

EUROPE



Part 2

TRAVEL JOURNAL

From Romania, with love

Peleş Castle was built as a summer residence for the Romanian royal family in the 1800s. The detail of the interior woodwork is astonishing, and the whole castle was powered by its own water turbines. Visionary!

On their 18-month trip of a lifetime from France to South Africa, **Patrick** and **Marie Gurney** head into Eastern Europe, looking for castles, bears and berry wine.





From left to right: Marie at a wild camping spot on the beautiful Soča River, Bovec. Down town Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. At Vintgar Gorge in Slovenia, wooden walkways lead you into a narrow valley.

We left Croatia in August 2018 and arrived in tiny Slovenia – about the size of the Kruger Park – where our first impression was that it was extremely tidy. We drove through pristine-looking villages full of traditional Alpine chalets and bright flower boxes.

Our first destination was Postojna Cave, where a mini train took us underground for 3,7 km through lit-up halls and galleries. We even saw the famous “Baby Dragon”, a type of aquatic salamander called an olm. Olms, we were told, can live up to 10 years without food and have a lifespan of 100 years!

Our admission ticket also included a visit to the beautiful Predjama Castle, which is perched halfway up a towering cliff and partially built into a cave.

Slovenia only has one national park, but when it’s as spectacular as Triglav, the country really doesn’t need any more. Triglav is famed for its crystal-clear glacial river systems that descend from the Julian Alps. The drive there took us along the exquisite Soča River to Bovec, a small town known as the country’s adrenaline capital. It was still late summer in Europe so we kayaked and hiked and tried out Europe’s longest zipline: 4 km in total, with the longest single line at 650 m.

Using the park4night app we found a wild (i.e. unofficial) camping spot right on the Soča River. It was crazy beautiful! But we weren’t the only ones there... Three other campers had also parked, and in the morning we were woken up by a policeman. He was intrigued by our rooftop tent, the South African number plates on the Hilux, and our 18-month itinerary.

“You are driving to where?” he asked with a massive grin.

“Africa!”

He just shook his head. “You can go, but the others must pay the fine – they know the rules.”

It was a valuable lesson learnt: Always find a quieter spot if possible, something we would perfect over the coming months. This time we dodged a R550 fine.

A road trip through Slovenia is not complete without tackling Vršič Pass, which is also in Triglav National Park. Nicknamed the “Russian Road”, it was built by 10000 Russian prisoners of war in 1915. The pass is 20 km long and

gains 1600 m in elevation along 50 hairpin bends – they’re numbered so you can keep track of your progress. With an average of one hairpin per 500 m travelled, our Hilux – nicknamed Kukuza – was taking strain. I loved the deft road construction with nail-biting drop-offs, but Marie wasn’t as enamoured. She kept wondering how quickly she’d be able to open the door and dive out...

Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, was calling. Because the country is so small, it meant we were only 80 km away. En route, we stopped at Vintgar Gorge where 1,6 km of suspended wooden walkways take you deep into the narrow valley.

Next was the charming town of Bled with its lake and island church. It was hot, so we took a dip (with a few hundred other swimmers), then we had a quick lunch followed by coffee and the local culinary treat – Bled cream cake, a delicious flaky pastry with custard and cream.

Arriving in hip Ljubljana, we chanced upon Odprta Kuhna, a buzzing street-food extravaganza where top chefs share their latest creations every Friday. Then we checked into a pricey Airbnb for two nights. (In general we found Slovenia to be the most expensive country on this leg of the journey.) We met the owner who gave us the keys, a cup of *kava* (coffee) and a customary shot of *snops* – moonshine with a 40% alcohol content. (It was barely 9 am...) After seeing the poor state of our room, I went back to the bottle for another throat-stripping experience.

Expense aside, Ljubljana had an arty, laid-back feel. We visited the Metelkova – a cluster of ex-Yugoslavian military barracks that squatters took over in 1993. The state has been trying to tear it down for years but to no avail. Today it houses youth organisations, art institutions, bars and coffee shops.

We were heading to Hungary next, and then Romania. Sitting in a *kavarna* (coffee shop) in Ljubljana researching the latter country, I came across a website describing a huge cultural festival near Prislop Pass, which would take place in a week’s time. We’d have to rush through Hungary if we wanted to make it...

Blue cowboys and a rally driver

The day we crossed into Hungary, we drove 400 km along a network of picturesque, rural tar roads, alternating with highways to make up time.

