

EUROPE

Part 1

TRAVEL JOURNAL

# Europe in a Hilux

You've already travelled through Africa with them, now it's time to go back to the beginning – to May 2018 – when **Patrick** and **Marie Gurney** set off on their 18-month overland journey from France to South Africa. In this first part of their trip, they drive through France, Italy and Croatia.

Patrick enjoys *padkos* on the shores of Lake Annecy in France, while testing out the Hilux's new kitchen system.



From the top: The Alpine town of Anney is famous for its lake and tree-lined canals. The Gurneys' visit to La Thuile, Italy, coincided with an annual event called the battle of the goats. A taste of Italy: decadent *affagato*, a coffee-based dessert, and Parma ham and salmon on fresh baguette. A snow-covered landscape greets the Gurneys' crossing into Italy.

The first hurdle was getting our 2001 Toyota Hilux KZTE (affectionately known as Kukuza) to Marie's home town of Valence in France. From there, we'd drive to Johannesburg, my home town, through Europe and Africa.

The vehicle was shipped from Cape Town to Antwerp in Belgium. What should have been a six-week voyage turned into a three-month ordeal. The clock was ticking and we were eager to get going, but first we had to navigate some red tape.

We were disappointed by our shipping agent, who tripped up on the paperwork early on. They insisted on presenting our Carnet de Passage to customs officials in Belgium, whereas the AA instructs that you should simply complete a Temporary Import Permit. The TIP would have been far less of a hassle, and that early mistake came back to haunt us later in the journey.

On 28 May 2018, we finally had Kukuza delivered to Valence. We packed hurriedly and set out a few days later, heading straight for the magnificent Alps. We whisked through the French countryside and overnights in Annecy, next to a lake at the foot of the mountains. From there we headed to Mont Blanc, where we stayed in Chamonix.

Our plan was to camp whenever we could, and that first night in Chamonix was our first time in the tent. We had bought a second-hand Howling Moon Stargazer rooftop tent in South Africa, and we hadn't even opened it yet!

It was a 15-minute puzzle to figure out, but then we were sorted. The rooftop tent turned out to be an absolute blessing in the months to follow, because we seldom found that perfectly level spot to pitch a traditional ground tent.

The following day we took the cable car up to a place called Plan de l'Aiguille, from where we could admire Bossons Glacier. The sheer size of the ice-blue glacier was something to see.

It was summer in Europe but still chilly. That night, in a campsite nearby, we lay bundled up in our cosy tent listening to the gunshot-like sounds of the cracking glacier echoing in the distance.

## Crema di caffè junkies

Travelling through Europe is wonderful – it's so easy without border crossings. Suddenly you're in another country; you can tell by the different language on the road signs.

Rather than using the 12 km Mont Blanc Tunnel – the most convenient way to enter Italy – we opted to take Kukuza on a 150 km route full of mountain passes. This took us a few days on a mix of dirt and tar roads, and we camped wild in the pristine, partially snow-covered mountains. We were getting quicker at setting up the rooftop tent: four minutes was our new record, including chairs and table out and coffee on the go.

We got our first taste of Italy in the town of La Thuile in the Aosta Valley. Many of the houses there have roofs made from coffee-table-sized slabs of slate. We saw a large number of goats and people gathered together in a field. Our first cultural event, as it turned out, would be the annual *Batailles des Chèvres* – a goat battle!

Locals explained how it works: Two goats lock horns until a persuasive push from the victor turns away the challenger. Along the way there is much excitement and cajoling among the 100-plus competitors.

Even though we had allocated just over one month in Italy, we knew we'd never make it all the way down to the end of the "boot". We decided to focus on the central region of Tuscany instead – the countryside surrounding cities like Genoa, Pisa, Sienna and Florence.

The Italians certainly have a flair for ornate buildings. In Pisa we saw the Leaning Tower and in Florence the most beautiful churches.

