

# Beyond Bucharest

Motorcycle Adventure Travel - by Bob Goddard

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## An Ugly Great Beast

### Day 4, Sunday June 26th, Hattenhofen

Next morning I was up bright and early and washing bugs off the bikes before breakfast when a chap on an identical candy-orange Honda Varadero rode past, did a double-take, then came back for a natter. Well, as much of a natter as you can have between two bike enthusiasts who speak hardly a word of each other's language.

With lots of pointing, nods, smiles and "sehr guts", we established that we both believed we owned the best bike in the universe. After giving me a hearty shoulder slap and handshake, he roared off down the road with a wave. It has to be said that his six foot two inches (I'm guessing here, height was way beyond my vocabulary) was more suited to this bike than my puny five foot six. How I came to buy one still seems improbable, all these years later.

It was spring 1999 and Viv and I had recently got back into biking. On our first holiday without our children in 25 years we'd gone a bit mad and hired a little motorbike to explore the hidden delights of Turkey. We had so much fun we decided to get a bike back home so we could grow old disgracefully. A few weeks later an old Honda 600 Revere put a smile on our faces and a crease in our backsides.

If we were going to do much more motorcycling, we needed something much more comfortable. We had test rides on lots of nice bikes but nothing really seemed to suit us. And then at a Honda roadshow in Norwich I spotted the newly-launched Varadero up on the stage and said to Viv: "*Cor, look at that ugly great beast! Let's go and take a closer look.*"

The 1000cc V-twin Varadero, named after a Cuban seaside resort and almost as big, had caused the media to coin a new phrase – 'monster trail bike' – and it was generally regarded as something of a joke by the UK motorcycling press. Impossibly tall, bulky and ungainly, they couldn't see anyone going for this new machine from Honda. But the bike press also seemed obsessed with race-replica sportsbikes, which had such extreme and excruciating riding positions, they would be a shortcut to the chiropractor for a middle-aged couple like us. What did they know?

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So it was purely out of curiosity that we went up on stage to inspect this hulking great brute of a bike. A local dealer saw us approaching and pounced...

*"Like the look of the new Varadero, Sir?"* he asked. *"Jump on board and try it for size."*

*"You must be joking,"* I replied. *"I'd need a step ladder to get up there!"*

*"Try sitting in the saddle, Sir. You'll be surprised at what happens."*

So I slung a leg up and over the broad seat, slithered my bum on to its soft padding and to my amazement the bike sank down on its suspension so that I could just get the tips of my toes to the ground.

*"Now, Madam,"* the dealer turned to Viv, *"if you would like to hop on the pillion you can get an idea of how luxurious it feels on the road."*

Oh, he was good, this chap. With Viv on the back, the bike sank down even further and I could get the balls of both feet on the ground to hold us upright. Just. It felt great, in an intimidating sort of way.

*"There. You won't find a more comfortable motorcycle for two-up touring,"* he said. *"Why not pop over to our showroom tomorrow and take our demonstrator out for a spin?"*

Quite why we turned up at the dealers the next day to ride a bike that was clearly too big for me and way out of our price range, I still don't know. But something drew us there and within minutes we were sitting astride a massive, throbbing machine at the kerbside, me wondering if I ever dare set off down the road on it. After I'd asked Viv for the third time if she was ready, and for the third time she'd answered *"Yes!"*, I couldn't put it off any longer. I let out the clutch and launched us on a magic carpet ride.

The second we pulled away, the huge and cumbersome bike lost all its bulk, became perfectly balanced and light as a feather to steer. The big V-twin engine woofled quietly as the scenery slipped by ever faster, and instantly I felt like I'd been riding this bike all my life. As Viv's arms wrapped around my waist, the Honda surged forward in a smooth rush of liquid power and the bike glided over the road's undulations as if they were made of treacle, not tarmac.

With knees nestled in large recesses in the tank, bums sunk deep in the sumptuous seat and the fairing deflecting the slipstream around us, I felt we were sitting *in* the bike as much as on it. A touch of the throttle and we were swept forward instantly. A touch of the brakes and the bike slowed rapidly without drama. The Varadero loved leaning through bends and the handling was perfect. It felt safe, effortless and supremely comfortable.

There was only one problem... I had to give it back!

The same smiling chap who had enticed us into the saddle the day before had sent us off on our morning test ride with a pat on my shoulder and these words: *"Go as far as you want. Just try to bring it back before we close at six o'clock tonight."*

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He knew what he was doing. As the miles slid by and our grins spread ever further across our faces, the big Honda charmed its way into our affections. By the time we eventually returned to the shop and reluctantly prised ourselves out of its armchair comfort, I was in love. I couldn't stop stroking the tank and gazing at its voluptuous bodywork. Viv was equally smitten with the pillion ride. We were sold. We even signed up for colour-matched, Honda original equipment topbox and panniers and I barely seemed to notice as the bill soared to double our original bike budget.