We stayed with new friends in the town of Pecs – a couple called Katia and Josef whom we’d befriended earlier in Croatia. In Hungary, they drink a smoother but stronger moonshine called *pálinka*. Josef and his two neighbours were excellent home distillers of this national elixir – the next two days were jovial!

We camped wild along the Danube River on our way to beautiful Budapest, which we loved for all of one morning. The city is split into two by the river and it has a similar sense of romance as Paris.

Back in Kukuza, we headed out of the city to meet the Csikós, also known as the “Blue Cowboys” because their traditional costume is blue. Hortobágy National Park is Europe’s largest ranch land and home to these horse herdsman – we were captivated by their horsemanship. There were plenty of Hungarian Grey cattle in the park; it’s tradition for farmers to let their cattle graze here in summer. But we were amazed to see Hungarian water buffalo as well.

Sadly, we had to cut our Hungarian visit short: The Prislop Folk Festival was only days away...

We crossed the border into Romania late one evening, at 8.30 pm. We usually arrive in a new country in daylight so that we have time to look for a secluded camping spot for the night. While eating dinner in the town of Satu Mare, we used Google Earth to find a quiet spot just out of town on the banks of a river. We went to bed but we were woken unceremoniously at 2 am by some chap who seemed to be practising his Dakar Rally skills in the countryside! It was a taste of things to come...

The next day, we drove 120 km to Maramureş, a region famous for its 17th-century wooden Orthodox churches, built with tall spires and roofs with oversized shingles. Perched right on the Ukrainian border, this is a land locked in time. There’s nothing odd about seeing a horse-drawn cart filled with hay, or locals dressed in folk costumes. Maramureş is basically a living museum.

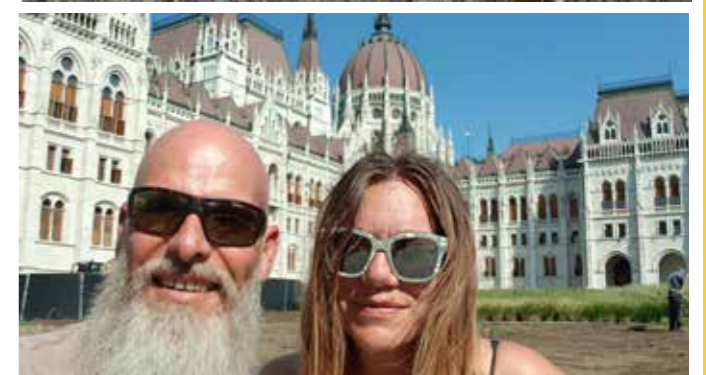
We visited a village called Săpânța, home to Romania’s tallest wooden church with its 75 m-high spire, and the Săpânța-Peri Monastery. When a citizen of Săpânța dies, an artist is commissioned to carve and paint a pictorial homage of the deceased onto a wooden headstone in the tiny “Merry Cemetery”. We took a guide to help us decipher the verses – some were sad, some funny. As much as this was “modern” Europe, it felt somewhat magical.

Miraculously, we were still on track to make it to the festival in Prislop on time. To get there, we drove the winding Prislop Pass. We turned the last corner and arrived in the village, but hang on... Where was the festival? This celebration of folk dance supposedly draws 20000 people, but we saw just two parked cars at a wooden hut selling Romanian souvenirs.

We asked the shopkeeper where everybody was. “Ah,” he replied, bemused. “No party now, come in 2019!”

The website we’d seen clearly said it was taking place in 2018, but now it seemed to have been postponed due to funding issues.

Disappointed, we headed into the hills to find a campsite for the night. We met a sheep farmer feasting on cheese and shared some of our Hungarian *pálinka* with him. A few shots later, Marie and I had drowned our sorrows. We vowed to never let our route be influenced by outside factors again – we’d simply let the road unfold.



From the top: A “blue cowboy” shows off his skill on horseback in Hortobágy National Park, Hungary. The Hungarian Racka sheep is best known for its unusual spiral horns. Patrick and Marie outside the Hungarian parliament building in Budapest. The Zsolnay Fountain in Pecs has four spouts shaped like oxen heads.



From the top: Horse-drawn carts are still a popular mode of transport in Romania. With its colourful wooden crosses, Săpânța cemetery makes for a pretty resting place. Romanian sheepskin coats, for sale on the Transfăgărășan pass, are guaranteed to keep you cosy.

