

Motorcycle Tour Magazine

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BACKROADS

Motorcycles, Travel & Adventure

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Exploring
Eastern Europe
with Adriatic Moto Tours

Most excellent riding adventures have a definitive start, point of origin and impetus that pushes the mind rolling in the direction of the journey.

This particular trip, through the Baltic region of Eastern Europe from Romania's Bucharest down through Greece to Gallipoli and Istanbul in Turkey, before running up the Black Sea of Bulgaria, had its start a winter or so back.

I know it was a Monday, as I was watching multiple episodes of Top Gear and one particular show where the boys were super-car'ing around Romania.

The snow was piling up outside and thoughts of riding were fluttering about my head (they always are), but the reality was it would be months before our bikes rolled easily down the driveway.

It was a normal Top Gear show in most respects with high powered and unattainable autos being hooliganized by the British Three Stooges, but then it happened. This time it was a road – just a road. Top Gear drove across the Transfăgărășan.

For five minutes or so, on that cold and snowy night, everything stopped and, even though I hate to say it, it was Jeremy Clarkson who started this particular motorcycle exploit when he said, "We were wrong... this is better than Del Stelvio. This is the best road in the world!"

And, watching them on said cold and snowy night in New Jersey, indeed it was.

I hit pause and rewind and called Shira up and told her to watch.

She did and looked at me with a mischievous grin and it was at that moment we knew we would be heading to Romania.

It took a few years and a number of scoured history and travel books just to put things in greater perspective than just one single road (even the Transfăgărășan), and a bit of planning - but the day after putting our 20th Anniversary issue to bed we were on a Lufthansa Airbus 340 heading toward Europe and, eventually, the Romanian capital city of Bucharest.

To add to the pleasure of this trip was the fact that Shira, whose roots are Turkish and Romanian, would get to ride in her ancestor's homeland.

We had arranged to ride along with Adriatic Moto Tours on their Romania to Istanbul Adventure.

Exploring the Realms of Eastern Europe

Bucharest to Istanbul
with Adriatic Moto Tours

words and images: Brian Rathjen



We had ridden with Matej Malovrh and company a few years back through the Balkans and knew we would have a most excellent time with them once again. On that ride we found they did a brilliant job of dipping us deep in the region's culture, history and people; something that needed to happen to truly get the most of this region that has played a pivotal part of human history.

And, then there would be the Transfăgărășan too. Yea!

Arriving late in the day after 24 hours straight with little napping we grabbed a few hours sleep in the room at the massive Intercontinental Hotel, and then strolled over to the old section of Bucharest to choose one of the dozens of restaurants that had spilled back out onto the street after closing down for the hard squalls that had passed through when we first arrived.

A little dinner, a little 'after dinner' stroll around the old section and we were back to the hotel fairly early looking to catch up with the rest of Romania come the next morning.

We were not to meet the rest of our group and guides Niko and Matevz, until early evening the next day, so we took the free day and did the sights and sounds of this ancient Baltic city, meeting our fellow riders later that second day.

Along on this journey would be fellow Americans Jack, Jim and a couple from Washington State - Joe and Susan. From Australia we had Colin, Pete and Kristine - a couple who had just arrived from taking in the TT races at the Isle of Man - what a few great way to keep a vacation all motorcycle!

The Intercontinental Hotel, Adriatic's choice, could not have been more pertinent to Romania's recent history, being the same hotel that was the center of attention during the Romanian Revolution in 1989, when students and citizens rose up against the dictator Ceausescu and his hard fisted regime. Over 1,100 Romanians were killed before the Army stopped rolling against the people and decided to be on the right side of history. Ceausescu and his wife were overthrown and executed within days.



From this very hotel the world media filmed and broadcast the events as they were happening from their room's balconies.

The scars and memories of this Communist regime were still apparent as we did a walking tour of the older parts of Bucharest the next day.

We ran into some of our riding partners for the next few weeks, found lunch back in the old section and got ready for our first 'rider's meeting' which would be found at the hotel bar that evening.

As with most better companies there would be a daily briefing each evening and again right before we would start off in the morning.

Bucharest to Brasov, Romania

Early on that Sunday morning, before breakfast I took a short ride on the BMW R1200 GS provided by Adriatic Tours (Shira would be riding an F700 GS) to see the largest building on this side of the planet, taking note that even in a former Communist Block city there is very little traffic early on a Sunday morning.