This was most unlike me. I don't mind admitting to being careful with money. I simply don't enjoy spending it unnecessarily. I happily drive a tired old banger of a car, I'm comfortable in clothes from a charity shop and I can see no sense in buying something new when a perfectly good second-hand version is available at half the price.

But the Varadero wasn't available second-hand. It had just been launched and the first few had arrived in the country only weeks before. I had to have one. Now. Caution, reason and money flew out of the window hand in hand. And to this day I don't regret a single penny I spent on my lovely, lovely Varadero. As far as I could tell, my new German biking buddy, fast disappearing from Hattenhofen on his identical Honda, felt exactly the same way.

Sunday 26th June had been designated a rest day, so we enjoyed a leisurely breakfast of home-made cheese, ham and other succulent cold meats. The Eberls also run a top-notch dairy and butcher's shop next door to the gashof, with a farm out the back, so you couldn't get fresher or tastier food if you tried. Served with a variety of breads, jam, tea and coffee, we were set up for the day.

As we munched our way through this delightful feast, we were amused to see the cream of Hattenhofen's young men strutting around outside the restaurant across the street, fully kitted up in their lederhosen, braces and hats with feathers in, each downing a couple of litres of beer for breakfast before setting off for a bit of traditional Bavarian leg-slapping. And they didn't seem the least bit embarrassed at looking like a right bunch of twonks. Lest this sound like a racist slur, let me add that, in my opinion, English Morris Dancers look every bit as dopey, with an additional effeminate twist, but I'm very pleased both these yodelling and dwyle-flonking traditions are maintained as a poke in the eye for Euro conformity.

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**Ornate architecture delights the senses in Munich**

We asked Victoria if it would be possible to leave the bikes at the hotel and visit Munich by bus. No bus, she said, but she would take us in her car to the next village, Nannhofen, where we could catch the train. We protested unconvincingly for a few seconds, as we Brits are supposed to do, before accepting her generous offer graciously. She even helped us buy the right tickets from a machine at the unmanned station, and showed us the phone box where we could call for a taxi on our way back. What a sweetheart! Even Viv was beginning to see the attraction of taking her home with us.

The train was punctual, clean and efficient and delivered us to Munich city centre in time to see the ‘glockenspiel’ display of life-sized moving characters performing their animated routine on the hour in the clock tower of the gothically magnificent Ratthaus (town hall). Then Munich was taken over by a running marathon and we

beat a hasty retreat to the botanical gardens where we could cool our feet in the fountain and write postcards home.

After our impressive hotel breakfast, and anticipating another sumptuous banquet in the Eberl’s restaurant that evening, we made do with an ice-cream for lunch. The afternoon was spent aimlessly wandering around the beautiful city, sight-seeing and people-watching, until our legs grew tired and we hopped back on the train which delivered us effortlessly to Nannhofen. By this stage we were feeling rather smug at our handling of the German transport system, and I fairly swaggered into the phone box to call a taxi. Two minutes later I slunk out of the phone box feeling feeble and foolish.

Lulled by Victoria’s impeccable English, it hadn’t occurred to me that I might not know how to call a taxi from a German phone box. I’d assumed there’d be dozens of cards for taxi companies, plus various other dubious services, stuck up all over the inside of the phone box in the kind of sleazy, commercial graffiti we find in the UK. But this was Germany. Clean. Efficient. No nonsense. No cards. No phone book.

There was, I’m sure, some simple means of finding a taxi if you knew how to navigate the phone’s automated information system. But after several bewildering

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conversations with a syrupy-voiced fraulein, who turned out to be a series of recorded messages in undecipherable German, I finally gave up and admitted to Viv that we were stuck in a deserted railway station, miles from anywhere, without the first idea how to get back to our hotel.

Fortunately, we did have the number for our gasthof, where thankfully Victoria picked up the phone (her Dad doesn't speak a word of English). I asked if she could call a taxi for us, as we were stymied by lack of phone numbers and language. She said to wait there and she would get someone to us within a few minutes. So we read the timetable from top to bottom, raced each other up and down the three steps to the platform a few times and Viv slapped down my outstretched arm as I was preparing to launch into my best goose-stepping Hitler routine.

*"Don't be so stupid!"* she hissed. *"You don't know who could be watching us. You'll get us arrested and taken away in a blue van instead of a taxi."*

*"Jahwohl, herr Commandant!"* I replied, with a crisp nod and a click of my heels, then: *"Arrggh!"* as I discovered that flip flops were not the ideal footwear for this sort of tomfoolery. I was still rubbing my bruised ankles when a small car pulled up.

