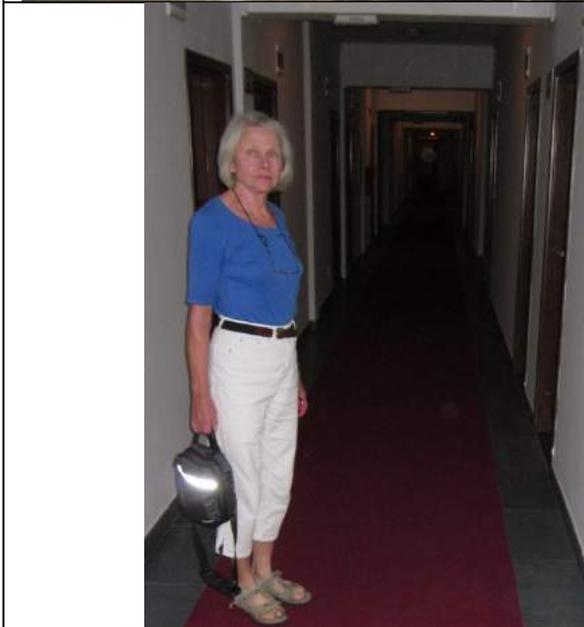
Kim's new friend in Zuntici had closed the week before at the end of the season. But he let us in, sold us beer and charged my battery that had run out again on the last steep climb.

His spaniel/sausage dog cross was very well adjusted too.

One detour too many to a soon to be deserted hamlet of Bubani as the storm clouds gathered.

On, on into that cauldron...





Soon storm succeeded storm with never a break between them.

We tried sheltering but it was useless.

So we pressed on - on and on with roads awash and dark as night before each downpour. This was mid-afternoon.

On to the uncertain welcome of the Hotel Park at Rovinj: a soviet mass market hotel of 400 rooms, isolated on the far side of the bay. A captive market in the wet.

Not sure Kim liked the long unlit corridors. Bad rooms though we had some of the best. I asked to change and was shown the alternatives. At least we had 3 of the same small rooms.

A tiny bath - but the water was hot. It was due for demolition a month after we left. And good riddance.

We tried a trick I had read somewhere to dry our boots: upside down over a lamp. It worked a treat.

And across the bay the patron saint of bicyclists looked on. Anyway it looks like a bicycle from here.





Across the bay old Rovinj looked well next morning in the sunlight.

So we cycled round while we waited for the rescue van. I had fallen off in yesterday's storm and sprained my wrist and saw no point in aggravating it.

The same story of an ancient once proud local capital now dilapidated. But it is at the centre of the Adriatic trade routes still.

Cruise liner tours and the like may be its salvation yet.



Print of a 18th century Venetian chart of Rovinj approaches





The rescue van drove us and our bikes to the last stop: the very pretty small town of Fazana.

Our hotel was in two restored buildings by the church and looked well in the full moon that night.

When we arrived there was a pentathlon going on with the blow-up finishing line by the church.

Competitors, spectators, tourists and all mingled in the market on the sea front.

The elderly lady in the tourist office suggested in perfect English that we try a back street restaurant called the Feral. So good was it that we ate supper there too. All locals. Not expensive. Kim wrote them up on Trip Advisor.

To fill in the afternoon we thought we would bike to the small town of Vodnjan 5 km inland

It was a local administrative centre in the middle ages and much extended by the Venetians during their supremacy.



Competitors' bike pound at Fazana.

We met them in teams of 2 or 3 again and again on our cross country ride to Vodnjan and in Fazana on their treasure hunt leg. Fun to watch.





It was not far so we chanced it across country on the farm tracks past many an ivy clad ruin.

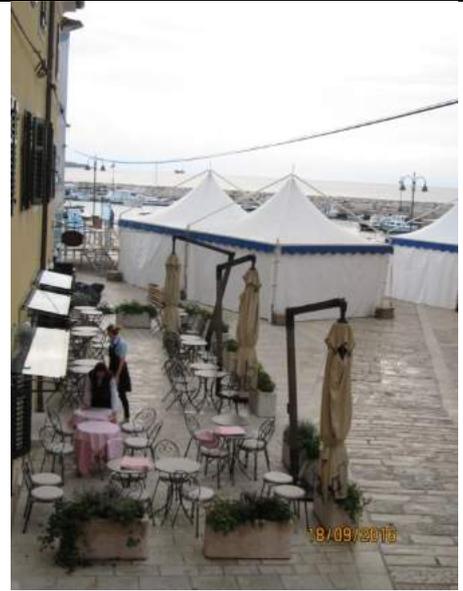
Once at Vodnjan it was the same story of neglect.

If restored well it will be stunning. They have started.



On the way back we passed an old croft shelter built into the field wall. It looked in remarkably good condition outside and inside. It was probably built in the 1700's or earlier into the dry stone (ie no mortar) wall.

These fields were mostly untended. I guess that will become more so unless big agriculture arrives.



A wet dawn broke. The electrics of our annex (and the hotel's though we did not know at the time) had failed in the storm overnight.

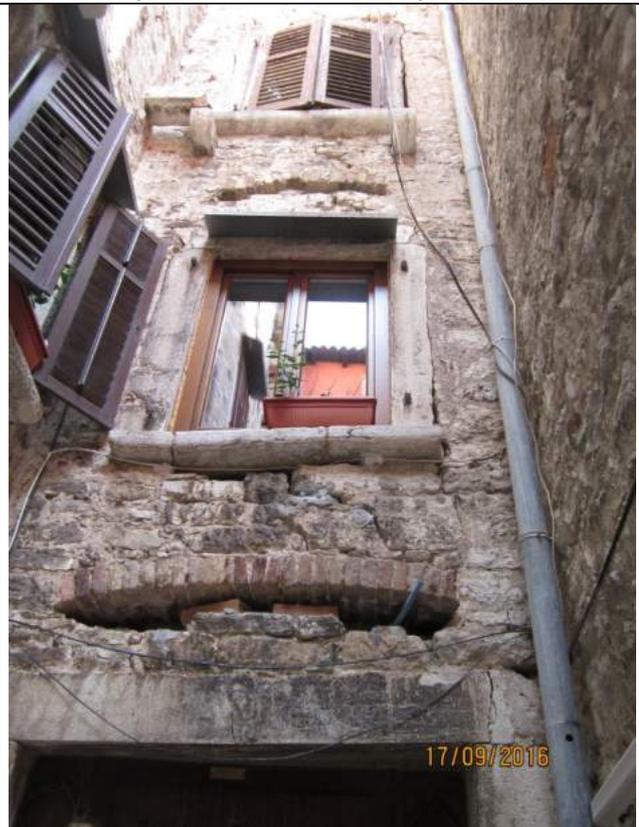
Kim tramped the streets in her night dress to get help - but she was first up and no-one answered. When the waitress arrived she put it all to rights and we had light to pack by. It happens every thunder storm.

In spite of warnings to the contrary the hotel put on a great breakfast for all those leaving and we were on our way before 8 am.

So over to the other side of the peninsular, looking down on the small towns tucked under the steep mountains and on to the airport.

If we ever return to this once lovely country with its unfailingly friendly and helpful people we will do our own thing and hope our tourist mite goes where it is needed most.

Meanwhile they, that patron saint and the ghosts of ages past may still pull them through if the EU does not wreck them as it has Greece and others. They are in the Euro but refused any but their own currency. Good for them.



Envoi