Ceausescu's Palace, once called the People's Palace, now the Romanian Parliament Building, is the second largest building on Earth (our Pentagon is the largest) and is the world's heaviest building. Its sheer size is amazing



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to see some 12 stories tall with 1,100 rooms and with 3,700,000 square feet of space - it rules Bucharest.

Impressive does not do this building any justice.

Romanian Police sat in a car, and silently watched, while I rode up onto the sidewalk for the digital moment.



Back at the Intercontinental we took a fast breakfast, went over maps – borrowing the front widow on a large motor-coach for a black board – and then began our ride making our way north and west from the center of Bucharest’s sprawl.

Every big metro has a sprawl area, and some take longer to ride out of than others. Ask anyone from New York or Philly.

Soon enough the large and non-descript buildings from Romania’s Communist past were replaced with architecture and farm houses built in a more traditional and historic Romanian-style. High, sloped tile and wooden shingle roofs, dozens of produce stands selling the most delicious looking cherries and fruit, horse drawn carts replaced the old yellow cabs, the ubiquitous tall conical hay bales and there seemed to be plenty of people simply walking to where they needed go.



This wasn’t Kansas.

The roads began to climb up the foothills of the Carpathians, really just big rolling hills at this point, and heading over the first of many passes we would cross on this trip.

We found lunch on one such foothill at the top of a heavily graveled drive with a view that was only surpassed by the place’s apple strudel.

We were now riding into Vlad Tepes’ realm. The 15th century Prince had ruled this region and was known for being extremely cruel to those who displeased or went against his wishes.

The word Tepes translates to “impaler” and was so coined because of Vlad’s propensity to punish victims by impaling them on stakes, then displaying them publicly to frighten his enemies and to warn would-be transgressors of his strict code. He is credited with killing over 60,000 people in this fashion.

His renowned cruelty and lust for blood became the thing of legend and an Irishman Bram Stoker, whom had never been to Romania in his life, picked up on this and created the story of Count Dracula – the undead vampire - in 1897.

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Along our route, high along the peaks, we made a stop at Bran’s Castle, reported to be “Dracula’s Castle” that, in fact, was last lived in by Queen Marie of Romania - Romanian’s “Savior Queen;” as well as Queen Victoria of England’s granddaughter.

Vlad did indeed visit here as this was part of his realm and - as spooky as I am sure this castle in the Carpathian mountains looks on a dark and stormy night – the throngs of tourists on this sunny late spring Sunday killed the fear factor like a stake through the heart.

Still, the castle itself was impressive as was the real torture room with its oh-so-inviting chair of iron spikes.

More impressive were the roads leading from the village of Bran to our stop for the night, the bustling mountain town of Brazov – a walled and fortified city back in medieval times. Today the large stone towers still stand around the city, but the walls are long gone.

The place was really hopping as we rode in, and there were plenty of other riders there as well. It was Sunday and on any Sunday anywhere in the civilized world you will find like-minded riders out enjoy the very thing we all do.

We parked, found our hotel and then, after a shower and settling in went for a stroll about Brazov.

The huge Black Church – which was blackened by the 1689 fire that took down the walls and torched the town - is the largest Gothic-style church in this part of Europe and the Hirscher Haus, the oldest building in Brazov. It also houses an excellent restaurant, as we discovered later that night.

This time of year the sun doesn't really set on these mountains until almost 10 o'clock so another town-wide meander was in order to walk off dinner and prepare for the next day's ride.

Brazov to Sibiu, Romania

Today's ride would bring us through the heart of Transylvania on mountain roads that started warmed by the sun but quickly turned against us, swapping roles from just slightly damp to wet and slick in a matter of sweepers.

For us this wet ride did not last long and by our lunch stop in the beautiful town of Sighisoara, located on Tarnava Mare River, the sun had returned. Sighisoara is considered by many as one of the most beautiful and well-preserved citadels in Europe.

Here once stood 14 towers – built between the 14th to 16th centuries, to repel Turkish raids - and all but five still remain; each with their own distinctive names. The Rope Makers' Tower, the Taylors' Tower, the Showmakers' Tower, the Butchers' Tower and so on. This was Vlad Tepes' true



birthplace but we didn't feel all that imperiled, and Shira and I were happy to just sit around the town park for an hour, below the clock tower, drinking in the scenery. The walk to the citadel itself was well worth it; as was the small, but interesting Weapons Museum next to the 'Impalers' home.