It was Victoria.

*"The taxis I called were all too expensive for you (she seemed to have an uncanny grasp of our low-budget lifestyle) and too slow. They would take 30 minutes to get here, so I came myself,"* she said with a smile.

We felt very guilty for using her as an unpaid taxi service – she flatly refused all offers of petrol money – especially when she told us she was on her way out for the night, as the hotel was officially closed. We would have to go in through the back door to get to our room, and eat in the restaurant across the road that evening.

This last bit of news came as a bit of a blow, as we'd spent most of the day salivating at the thought of another gastronomic delight at the Gasthof Eberl. But we need not have worried, as the restaurant opposite did us proud and had two outstanding points in its favour. These were evident as we were welcomed by another attractive young lady, who seemed in a constant state of excitement while dashing to and fro with foaming steins of lager for the lederhosen lads, who were back from their leg-slapping duties and had obviously worked up a thirst.

After an equally knock-out nosh up of roast pork and chicken schnitzel, very tasty Sauerkraut and amazing potato creations, we were once again 'totally stonkered' and well impressed with Bavarian cuisine. We even got the restaurant owner and his mates



**The Ratthaus features animated manikins on the hour**

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to show us on our map the best route for our next day's ride over the Alps. All very friendly and helpful.

Then, on the way out, I took a closer look at the photo-portraits which covered the restaurant walls and discovered they were all the town's young men who had fought and died in their U-boats and Panzers in the last war. Just as well I didn't get too silly on the Bavarian brew and try out my Basil Fawlty 'greet the Germans' routine here, eh?

### **Day 5, Monday June 27th, Hattenhofen**

In an effort to beat the heat, we fired up the bikes early and got rolling at 7am next day, taking the autobahn north around Munich, then east towards Salzburg, and finally south for the Alps. We soon crossed the border into Austria and had to buy 'vignettes', motorway toll stickers, in the service station. These gave us 10 days unfettered use of the Austrian autobahns for just £3 each, which would have been a bargain, but since we would be turning off the motorway in 6 miles, and were leaving Austria that afternoon, it all seemed a bit unnecessary.

I had a plan to cross the Alps via the Grossglockner Pass, which sounded good and looked suitably impressive on my little map, skirting a peak of 3797 metres. But first we had to find the turn for Kitzbühel, the internationally-famous ski-resort, where televised winter sports are broadcast to the world. You would suppose that the region's major tourist resort would justify some sort of signage from the nearby motorway, but no. We were halfway to Innsbruck before we realised we'd gone way too far, turned around at Schwaz and headed back north. Maybe we would get our money's worth out of our vignettes after all?

Still no signs. Still no Kitzbühel turning. After an hour and countless miles wasted trailing up and down the motorway, we finally decided to turn off into the little hamlet of Wordl and ask for directions, a man's least favoured option when he's lost. My anger and frustration soon evaporated as we followed the pointed finger and shortly after rode into the picture-postcard prettiness of Kitzbühel and found ourselves surrounded by gingerbread houses. Pottering about as if in a film set were old chaps in lederhosen, knitted socks and waistcoats, most accompanied by Heidi's grandma with plaits wrapped around her head.

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**It's official: Viv's Honda Trans-alp goes over the Austrian Alps**

The route from Kitzbühel up into the mountains was equally jaw-dropping, its steep green hillsides tinkling with the sound of cowbells. I half expected to see Julie Andrews leaping about to the sound of music and serenading the big, butch bikers coming the other way. This is a popular route with motorcyclists, we discovered, thanks to its sweeping bends and delightful views, and we met lots of leather-clad Harley riders bringing big grins down from the mountains.

It's easy to wave to riders on the continent, because there's no throttle on the passing side, so most bikers indulge in a friendly acknowledgment of their fellows with a left-handed flourish. All except the French riders, who have developed a national habit of waving their foot instead.

As we neared the peaks of the snow-capped mountains, the pressure-cooker temperatures of the lowlands slipped away and it was deliciously cool when we stopped at the entrance to the Felbertauern Tunnel to snap a photo to validate Viv's bike's trans-Alpine credentials. After five days of unbearable heat, it was great to soak up the craggy, snow-covered scenery with waterfalls cascading down vertical cliffs, and inhale the cool, fresh, pine-scented air.

In the tunnel the atmosphere was instantly transformed into a thick, hazy fug, blue with exhaust fumes from the endless stream of cars and lorries passing through. We tried to breathe as little of it as possible on the one mile passage through to the southern side, where we stopped again to clear our lungs, check the map and update our route notes.

