

Brausgang 2016

"That's not how we do it here", insisted the landlord of our Budapest apartment when I said I thought I'd already paid by credit card. "You can pay in Euros or Forints or Dollars and there's a cash machine opposite".

We had been expecting minor difficulties and some culture shock on the road from deepest Devon to a former communist bloc country; it was just the abruptness that surprised, I guess, but then we travel for the experience, don't we.

I've always liked a full diary - Wednesday night I had a gig in Teignmouth, and Jan's niece and her husband, international acrobats from the US, were staying with us, so what would have been a late night finished even later. Thursday morning I had a too-soon get-up at six to drive to the York Book Fair, but then that's what I do, and what's wrong with a 600 mile round trip before a 3,000 mile round trip in the other direction? I got home about eleven on Saturday night, which meant I could have a lie-in in my own bed before changing the stock around - I'd already packed separate stocks for Budapest and Amsterdam and had every thing listed and priced in four different currencies in case of the expected customs checks at the Hungarian border.

The plan was to take four days to reach Budapest, spend four days there, four days to drive to Amsterdam, spend four days there, then two days to get home via Bruges (favourite restaurant). We had two rules - we only stop at places we've never been to, and no alcohol with lunch for me given the zero legal limit in some countries - Jan, however, doesn't drive...

We'd booked our hotel in Aachen, giving us a target of 445 miles on the first day, but we made it by 4.30pm thanks to another early start. I parked outside the hotel and went to look for the parking meter, and by the time I got back to the van Jan had already blagged a resident's parking permit from another motorist who just happened to have two! Must be the South-East London charm...

We were tempted by the Lederhosen shop but spied a nearby Antiques shop, and by the time we came out it was closed (luckily).

Aachen was the first German town liberated by the allies, and although large areas were destroyed in the artillery attacks, miraculously most of the charming old town survived intact.

We left about ten the next morning and headed for Wiesbaden for lunch - street after street of very grand houses and a splendid Antiques quarter (closed) with a teetering-piled-high Antiquariat (open). Traffic on the autobahn ground to a boring halt in the afternoon, but after a short detour in the countryside with perplexed locals scratching their heads at the volume of traffic in their village, we made it to Würzburg before five and found a reasonable hotel.

This fine old town on the river Main is overseen by the imposing Marienberg fortress, originally built around 1200, and surrounded by vineyards whose wines, in their distinctive teardrop bottles (left), got



us ever so slightly tipsy on our wine-tour around the altstadt that evening. Lurking in a very quiet backstreet we spotted a Weinstaub with a small menu on the wall, but otherwise resembling a private house. I pushed the door (I'm from Northampton) and we went into what felt like a dimly-lit private house; the tables of elderly locals all turned their heads, but the landlord gave us the okay and we sat down to some heady local wine. This was when I learned that "Danke schön" means you've kissed goodbye to any change from that note, and swapped it for a waitress's sweet smile (did I tell you I'm from Northampton). Our hotel's small, rough towels were their very own hangover punishment, but a decent buffet breakfast sorted us out, we hit a supermarket to get some very cheap wine and we were on our way to Regensburg for lunch.

I was reading Claudio Magris' book "Danube", and the plan was to join the Danube here and follow it more or less to Budapest, returning across country. His observation that those travelling downstream are more optimistic than up-streamers is indisputable. Sometimes it can be hard to navigate a new city, but this time we drove straight to the town centre, parked, walked the twenty feet to a decent cafe, found a table in the sun and relaxed. A very nice afternoon for a stroll along the river, and back in the old town we managed to resist the International Golf Museum (really?) but got distracted by the pristine art deco furniture in the antiques centre - definitely museum material.

Next stop Passau, on the Austrian border, and an amazing hotel right on the riverside (right), parking on the road behind, a bedroom bigger than the ground floor of my shop and a jazz club next door. We wandered the beautiful cobbled streets of the old town, deserted once the cruise boats had departed, and settled into a comfortable restaurant for food and wine (Austrian this time). Passau sits at the confluence of the Danube, the Inn and the Ilz, and there is some controversy over whether it should even be called the Danube after here due to the size of the Inn. It was an important strategic location and there was a Roman fort here from 80AD. The flood of 2013 was the worst since 1501, apparently, and the high water level on the shop wall where I parked was higher than the top of the shop window (below).

We left about ten in the morning reaching the Austrian border in a few minutes, where you're obliged to buy a motorway toll sticker from a bleak, inhospitable kiosk staffed by a ferocious lady with a very serious haircut and attitude sharp enough to reduce Romanian truckers to tears. Grown men were queueing in silence, hoping their turn would never come. She certainly scared me, and her staccato "ACHT



EURO ACHTZIG MINIMUM" suddenly seemed like a bargain, but I was unable to listen (through fear) to her instruction about where it should go on the windscreen, and I asked a bloke outside who hadn't listened either, just relieved to escape. Ironically she wore a jumper that said "Kiss me Baby!", yet she spoke no English - what did she think that meant? A few miles down the road we got pulled over by the police, but all our documentation was in order and they soon let us go; Austria was beginning to feel a touch unfriendly...however, lunch in Vienna cheered us up, then on the road to Budapest.