Adriatic offered two separate routes this day and we chose the longer which brought us through some rougher farm roads and smaller villages, built in the older Romanian fashion and many with front yards covered with bright, colorful late spring flowers.

Along one wooded area I stopped for a short time to talk (sort of) to a sheepherder and his dogs, who happily posed for a few pictures.

Locals were out selling their wares today with a coppersmith grabbing my attention. Was that really a copper still they were selling?

By late in the afternoon we pulled into the cosmopolitan city of Sibiu. Sibiu was a fairly happening city with its older section a plethora of outdoor restau-



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rants, bakery shop, a superb medical facility and a number of performing acts that pushed the envelope. Think a brilliant combination of Peter Gabriel, Sargent Pepper and Mad Max.

Free Day in Sibiu, Romania

The famed Transfăgărășan was just about an hour or so ride from the town center of Sibiu and by 10 am our group was winding its way through the forested road that lines the bottom of this high point of the Carpathians.

This road was built by Ceausescu, in response to the Soviet Union's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and to top the Transalpina Road we would cross the next day. Ceausescu had a massive and twisted ego. Everything he did had to be the biggest, like his palace in Bucharest. This road was to be for moving tanks and military vehicles, and they used a lot of explosives to get this done - roughly six million kilograms of dynamite were used on the northern face, and official records state that about 40 soldiers lost their lives in building accidents. These numbers are likely to be under-estimations due to Communist propaganda touting "greatest care for men."

A dark and costly past but now, thanks to shows like Top Gear, this road has become a mecca for motorheads from around Europe and the world.

As the Transfăgărășan began to wind up I found a barrier with Romanian writing basically telling me the road was closed.

The concrete barrier was just half across the road - I rode past the other half and headed up the pass that crosses the Făgăraș ridge.

The road was a tad beat up and as I rode higher and above any tree line the valley opened beneath me with the sky sharing strong beams of sunshine and dark clouds of rain. We were now in the real heart of the Carpathian Mountains. Tight waterfalls poured from melting snow and ice down sharp cataracts in the rocks face of the cliffs. Piles of snow appeared along the road,

encroaching across in some tighter spots.

I paused again and again to drink it all in.

The Transfăgărășan's really exciting parts were a combination of sweepers and hairpins, what I like to call "sweepins." Here and there, at the apex of the turns, heavy rubber had been building up from sport car enthusiasts being enthusiastic. Our group crossed the summit and rode through the tunnel to the far side before turning around and stopping for hot chocolate and coffee along the tundra lake on the top.

Was Clarkson right? Is the Transfăgărășan the greatest road in the world? Well, in truth I do not believe there is such a thing.

But, it was spectacular to ride and as visually stunning as they come and reminded me of Norway's Trollstigen in many ways.



It might sound like a cop out, but I think we can agree the greatest road in the world is the next excellent one we ride.

We were back in Sibiu by early afternoon with Shira and I finding lunch in the old section (we like old sections), basically doing the tourist thing the rest of the day in this lovely Romanian town.

The Arts Festival would be continuing all week so that evening we were once again treated to a show, of sorts, as the town square, beneath the high church tower was filled with a dozen of what I will call 'acoustic statues' that emitted different tones while spinning around like some OZ-like mobiles. It was raining this evening and standing in the old Romanian square, with the tones and rains encircling us, was truly bizarre in the very best way.

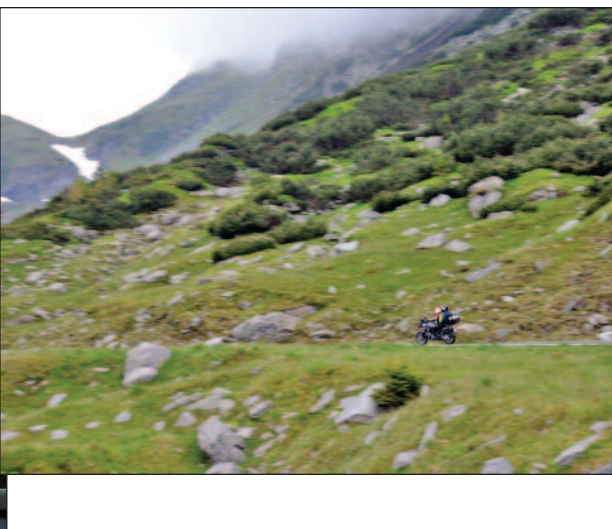
Sibiu to Pitești, Romania

If yesterday's famous road was visually stunning then today's was as equally technical. The Transalpina is called the King's Road with good reason, as it is the highest roadway in Romania and one of the most challenging pieces of asphalt I have ridden in a long time, easily matching or even surpassing the Stelvio Pass. Deals Gap's Dragon would have died from exhaustion here.

