

Croatia Bound

Our anniversary is mid June and it frequently coincides with our big annual trip. For the past several years it has involved VBT (Vermont Bike Tours) and the tandem. I'm sure that Bentha would prefer a nice relaxing vacation sans cycling, but I paid a lot for the bike, and as frugal (cheap, and proud of it!) as I am, we need to get our money's worth out of it.

One of the best trips we ever did with VBT was the tour in Puglia – a province in the heel and spike in Italy. There were about twenty cyclists in the group whose ages ranged up to eighty. When we first met, the guides asked, if anyone had ever been to Puglia before. No hands were raised. Then Bill (the eighty year old) slowly raised his hand and admitted that he had been there in 1945, compliments of the US Army, chasing the Germans out of the country. He still teaches chemistry at the University of Rochester. One of the greatest pleasures on these trips is the people you meet. On the last day of the tour we all vowed to meet again in Croatia, and toasted our proposed meeting with one of the many glasses of wine we enjoyed.

Well, we were the only ones who signed up for the trip. We contacted everyone, but they all had some sort of conflict or commitment that precluded making reservations. Well, we were going anyway. So we paid the fee and let VBT do the rest. We flew from Charlotte to Frankfurt, then to Zagreb and finally landed in Dubrovnik where we spent three days exploring the city. It was wonderful. The old part of the city is an official UNESCO world cultural heritage site. We met about half the group there and spent the time touring the city and its environs for three days. The tandem stayed packed in the two hardcases.

Our official guides finally met us on day three and we packed the van for the drive to Split, where we spent the day exploring the city. Bentha and I walked to the tourist area where the remains of Diocletian's palace beckoned all tourists to the attendant ice cream shops and a myriad of other stores and restaurants. Diocletian was one of those ancient Romans (born in Split) who worked his way up the ladder from warrior to Emperor. He was not a nice guy. If you didn't agree with him you were executed. If you were a Christian and refused to worship the Roman gods; same fate. But he had a great palace on the seashore.

The next morning we boarded a ferry to the Island of Brac (pronounced "bratch") where we would start our week of cycling. You could see the mainland from the island port. We disembarked at Supetar (Croatian for St. Peter) where we walked to the hotel - a nice place, owned by an ex-pat from Chicago. He tired of the windy city and wanted to go home. We quickly found out that the country was hilly. A five mile trial run convinced us that we had some hard rides ahead. You know those pictures of cities with nice mountains in the background; well we were to spend a lot of cycling time circling in those hills. The country was beautiful and clean. We saw no poverty. My impression was that people's needs were not trumped by their wants. The water was dark blue and clear. Having spent nine years in the Navy, I've sailed many oceans, but never have I seen water so blue. The karst topography provided the limestone for all the buildings from the smallest house to the great cathedrals and churches. In fact, the stone that was

used to build the White House was quarried from the area. Our three days on Brac were great. We had time to develop an ease with the rest of our group, drink a lot of wine and sample the local fare. Every meal was kicked off with a gulp of grappa (Croatian for lighter fluid). We never did get used to it, but you wouldn't want to insult your hosts. I would wind up drinking Benthath's portion/potion. She's such a Baptist, but very non-demonational when it comes to wine!

The next stop was the island of Hvar, (pronounced kgghvaar). The capitol has the same name. The name sounds like the final gasp of a person with something lodged in his/her throat, just before applying the Heimlich maneuver. The city was beautiful, but the enjoyment was tempered by the knowledge that we had to do a six mile climb the next day. Not easy on a tandem, as you well know. We could have ridden the van to the top, and coasted down to the next city, but I promised Benthath that we would use the granny gears the whole way and we would take the van back. Coasting down to the city of Stari Grad we wore out the brakes. We had to stop to cool the rims to avoid blowing a tire. It was one of the times when I wished we had disk brakes. There were no guard rails. Benthath kept pointing out fields of lavender and grapes. I kept my eyes on the road lest we fall off the edge and tumble to our deaths 500 feet below. Croatia has a zero tolerance for drinking and driving. Now I know why.

One night we had dinner with a local family. Ten of us gathered around the table while our hosts served us the local foods. The mother and father served the meal. Their fourteen year old son served as translator. He had studied English for two years, but was fluent. We asked him a hundred questions, but the one I remember was "what subjects were you studying?" He reeled off thirteen, including biology, computer science, physics, math, chemistry, religion, physical education, English, Croat, history, etc. We all left with the impression that the world freed after the fall of the Berlin Wall was in a race for the top. I had just read that the US placed dead last among all the industrialized countries in math and science. I suppose most of our students would also have a hard time parsing an English sentence. If Croatia is any example of what we have to face academically, then we're in for a fight. Not you and I, but our children and their kids. It was a real eye-opener.

There was a farewell dinner at the hotel, a first class place right on the Adriatic. We broke down the bike after the party and packed our bags. It was a great trip, but we were anxious to get back and play with our two granddaughters, one 18 months and the other soon to be three.

The flight back was from Split to Munich to Charlotte on Lufthansa. Good meals and plenty of leg room in coach, plus all the wine you could drink - for free. It was good to be back and the memories of Croatia will age like wine.

Ed Johnson
epj@aol.com