Romanian chicken

Many people in rural Romania still use horse-drawn carts, but just as many seem to be trying to fast track themselves into the present. They've been buying up Europe's discarded vehicles for next to nothing, unleashing a dangerous mix of too much horsepower and too little driving experience onto the roads.

Take "Romanian chicken", for example: If you see an oncoming vehicle in your lane, it's *your* responsibility to get out of the way! We didn't see a single accident, though, so everyone at least seemed to be on the same page.

The further we travelled, the more we experienced Romania's strong cultural heritage. The food is a little heavy, but the slow-cooked lamb stew served by a local shepherd on the side of the Transfăgărășan mountain pass was the best I'd ever eaten. We enjoyed the local wine – Marie was particularly partial to berry wine.

Romanians are welcoming and always willing to assist. We met the seasonal pickers – usually Roma people – who pick wild berries and mushrooms in large quantities to be exported.

We also loved that Romanians let you camp anywhere. Wild camping is celebrated and viewed as a national right. We camped on farmland, in forests, next to rivers. . . We even drove up a mountainside (no road!) to get a good view, and nobody flinched.

Besides Transfăgărășan, we also traversed several other beautiful passes such as Transalpina, Bicz Gorge, Buzău Pass and Rucăr-Bran Pass. Every 100 km delivered another authentic village, castle or church – and, of course, the obligatory Romanian chicken contestant. . .

We continued east to the Churches of Moldavia. These huge churches and monasteries are masterpieces of Byzantine art. Entire walls both inside and out are decorated with elaborate 15th- and 16th-century frescoes that brought the stories of the Bible to life for many Romanians.

There was still one prime Romanian attraction we were keen to see: a bear! After all, Romania has the largest concentration of European brown bears on the continent. Marie was less keen. . . I kept teasing her, saying that when standing up, a bear would "only just" be able to look us in the eye in our rooftop tent.

Each night, ignoring "Do Not Enter" signs, the advice of the local residents and Marie's pleas, we chose camps in the most remote corners of the biggest forests we could find – all in the hope that we would encounter a bear. Then, one night deep in the Șureanu Mountains, we got lucky.

"Did you hear that?" Marie whispered.

"No," I answered, but then I *did* hear it. And it didn't sound happy.

It sounded like the bear was right outside our tent, but it was probably 500m away. Petrified, we didn't even peek out. The bear moaned every 30 seconds or so, while walking away from us through the forest. Marie finally came up for air and there was much nervous chatter between us before we could get back to sleep.

But we still hadn't *seen* the darned bear. So, after three weeks of wild camping, we decided to use a professional tracker to find one. We joined Absolute Carpathian tours on an outing and saw more than 10 bears in two hours at a feeding station high up in the mountains. The bears are fed to dissuade them from rummaging through bins in the nearby town of Zărnești.

It was special to see European brown bears in the wild. They're huge but very shy and their group behaviour was fascinating to watch from the comfort of a secure wooden hide, which pleased Marie no end.



Near Zărnești, we also visited Bran Castle, often believed to have been a former home of Count Dracula. (Not actually true, but who cares? It looks the part!) Unfortunately, we arrived five minutes after four tour buses, so we were only able to take a few snaps from the outside.

Way more impressive was Peleș Castle, 50 km away, which was built in the 1800s as a summer residence for the Romanian royal family. The detail of the interior woodwork is astonishing, and the whole castle was powered by its own water turbines. Visionary!

Bucharest was next, the beating heart of Romania – a mix of old-world Paris and Soviet-era apartment blocks. We booked into an Airbnb for two nights and saw the gigantic Palatul Parlamentului (Palace of Parliament), believed to be the heaviest building in the world weighing an estimated 4.1 million tonnes.

We dined at Caru' cu bere – "The Beer Wagon", a restaurant in operation since 1879 and so named because the beer gets delivered by wagon from the family brewhouse around the corner – and we visited the beautiful opera house and lunched in the parks.

We also visited Nicolae Ceaușescu's opulent residence – he was Romania's final communist-era leader. Our guide was an incredibly dry, funny man. Showing us around the different rooms, he would say things like, "Look my comrades, at these humble gold taps and Persian carpets!" or, "See this humble cinema room, this is not the same Romania I lived in, comrades!" Through his almost forced laughter, we could feel the pain he must have suffered in those years.

We spent a month in Romania and fell in love with this wild and free place. It was also a very affordable country to visit.