The true history of the Transalpina is actually up for debate. One theory states that the road was created by the Romans as a way of moving to and from Sarmizegetusa, the main city of the Roman Empire in Romania.

The other says it was built by King Carol II, and it is a fact that it was rebuilt during World War II by German troops, when they needed a road for military purposes, but remained inaccessible for most normal drivers and vehicles until only a few years ago. It was not even paved until 2009.

Whoever built this road - thank you.





You did a most excellent job.

With a length of 146 km, it goes through the center of the Carpathian Mountains, reaching a maximum altitude of 2,145m at Paso Urdele and is as amazing as they come.

The southern side was far easier to ride at speed with long, wide sweepers that offered great riding sights and allowed for a more moderate pace.

Big grins here, kids, big grins!

Adriatic chose a most marvelous hotel in the backcountry for lunch that day and we dined in old rooms with wide doors open and cooling breeze sliding down off the mountains.

I could have stayed there all afternoon but we had another 100 kilometers to go and our route would bring us directly into the black clouds and lightning that was now coming off the pass.

When the tempest hit, it hit fast with blinding rain, which segued into pummeling hail.

Discretion was indeed the better part of valor and our group pulled over, in mass, to seek shelter and stayed put for a good while until the skies lightened up. We still had some distance to go to the urban city of Pitesti and did our best to get there in short order, but the rains returned with a vengeance and riding into the poorly drained city we rode through the deepest puddles and water I have ever seen in a modern city as it must have rained inches in a short hour and the water had nowhere to go in a city with no real drainage.

It was a mess. And I felt like Mike Nelson riding to my hotel. (Extra points for that reference)

Unlike our other stops we were told Pitesti was just a town of convenience and necessity on our way to the Danube River and Bulgaria. But still the local hotel was warm, dry and comfortable that evening. We're easy.

Pitesti to Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria

As much as Pitesti was an industrialized urban area, the region just to the south heading toward Bulgaria, is Romania's breadbasket and highly agrarian. With the peaks and clouds of the Carpathians slowly disappearing in our mirrors we rode in a dry and comfortable day as we made our way across the highest plains in all of Europe.

Row after row of various crops lined the road and fields of wheat stretched far into the distance.

We passed a few of the largest sunflower fields we had ever seen, just a few weeks shy of holding their yellows faces to the sky.

The road ran south through tight clusters of towns with old and young sitting on small benches outside their homes watching their world roll by.

I wondered what the old ones were thinking as we shot past. I knew what the young ones were thinking.

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As we got closer to the Danube River we began to spot large, almost eagle-size nests perched atop telephone and utility poles.

Massive things - they were home to the White Storks of Romania.

These migratory birds fly up to the river's delta area along the Romanian border to nest and breed. They are rare these days but it would be hard to tell this, as we saw dozens of nests this day all packed with families of White Storks.

Add to this mess the fact that the bridge was down to one lane for construction and we had to lane split around massive Iveco and Man trucks just to shorten our crossing time from hours to more doable minutes.

This was not how I had pictured myself entering this country. Our peaceful float across this river had morphed into a scene from the new Mad Max film.

At the border station, marked in Cyrillic, they collected paperwork and then told us "Bike boys go to left."



Our plan was to cross one of the world's most famous and beautiful rivers on a small ferry at Zimnicea, but when we arrived at the dock we were told that the ferry lay across the Danube on the Bulgarian side with a failure of unknown origin. Basically, they said, it was broken.

One of the things you must be when traveling by bike is flexible and we went into Plan B, which entailed crossing over the river into Bulgaria about 40 miles east through the busiest commercial border crossings imaginable.

And we did and waited for them to let us into the country, which took a lot less time than I thought.

Now in Bulgaria we tried to make up for time lost as we charged toward the town of Veliko Tarnovo.

After the crossing, and a fairly rude fill up at the local Shell station, I was not sure what to expect of this Bulgarian town but the topography began to change with the river valley giving way to tall cliffs and soon we could see that Veliko Tarnovo was built into these cliffs.