But for us, the real Italian triumph was not architecture but *crema di caffè*, a deliciously smooth coffee ice-cream drink – perfect for the warm summer temperatures we were experiencing in Tuscany. *Crema di caffè* was available everywhere and Marie was addicted. In fact, it was impossible to find a terrible coffee in Italy.

To find quiet, hidden camping spots, we used a mix of free apps like Google Earth, Park4Night and iOverlander. These off-the-beaten-track spots really made our journey memorable. Our routes through the Italian countryside revealed plantation forests, natural bush, vineyards and abundant birdlife.

Entering the cities posed a new challenge for our camping-only approach. We weren't in a camper van, which you can simply park anywhere, so we had to find actual campsites, which were usually just outside the cities or on the city limits.

Sienna had a quintessential Italian village feel, with a beautiful piazza. Florence was much bigger, with hordes of tourists jostling for the perfect selfie.

Italy is a place where you can happily yell, "Ciao!" to your mate 150 m down the street – nobody cares. As in France, food is an integral part of the culture and each dish has its place and history. We both love pasta and there are more than 500 different kinds in Italy. It's impossible to choose! The buffalo mozzarella available in the supermarkets is outstanding, and there are so many flavours of *gelato* (ice cream) that you should always ask to taste a few first, just in case you miss out on a spectacular new variety.

We camped along an ancient Roman stone road about 20 km from Sienna. Exploring on foot to the nearby village of Fonterutoli, Marie happened to locate a country restaurant called Osteria di Fonterutoli. The confit rabbit and liver we had there was one of the best meals we'd ever eaten.

At this stage, Marie flew back to SA for work. I spent a week with friends exploring Perugia in the Umbria region. Rural and quiet, Umbria is just as scenic as Tuscany but less touristy.

I also visited Assisi, an immaculately kept town, filled with churches and the famed tomb of St Francis, the patron saint of animals and the environment.

Before meeting Marie again in Venice, I had a few maintenance things to take care of. I got everything done over the course of two days in Perugia. Most important was sorting out our big solar panel, which was taking up valuable space on our back seat. With the help of a local engineering workshop, I moved it to the inside of the canopy roof and fastened it inside a hanging tray. Our table had been bouncing around the back, so we fastened it to the rear canopy door with brackets. The bakkie's CV joints also needed replacing – I had these done at the local Toyota garage. Sorted.

It took two days to drive the roughly 350 km from Perugia to Venice. Reaching the east coast, I did a quick one-night stopover in the Po River Delta – the largest protected wetland in Italy and a hotspot for European birders.

Most Italians told us not to visit Venice since it's overcrowded with tourists. But Venice is magical, especially at night. It has great architecture and the mode of transport – all boats, no cars – is unique. Our drink of choice was Aperol Spritz, a bright orange aperitif mixed with white wine, prosecco and ice in equal parts. They have a tradition here of eating *cicchetti* – gorgeous, neatly cut discs of white bread with mouth-watering toppings. While we were there, we also popped over to the next-door island of Murano, famous for its glassworks. I was on the hunt for a few old Venetian trade beads, which I managed to find.



From the top: Plan de l'Aiguille is about a third of the way up Mont Blanc and a good spot to view Bossons Glacier. Marie next to an old stone chapel overlooking Lake Roselend in the Alps. The Leaning Tower of Pisa was completed in 1372. Despite its precarious appearance, it has somehow remained standing, even surviving a few earthquakes.



## Island-hopping in Croatia

Our last stop in Italy was the city of Trieste. From there, we drove through Slovenia for 20 km before entering Croatia, where we'd spend another month. Our first stretch was a beautiful 160 km drive down the Dalmatian Coast to the town of Pula, home of a large Roman-era amphitheatre.

Near a small village called Zagorje, we drove the Hilux onto a ferry to cross to Cres Island. The sea journey was a mere 5 km, and it took 10 minutes, but loading all the people and vehicles onto the ferry took at least an hour.