Top: Over time, Patrick and Marie became experts at finding beautiful wild camping sites, like this one on the banks of the Lake Bicz – the largest artificial lake in Romania. Above: Sunset over Romania's capital, Bucharest.



Blasting through Bulgaria

It was mid-November in 2018 and getting colder by the week. Bulgaria was to be an eight-day stepping stone into Greece as we searched for sunshine.

Crossing the Danube River via ferry, we landed in Silistra and drove to Varna on the Black Sea coast. We followed the coastline south towards the ancient city of Nessebar, famed for its cobbled streets and wooden houses – and because some of Europe’s earliest coins were minted here in 400 BC.

Heading inland again, we completed the short but beautiful Shipka Pass and camped next to Bulgaria’s “UFO”, or Buzludzha Monument, which looks like a flying saucer sitting on a hill. Built in the 1970s to celebrate socialism, the abandoned concrete behemoth is yet another relic of Eastern European communism.

Further back in time, Thracian kings and other nobles left burial mounds all over central Bulgaria more than 5000 years ago. We visited a few of these elaborately decorated tombs in the Kazanlak Valley. Bulgaria is a relatively new archaeological tourism destination in Europe and there are many sites spanning at least 8000 years of history, with new discoveries being made each year.

The Kovan Kaya archaeological site was our last stop in Bulgaria. We slept in the parking lot and visited the following day. This massive lump of granite has more than 100 mysteriously carved rock niches. Some believe it was a place of remembrance – each niche holding an urn of ashes.

We enjoyed driving through Bulgaria’s mountainous countryside, and there was unique food to be tasted, which exhibited both Balkan and Middle Eastern influences. Highlights included *kufta* (meatballs) and *banista* and *broek* (both phyllo pastry dishes).

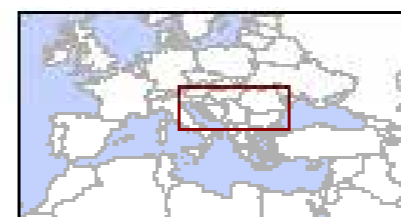
But the best thing about Bulgaria was discovering a Russian-built, retro-looking 4x4 and former army troop carrier called the UAZ350. We saw them often in the countryside where they seem to be used for just about anything. I’m on the hunt to buy one and Marie and I would love to return to Europe one day and explore further in this adorable vehicle.

For now, we had Kukuza. We pointed the nose of the Hilux towards Greece. The olive groves were calling...

From the top: This unofficial site outside Varna, Bulgaria, consists of just a few clearings where “hippies” camp in summer. The monolithic Soviet-era Buzludzha Monument looks more like a spaceship on a hill. Various theories exist about the origins of the carved niches at the Kovan Kaya archaeological site, but the mystery remains.



Some 5000 years ago, Thracian nobility were buried in tombs like this in the Kazanlak Valley in central Bulgaria.



Fast facts

The prices below are just to provide an approximate idea of Patrick and Marie’s costs during their trip. Keep in mind that they travelled in 2018 and prices will have changed.

SLOVENIA

Postojna Cave entry: R750 per person.
Standard café meal: R250 per person.
Bled cream cake: R120 per person.
Ljubljana Airbnb: R3 650 for two nights for two people.
Triglav National Park: Free to drive through.
Vintgar Gorge entry: R170 per person.

HUNGARY

Hortobágy National Park entry: R320 per person (including the Blue Cowboys).
Săpânța graveyard and monastery: Free

for the graveyard; R120 per person for the monastery.

ROMANIA

Churches of Moldavia: R100–R150 per person (per monastery).
Brown bear trek with Absolute Carpathian: R950 per person.
Peleş Castle entry fee: R120 per person.
Bucharest Airbnb: R3 800 for two nights for two.
Caru’ cu bere restaurant: R250 per person – included mains and a good local beer.

BULGARIA

Ferry over Danube River: R550 (one-way).
Buzludzha Monument entry: Free.
Kazanlak Valley tomb visit: R153 per person.
Kovan Kaya entry: R36 per person.

NOTE

We have already published the African leg of Patrick and Marie’s journey – see issues #158 to #166 to 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. Read Part 1 of Europe in go! #175. In the end, the Gurneys visited 23 countries and travelled 50 000 km, arriving back home in Johannesburg on 19 December 2019.

MORE INFO: info@skultcha.com;
skultcha.com
Facebook: “skultcha”
Instagram: @skulcha