Magnificent.

We found our hotel and quickly began exploring the town and walking through the historic section to get a view of the Tsarevets - the King's Hill - which was the home of the rulers of Bulgarian's Second Kingdom; a phenomenal high castle and church that is protected on three sides by cliff and walls running down to the Yantra River.

Dinner was found in this historic part of town and our hotel's room overlooked the huge Four Horseman monument down below.

My mind had set itself on a certain way I thought this old post-communist nation would look, but by the end of that evening that paradigm had changed.

Welcome to the real Bulgaria, Brian.

Veliko Tarnovo to Plovdiv, Bulgaria

In 2019 Plovdiv will become the Cultural Capital of Europe. It is a very big deal.

I'll tell you all about it... but first we had to get there this day, which would be the shortest day's ride on the motorcycles for this tour.

The journey today would run through the Balkan Mountains, crossing them on the Shipka Pass. During the Russo-Turkish War a number of battles were fought atop this mountain pass in 1877 and 1878, with 5,000 Bulgarian volunteers taking part and fighting alongside the Czar's Russian Army against the Turks. This area has been at war with each other on and off for centuries. Give it time - it will happen again.

Today the Monument of Liberty is the national shrine that symbolizes liberation and freedom - the final birth of the Bulgarian nation and independence.

When we arrived the mountain ridge was shrouded in clouds, but a good wind moved them along and a few of us ventured up the stone stairs and then into the monument, which serves as a museum as well.

The paintings depicting the war were strong and reminded us, again, that the history of this magnificent part of the planet does have a deep and brutal past.

The ride down the south side of the Shipka Pass was most excellent, with the bikes settling in nicely along finely paved mountain sweepers.

We finished them way too quickly and a return ride was almost in order, but we needed to get to Plovdiv for



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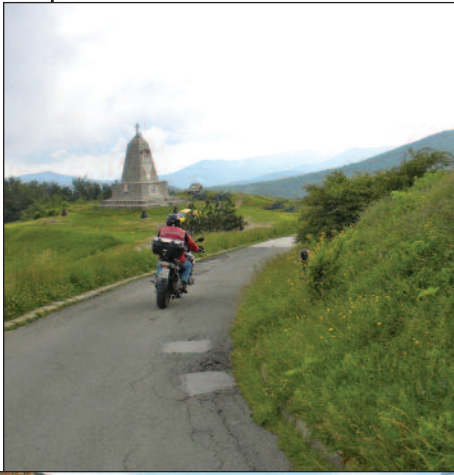
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lunch and to go explore the culture and history that has been recently found in this ancient city.

It seems that people have been in the Maritsa River valley for more than 6,000 years. The first real city was Thracian, but Phillip of Macedonia, Alexander the Great's father, renamed it after himself – Philippoupolis – soon after he conquered it in 342 BC.

Then the Romans came. They built massive sports arenas and theatres here, some of which have just recently been unearthed.

The Roman arena was discovered when work was being done to some basements along the town's center. It has now been incorporated into the modern city, with ancient and modern living in a wonderful harmony.

When do you get to have an affogato next to 1,800 year-old Roman ruins and then be allowed to go sit in seats that once beheld chariot races?

This happens in Europe everywhere we go. In the US they put you on the bus or behind a fence.

The Roman Amphitheater, which overlooks the city and has live performances during the summer months. The day we arrived the opera was having its opening gala.

We spent the entire afternoon walking around the older sections and then through the parks that were clean, full of young men and women doing what young people do, old men deep in complicated chess games and old grandmothers sitting chatting with each other about the young people kissing on the next bench. I tried to get Shira to sit on a bench and make out with me, but she said she had better plans.

Still, life was very good this day in Plovdiv. The Singing Fountains were magnificent and added a cooling breeze to the warm day and above all this, the giant statue of King Phillip kept watch on his city.

The city, its culture, both old and new, and its people have given the EU a real reason to give the city of Plovdiv this honor - Cultural Capital of Europe - in 2019, which it will keep for a period of one calendar year, during which it will hold a series of cultural events with a strong European dimension.

Plovdiv is already deep in celebration now... in 2015.

Plovdiv to Gallipoli, Turkey

It seems that this tour, though it was doing a fine job of riding through some of the region's incredible scenery, great peoples and deep culture, had highlighted some of its bloodiest forays as well. Vlad the Impaler, the Battles on Shipka Pass and this day we would ride to Gallipoli, one of the fiercest military campaigns in modern times.