It was Saturday 18 July 2018. When we arrived in the village of Cres, the World Cup soccer final between France and Croatia was three hours from kick-off. We had bought Croatian flags for the Hilux, although of course Marie was secretly supporting France...

We searched for a good beach restaurant with a big screen and cold beer. A place called Sumica was perfect – it had good pizza and plenty of Tomislav, a strong local beer. Unfortunately Croatia lost the game, but that didn't stop the party from going on until 3 am.

Across the bay from Cres, we found a massive olive grove where we made camp for the night. We met a young couple, Raphael and Carol, travelling in an old Mercedes van. They had driven down a steep dirt road and we had to help them get back up the incline. That evening we camped side by side, sharing dinner and drinks while discussing life on the road. They were just some of the many people we would meet on our trip, with whom we're still in contact today.

We settled in for four days at a super spot called Camp Bijar, next to the pretty village of Osor. We did laundry and chatted to the other campers. We invited our "street" of campers to join a long table for drinks and snacks. One couple, Katia and Joseph, invited us to come stay with them in Hungary if we wanted, and another camper – Peter – cooked us the most delicious fish.

It was absolute bliss. Idyllic and simple, Camp Bijar even had a bakery making fresh baguettes and croissants.

**Our sons Kai and Callum** flew in from Paris to meet up for a quick 10 days. Kai was 20 at the time; Callum was 18. We collected them in Split then headed to Pag, Croatia's "party island" further down the coast.

From the mainland, Pag does not look inviting – like a chunk of barren moon rock plonked into the Mediterranean. The boys had never heard about Pag and its "Little Ibiza" reputation, so it was a case of the oldies showing the youngsters where the party was at!

We booked an Airbnb in Novalja, which totally delivered on the party front – the boys loved it. There were hundreds of young holidaymakers around, all in summer gear hanging out at beach bars, restaurants and markets. The nightclubs were on Zrće Beach, 7 km away, and super organised, shuttling the partygoers back and forth until the early hours. One night, Marie and I even managed to get to one of the clubs for a boogie.

From the top: Venice's famous canals are not just for tourists. The canal boats are the city's main mode of transport – even if you have to move house. This scenic camping spot was on an old Roman road in Tuscany. The tiny Valdarke Beach is one of Cres Island's many attractions.



## Krka and Plitvice

Back on the mainland, we drove to Krka National Park, about 120 km to the south-east. The park wraps around Lake Visovac and the first thing we did was a three-hour boat trip from Skradin (the park entrance) to a monastery built on a tiny island by Franciscan monks in the 15th century. The easiest way to see Krka's landscapes is by boat, but we were also keen to explore on land – specifically, we wanted to hike to the natural pools and waterfalls along the river that drains the lake, which we'd seen in our guidebook.

We got off the boat at Skradinski Buk and a gentle stroll led upstream along a series of crystal-clear river pools and waterfalls. I'd never seen anything like it. Eventually we reached a viewpoint over the Skradinski Buk waterfall. All the other visitors were swimming, and 10 minutes later we also took the plunge – spectacular!

The boys flew back to France from Split. From there, Marie and I drove 200 km north to Plitvice Lakes National Park. Plitvice has a series of long, wide wooden walkways taking you past terraced pools and waterfalls, created by nature over many centuries. The limestone naturally occurring in the spring water forms a build-up that grows about 1 cm per year, eventually resulting in 5- to 10-metre-high waterfalls. The clarity of the water is mind-boggling – you can easily see the bottom of a 5-metre-deep pool. It felt as if we were walking around on the set of some fairy tale movie, with each turn revealing more beauty. Plitvice is prettier than any picture can do justice.

From the top: Croatia's Plitvice Lakes National Park is a wonder world of turquoise pools, waterfalls and forest. One of the joys of being on the road is meeting new people all the time. Patrick and Marie spent a few days at Camp Bijar near the village of Osor and had time to share a drink with their neighbours in the campsite. A drive through the olive groves on Cres Island.