Entering Hungary was where we expected to be stopped but were waved straight through. Bit of an uninviting, cold war, Soviet-style border post though.

A few miles into the country we pulled into a service station which was pleasantly old-fashioned - pump attendants in uniform who clean the windscreen whilst filling up. I'd never paid 28,000 of anything for a tank of fuel before, but it worked out about seventy quid, which is about the same as the rest of Europe (barring the UK). From here we must have gone an hour and half without seeing a house or anyone working in the fields, although the roads verges and landscape were all immaculate.

We rolled into Budapest about five in heavy traffic, but excited, mileage hitting 1265, managed to negotiate a no-left turn system (only three rights), and located our apartment. Worryingly it was all locked, but we had the landlord's phone number, and he soon turned up to relieve us of all our cash. We unpacked and went to meet the Harrisons who'd flown in a few days before, and with whom we were sharing the booth. They'd booked us into a good restaurant, very busy, and with a very busy waiter who almost wanted to clear the plates while we were still eating off them, then they gave us a quick guided tour, memorably to a ruin pub for which Budapest is well known. These are deserted buildings, sometimes without windows or roofs, a bit like Mad Max at Glastonbury Festival in a squat. Graffiti-covered walls, tarpaulin roof, band in one room, DJ in another, climb the scaffolding staircase to the balcony, tattooist in one room, cocktail bar in another, lots of young people, bit like my shop used to be! On the way back to our flat we couldn't resist the glimmer of light coming from a bar down the street, whose interior was decorated like an Edwardian private house, but surreally-



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challenged by a larger-than-life American girl pouring out her history and problems to a couple of trapped geordie lads.



Pesti Vigadó (above) must be the most incredible place I've ever done a book fair. It's the National concert hall overlooking the Danube with a grand colonnaded entrance way into a huge marble and ornate gilt vestibule with sweeping staircases up to the fair level, with parking space for two full-size grand pianos, a Steinway and a Bosendorfer. Only 25 exhibitors in two rooms with a connecting corridor (some corridor), but great quality books.



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The evening preview followed a short champagne reception in the entrance hall at the foot of the stairs (below) accompanied by short speeches from the outgoing and incoming Presidents of ILAB and Adam Bosze the President of the Hungarian ABA, all translated into, or out of, Hungarian by the very relaxed and capable Anna Huppert.



There was a great frenzy of viewing and many ILAB colleagues who had obviously been smoke-dried in the congress bought from us. The next two days were very busy with members of the public right up until the end, with some sales, lots of looking and lots of photography of stock (?), and the piles of Chelsea Book Fair tickets all disappeared - I would love to hear a hubbub of Hungarian on the King's Road and a chance to practice my half-a-dozen words! We made some very good contacts, and I think it was my best take at any fair this year. I'd parked in the underground next to the fair, and when I went for the van found the machine only took cash too. My bill was 10,500 HUF, but the largest denomination it would take was 2,000 (about five quid), yet there were several Ferraris in the garage and even a Formula 1 racing car (where can you drive one of those except up and down the ramps?)

After loading we went to a restaurant with a Japanese colleague about twenty yards away on the bank of the Danube (have I mentioned the Danube yet?). It was a beautiful evening - good company, glowing sunset, Buda twinkling on the opposite bank, pocketful of money, serenaded by a Hungarian Gypsy trio, and outdoors at the end of September?

Back on the road in the morning we sailed through the border having no need for the Hungarian get-out-of-jail-free letter that Adam had written for us, and we stopped for lunch in St. Pölten, the capital of southern Austria. A delightful Baroque town with a central market square and its own huge statue. It was still sunny and we dined outdoors before strolling around town. Exchanged our HUFs for Euros and found an Antiquariat that, alas, only sold new books. (I've subsequently discovered that it sells old books online, but where's the fun in that?).

We made Salzburg on schedule at six o'clock and found a decent hotel near the river Salzach and strolled along the Mozart route to the old town for dinner - beautiful

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architecture, too many tourists, but the mountainous backdrop compensates. I had spent several days with a Strauss earworm, but when a tourist on the table behind us said she was going on the "Sound of Music Tour" the next day, everything was drowned out by Julie Andrews and I had to leave.

Very romantic alarm call at seven in the morning, as first one bell, then another, and another, slightly out-of-synch, slightly differently pitched, performed real music, later joined by a carillon...

