

Cycling to Budapest

From Tom's diary

Bicycle trip Trieste-Budapest, August 2004



“People present: Tiziano Agostini (the Boss)
Alessandra (Alex) Galmonte (the Scheduler)
Alessandro Soranzo (the Nice Guy)
Alice Gherzil (the Driver)
Tom Troscianko (the Terminator)”

“Day 1: Wednesday 11 August 2004. Trieste – Vrhnika. 55 miles, 5 hrs.

The idea of the trip was unlikely – four vision scientists cycling 1000 km to ECVF, from Trieste to Budapest. However, it seemed to be destined to happen when, only a little bit after the nominal 8 AM deadline for starting, everybody congregated at and outside Alessandra’s apartment. The first casualty was Alessandra herself. A few days earlier, her coffee table had fallen on her toe. The subsequent damage to this lower concentration of nerve endings led to an inability to wear the kind of cycling shoes which are *de rigeur* for any self-respecting Italian (they have a base which slots into the pedal, making it possible to pull up as well as push down, and well nigh impossible to leap off the bike during a crash). Being me (not in any way Italian) I suggested wearing sandals. Alex dismissed the idea as the ravings of a madman – and then discovered that I was planning to cycle in sandals anyway. On a crap mountain bike, not like the beautiful yellow racing bikes; in shorts I go walking in with no crotch protection; in other words, way beyond the set of reasonable biking behaviour for anyone from between Sicily and the Alps. Almost speechless, she constructed the perfect riposte: “I hate your saddle”. Perfect. An insult not to my ass, but to the ass-interface. The cue to go down the lift and tackle the great outdoors. And so, at 9.01 AM we set off. All OK for the first 400 metres, and then we turn right. The first hill, all 8 km of it.”



“Might as well get the existential crisis out of the way real quick. If I can’t make it up the first hill, the prospects of making ECVP are looking shaky. Luckily the weather is cool, and the effort seems manageable. We go up at a steady 7 mph, and I begin to get the idea that I might, just, be able to do this thing.

The top takes you to the Slovenian frontier. SLO is now an EU country but still has passport controls. It’s a long time since I crossed a border on a bike, and a suitable reward for the 8 km hill.”

“Traffic variable, but slightly bizarre in that some drivers hoot their horns in apparent greeting, while others have more hostile intentions. My nearest miss is with an ambulance, which I guess is the best sort of vehicle to get hit by if it is to happen at all.”



Some science: The fly Experiments

“... Then a dessert with cream cheese and steamed pastry. So here’s how the fly experiment happened. We noticed that a fly which went into some cream and chocolate appeared to die. So we caught another one and forced it into the same goo. Again, the fly was not well afterwards. It could walk but not fly, and only avoided fingers with sluggish responses. However, flicking it on the floor seemed to revive it and it flew away. How and why??? Will this generalise? The next condition is to blow on the stricken fly to see if the airflow itself dislodges the toxic substance, or whether an acceleration is needed too. But, sadly, the five scientists lack the energy to do this, perhaps also because of the cream and chocolate (and wine).

Now, after lunch, it’s 6 PM and time for a late siesta! Enlivened by a cacophony of hammer blows somewhere on the roof. Probably a giant fly seeking revenge.”

“Day 2: Thursday 12 August, Vrhnika – Celje, 74 miles, 6.5 hours.”

“Anyway, today started early with breakfast at 7... Hit Ljubljana before 9 and then the nightmare begins. Most of the roads that we wish to take are prohibited for bicycles. I take one anyway, to keep up with the lads up ahead, just trying to follow the “Maribor” signs. Get caught by police who tell me that I cannot be on that road. So I ask them where I should go instead and they shrug their shoulders and speed off. Great...”

“... The solution was to ask a man on a bicycle with his dog in tow (actually, the little dog seemed to be towing the bike). He took us through a dirt lane to another road and told us to follow that one. We did, and found that it led straight to another motorway slip road. Marvellous.”



“Day 3 Celje-Ptuj, about 42 miles, about 4 hours.”

“OK. Today we got **rain**. Pretty much from the outset. A big black cloud was following us. If we slowed down we got rained on; if we speeded up we got sunshine. It was bizarre to be stalked by weather. Of course, there had to be steep uphill bits where it was impossible to escape...”



The town (Ptui) is beautiful, somewhat reminiscent of Tübingen. A big river, the Drava, flows through town. We found a good restaurant for dinner on its bank. Over the bloody (and tender) steak and a 1997 Merlot wine we discovered that almost all of us had been clinically depressed in the past. The nature of that conversation, and a discussion of suicide, marked a new closeness in the group. We retired to bed tired but happy.

“Day 4 Ptuj-Heviz (Hungary). 82 miles, 7 hrs.”