Clockwise from top left: Zagreb is a city of quirky museums and friendly felines. It's easy to see why Pag is Croatia's party island. Kai and Callum with Marie on Pag. Boardwalks in Plitvice Lakes National Park take you past crystal clear pools.

## Kissing our way through Zagreb

Zagreb is one of the quirkiest capital cities around. It has the world's shortest funicular railway (only 66 m) and some weirdly interesting museums. One of its major attractions is a "kissing route" that leads you through town.

We checked into a centrally located Airbnb for two days and set out to visit the Museum of Broken Relationships. Yes, that's right! It displays a collection of objects each representing a broken relationship (for better or worse), which have been donated by people from all around the world. Each object is accompanied by a note explaining the role of the object in the break-up. There are touching, sad and some really funny stories.

We also visited the Museum of Science, which was straight out of the 1970s and more like an educational antique shop. The map on the wall still had Zambia and Zimbabwe as Northern and Southern Rhodesia...

We loved visiting all the odd little shops, stopping for a coffee, and eating local specialties like *štrukli*. There are savoury and sweet versions of this gratinated dish, made with pasta and a mixture of cheese, egg and sour cream.

The lower part of Zagreb is the most "recent" addition to the city. Built mainly in the 19th century, it's a lively quarter full of shops, cafés, markets and some pretty parks. We bought all our fruit and veg at the huge Dolac Market with its red umbrellas in the main square.

But back to the "kissing route"... It's such a clever way to get tourists to explore a city. You get a map with different "kissing spots" noted. As you follow the route, you keep bumping into other couples doing the same thing, and we shared many smiles and laughs.

We visited the Strossmarter Promenade in the upper part – the older section – of the city, for a view over Zagreb complete with deckchairs, snacks, drinks and music. It was the perfect setting for our final sunset in the city.

We found Croatians to be straightforward people who are true to themselves. Their intent is clear; you never have to second-guess what they're actually thinking.

We'll definitely be back one day, for all the amazing attractions we still want to see, but mostly for the cats. They were everywhere: in the street and on the pavement, and they were social, engaging and beautiful; rolling over for a tummy rub whenever we approached, and not relenting until the fix was provided.

How does a country get that right?



The Zagreb funicular might have the world's shortest track (66 m), but this quaint public transport system has lots of character.



## Fast facts

### COSTS

The prices below are estimates. The Gurneys travelled in Europe in 2018; the rates will have gone up since then.

### SHIPPING

We shipped our bakkie from Cape Town to Antwerp (Belgium) at a cost of R33 000. The shipping agent we used has since gone out of business (not surprising, considering our poor experience with them). In 2019, quotes from other companies were in the vicinity of R38 000 to R42 000.

### ITALY

- **Accommodation:** The campsites we used near Sienna and Florence generally cost in the region of R500 per night for the two of us.
- **Transport:** In Venice we used a *vaporetto* (canal boat). Trips cost about R135 for a 75-minute cruise around the canals. We did this a few times as it was really worth it!
- **Food:** A *crema di caffè* cost around R20, going up to R30 for the fancier *affogato al caffè*. A plate of five *cicchetti* cost R80 to R100. An Aperol Spritz cost about R125.

### CROATIA

- **Accommodation:** The Airbnb in

- Novalja cost about R15 000 for the four of us for six nights (it was peak season); and in Zagreb we paid R1 000 per night for two people. Camp Bijar near Osor cost about R500 per night, without electricity.
- **Transport:** The ferry to Cres Island cost about R300 one-way, for us and the Hilux.
- **Entrance fees:** R85 per person for Krka National Park (this included the boat trip to the monastery on the island); R360 per person for Plitvice Lakes National Park (this included a panoramic train ride). It cost R80 per person to enter the Museum of Broken Relationships.

### MORE INFO

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**NOTE:** We published the African leg of Patrick and Marie's journey in issues #158 to #166. Read about their travels through Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. This European part of the trip preceded the African leg. In the end they visited 23 countries and travelled 50 000 km before arriving back home in Johannesburg on 19 December 2019.