Seven euros for breakfast for two in a busy bakery instead of €26 in the hotel, and on the road for Germany. A perfectly-timed road sign for the ancient old town of Günzburg drew us off the autobahn for lunch in a lovely market square before continuing to Karlsruhe for the evening. Slightly difficult navigation of the town's roadworks wasn't helped by the street map in the Rough Guide being wrong, but we found a place to stay, and somewhere to eat and all was well. Found an Antiquariat too - new books, some old paperbacks, secondhand DVDs...what's happening? Okay breakfast in the hotel, and I realised some of the rooms had a shared bathroom (not ours), which is still quite common in Europe - I stayed in one in Brussels once where they said they only had a room with a shower, so I took it and discovered the toilet was a floor below.

It seems there is a service station every few miles on the German autobahns, unlike northern France where they're all closed (refugee problems), and the UK where they're all crap (apart from two - you know where they are), and a lot of "green bridges" for wildlife too.

Trier, on the Mosel, sits at the bottom of a fantastic valley, viewable from the surrounding autobahns. Founded in 15 BC, it has northern Europe's largest collection of Roman remains, and what feels like northern Europe's largest collection of students, but the pedestrianised town centre is a very attractive lunch venue.

How could we miss Luxembourg? You almost don't notice going through it, but the diesel is only about 80p a litre, and I couldn't get out of my mind all those teenage nights laying in bed in the dark, pretending to be asleep, listening to music you didn't hear anywhere else through a rubbish earpiece...



Next stop Dinant, southern Belgium (above), French-speaking, and a hotel in the rue Adolphe Sax, named after the inventor of the saxophone (another famous Belgian) in 1846. The whole town is dotted with sculptures of saxes in glass, brass, stone, and a photogenic bronze of the man himself outside the museum on a bench (yes, I did, below).

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The river Meuse is the centre of attraction, closely followed by the sheer cliff-face topped by a fortress accessible by a funicular railway, but no music? We had breakfast in a cafe next to the Sax museum and I suggested a quick look, but five minutes was too long. A few photos, some funny bent tubes, a short video and one saxophone behind glass under the floor? Oh, and no-one else around...

Next morning a supermarket trip to load up with our favourite Belgian beers, then off to Maaseik on the Dutch border, another pretty town for lunch. Suddenly late September was turning into cool autumn and we headed into Amsterdam about five o'clock as the leaves were beginning to fall in the showers of rain. Excellent apartment, very close to the Rijksmuseum and the book fair venue at the Marriot Hotel. Setting up was not until Saturday morning, so we spent Friday exploring and in the afternoon boarded a bus full of booksellers bound for Laurens Hesselink's generous party.



At the sumptuous premises of Forum and Asher, in the countryside, we were greeted with champagne, amazing books, a gin bar, red wine (left), a very cool DJ and Indonesian food by a TV chef. The weather was excellent, the ambience sublime, and we all got a free ride home.



Unsurprisingly the early morning set-up was somewhat mellow, and the coffee machine did most business until heads began to clear. I helped clear mine by having a row with my neighbour about space allocation (fair manager's nightmare), but we made up later. The fair looked amazing, with some of the best quality stock the world can offer, and unsurprisingly at prices most of the world can't afford, especially if you're thinking of adding a profit on top. The venue is certainly very central, and a good number of the public came in and bought, including a number of dealers from the UK. After packing the van we joined an Australian colleague for dinner in a very lively Indonesian restaurant, where we were allocated an hour and a quarter to eat and be out. We started worrying when they hadn't taken our order for fifteen minutes, time was running out and we thought we might have to have dessert on the pavement, but luckily our later shift had cancelled and we relaxed and learned how to train our customers. On the way home we had to dodge the showers in a bar, and when we felt we'd overstayed our welcome, the barman said "no, it's still raining".

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Getting out of Amsterdam in the morning was even easier than driving in, so it felt like payback when we circled the Utrecht ring road more times than necessary, but we made it to Bruges in time for lunch. Just inside the ring road we found a newly opened (one week) Antiques shop run by a young couple where Jan bought some furniture, and I bought a few good books from a baronial library. There was a great bar (below) around the corner from our hotel that was stuck in time with really cheesy old 60s music, the garish LP covers decorating the walls, and the barman dropping in and out of singing along - great beers though, and a great locals scene. Eating in our favourite restaurant was the reason for staying here, and it didn't disappoint, unlike the hotel - a new one for us. The room was comfortable, if basic, and we weren't bothered by the creaky floorboards until we heard those in the next room, and our neighbours' conversation as if they were in our room. Hey ho, it looked like a good idea on the internet...

Next morning we had a great breakfast in a cafe by a canal, feasting on Flemish architecture...oh yeah...and eggs, toast, coffee, orange juice...then through the tunnel and the anti-climax drive across southern England, and home about half five - total mileage 2988. Sorry, Treggy, Grasmere just wasn't gonna be on the radar...