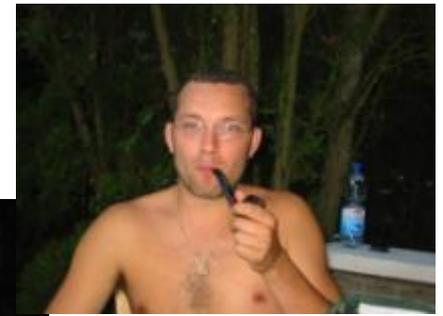
“What a long cycle ride. We are in Hungary ...” “The cycle ride through eastern Slovenia was the best bit yet of our trip. The black cloud had gone (just) and the weather was fresh. The countryside was ever more beautiful and subtly different from the landscape nearer Italy. More “east European” with shabby little houses, storks’ nests, more poverty, and nicer people. ”



“Day 5: Heviz-Radapuszta (Lake Balaton) about 40 miles, about 4 hrs.”

“An easy day’s cycling, as we only had to get halfway around the southern shore of Lake Balaton to get to the house of Gabor and his family.” “He and his father had built the house themselves in the 1980s when everything was hard to get; now it serves them well as a holiday home. We were invited for lunch, little knowing that this would take around 10 hours.”





“There were about 8 people present – Gabor’s wife, cousins, the parents and various others. They had prepared a goulash from two deer shot by Gabor (one mature, one young), and also had a young roast wild boar also hunted by Gabor (sitting all night in a forest waiting for it). I was most interested in the goulash, which was truly superb.”

“Altogether this was some of the best food I had ever eaten, and the wine was superb too. The meal went on for ages. The sweets were a poppy seed cake just like my mum used to make, and other cakes (nuts, honey) baked for the occasion. There was home-made grappa distilled by the multi-talented Gabor. He explained how during the distillation process in his kitchen, which is illegal, police rang his doorbell because his wife had the same name as someone else in the building, and it was that person that the police wished to see.”

“We smoked flavoured tobacco (chocolate, vanilla) in briar pipes.”

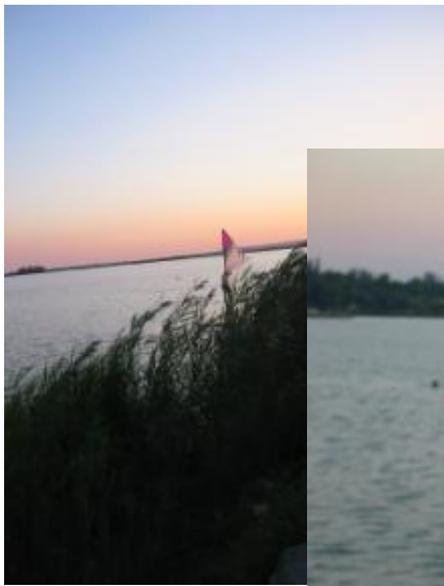
“... and when we finally returned to our house at around midnight my consciousness slipped away.”

“The next day was a rest day so it does not count. I prepared my ECVP talk and we ate food twice.”

“Day 6 Radpuszta-Velence, about 75 miles, about 7 hours.”

“The morning was strangely stressful. It took ages for people to get ready to leave and I was fretting cos it looked like the day would turn out real hot and I wanted to catch the morning coolness...”

“We found a lakeside hotel in the small town of Velence... Went to a beach hut for dinner (fried lake fish, chips, salad, sausages, pancakes, beer) and after that I decided to enter the lake. The temp was lovely (except for Alessadra who considered it cold) and I had a swim/paddle. Then something extraordinary happened. A man did not know how to rig a windsurfer, so I did it for him; pretty badly, but sort of OK. He then invited me to try it out! I had not windsurfed for around 20 years and was full of foreboding. The wind, however, was only weak and I managed to lift the sail and control the board fine. All the knowledge returned gradually. Lovely! The board did not sail into the wind as it lacked a skeg, but I knew that I could still do it!”



“Day 7 Velence-Esztergom (and Sturovo in Slovakia), about 60 miles, about 6 hrs.”

“Sometime in the late morning I spotted hemp plants growing by the road so I picked some nice pungent ones, suspecting that they would have little if any psychoactive effect; but at least the smell was great!...”







“... Now I need to rest before the final movie! Am feeling much fitter than yesterday. Already, I don't want this journey to end. Perhaps we'll carry on to Moscow!”



A large, vibrant firework exploding in the night sky. The firework is a large, multi-colored burst with a central bright orange and yellow core, surrounded by numerous smaller, colorful sparks in shades of red, orange, and white. The background is a dark, black night sky. The text "Thanks Tom" is overlaid in the center of the image in a large, white, sans-serif font.

Thanks Tom