A curious elderly Austrian chap saw me working on the Varadero with a marker pen and came over to investigate. On the top of my bike's broad petrol tank I had taped a laminated A4 sheet of white paper – a home-made, flexible dry-wipe board – on which I jotted the road names and towns along our route for easy reference while on the move. On a bike, it's much too tedious to keep stopping to consult the road atlas, and far too dangerous to be riding along while trying to read a map through the clear map pocket of some tank-top bags. Take your eye off the road for many seconds and you're a goner!



**Catching our breath after the Felbertauern Tunnel on the Grossglockner Pass**

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But a quick glance at a boldly-written road number and the name of the next town keeps you on the right track. It seemed an obvious solution to me, but was clearly a new one on this bloke...

“*Englischer?*” he asked, as he watched me wipe away the morning’s route and jot down the afternoon’s directions. “*Ferry kleffer!*” he said, tapping the tank with a bony finger. It was not so kleffer when I accidentally brushed the board with my gloved hand as we set off and promptly erased half the route. Doh!

A few miles further down the mountain and we stopped again among the flower-sprinkled high meadows near Matrei in Osttirol for a picnic lunch of the rolls, ham and cheese liberated from Pa Eberl’s breakfast that morning. We’d justified this dastardly theft on the basis that there’s not much food you can force down at 6.30am, and his grub was far too tasty to leave behind.

The sun was bright, but the air still cool at 2000 metres before we descended to Lienz, heading east down the Drau Valley into the heat once more. This is prime country for spotting amusing place names, our childish way of raising a smile on long journeys. We passed Moos, a tiny village appropriately surrounded by dun cows munching grass, then Going, an ideal place, perhaps, for those who’ve not quite settled down, and finally my favourite, Giggleweg.

Then it was time to pay full attention to traffic on a last stretch of autobahn for the hot dash south to the Slovenian border, crossed via another smoky tunnel, this one 2.85 miles long. By the time we emerged, coughing and spluttering, into the fierce afternoon heat of northern Slovenia we were totally knackered and grabbed the chance to stop at the first service area for fuel, water and currency exchange.

So far we’d been in the Euro zone, but now we needed to change some Sterling for Slovenian Tolars, which Viv promptly renamed ‘Toenails’. This was her own type of currency conversion, designed to help us remember the name of the local lucre. Otherwise there was a real risk we’d call everything spondulicks.

It was baking hot as we slumped next to our bikes and slurped a couple of litres of bottled water in an attempt to cool down, the chill of the mountains long forgotten. Slovenian families were splashing themselves with water from the service station’s outdoor tap, in between filling up any containers they could find to sustain them on their journeys. It looked like their Ladas didn’t have air conditioning either.

While we tried to cool down, we referred to our pre-trip notes for clues to the protocol for this former Yugoslavian country. It seemed we could expect heavy, on-the-spot fines for any traffic offences or jaywalking, and there was a zero tolerance policy on drink driving. This suited us, as we were never tempted to mix alcohol and motorcycling, and if all the other drivers were sober there was a greater chance of us getting through the country in one piece.

However, we took this information with a pinch of salt. In our experience, zero tolerance is often code for zero enforcement. Countries with ineffectual policing

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usually try to make up for a lack of coppers on the beat by imposing outrageous sentences on the one per cent of offenders who do get caught.

What else did we know about Slovenia? The forest areas were allegedly riddled with tick-borne encephalitis, which would discourage any Ray Mears-type impromptu wild camping. And the word for thank you was “*Hvala*”.

This was all the information our tired and overheated brains could cope with. Which was just as well. It was all we had. So we dragged ourselves upright again, shrugged on our sweaty jackets and helmets and pointed our Hondas towards Bled. This town with the unfortunate name was chosen because it was the nearest and we were too exhausted to ride any further, having covered 350 hot and sticky miles since Hattenhofen.

It was a happy choice, as Bled turned out to be a charming lake-side resort and within minutes we'd found a room for the night in a lovely three-storey wooden chalet. Svigelj Sobe (rooms) had its first floor ringed with one long geranium-bedecked balcony, and Pa Svigelj directed us to lock our bikes up in his ornate wooden garage, all natural timbers and cute little peek-a-boo windows.

Once again we were exhausted after 13 hours on the road – the last few in unbearable heat – and after a shower we barely had the strength to stagger down the steep hill leading to beautiful Lake Bled. We agreed we would appreciate the view better after a night's rest, so trudged back up the hill, pausing only for a snack pizza in the crazy golf café, before falling into our welcoming beds.



Fairytale castles overlook beautiful Lake Bled in Slovenia

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**This chapter covers the section of the trip shown below.**



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