We left Plovdiv an hour earlier than we had been getting on the road as we knew we would have about 430 kilometers to cover and have two border crossings, first in Greece and then into Turkey.

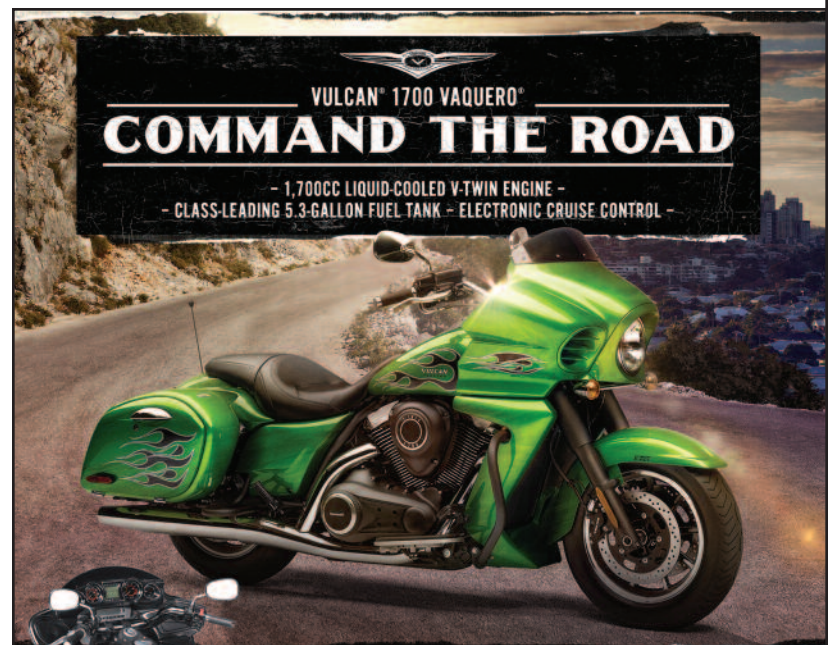


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The ride this day was fast along good size roads that ate up the small towns and kilometers at a great pace. We had one small pass today, at Makaza, and not much later we were slowing down for the border crossing into Greece.

It was amazing how the topography seems to change with the nation's names. Pine forest and hills gave way to sand, rock and olive trees and then the Aegean was to our right. We had ridden north around Romania and then south through Bulgaria, over a number of mountains ranges and passes and now found ourselves at the eastern arm of the Mediterranean.

In the bustling and built up town of Alexandroupolis (yes, named after 'the Great' one, son of Phillip who had his own city the night before – what, you thought the Bush and Clinton clans started this family dynasty crap?) we had a superb meal of octopus, shrimp and fresh Greek salad along the harbor and then carried on towards Turkey.

Greece economically imploded a week later.

We have crossed many, many borders before, sometimes with interesting results and stories, but going into Turkey was a tale unto itself. There were four separate checkpoints where we needed to produce papers, passports, registrations, rental agreements and the needed Turkish visa.

In truth we were through in good time, but it will be a crossing I will remember until the next 'interesting' one rolls into view.

As we rode down the peninsula of Gallipoli I could see the Dardanelles to my left. Connecting the Aegean Sea to the Sea of Marmara, it is one of the Turkish Straits, along with its counterpart, the Bosphorus at Istanbul.

Ancient Troy was located here - another war involving one particular woman (Helen), a siege and a giant wooden horse - the strait itself is almost river-like as it connects the seas. Further on the Bosphorus has been bringing ships to and from the Black Sea for thousands of years. It is a strategic and important waterway; one of the most important in the world - historically and today.

It was also here, during the First World War, that Churchill, who was then the first Lord of the British Admiralty,

put forward his plans for a naval attack on the Dardanelles to make their push against the Turkish Army, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in order to have a secure supply route to provide Russia with weapons. Atatürk would go on to lead the nation of Turkey, pushing for modernization to change Turkey from old Ottoman ways to a more secular, forward thinking nation.



It was during the Gallipoli Campaign that thousands of young New Zealanders and Australians went to war to support England. As we know this campaign was a fiasco and thousands died on both sides, but the losses hit especially hard with the Anzac troops.

This day I realized I was riding down Gallipoli with Colin ahead of me and Pete and Kris behind. It was especially humbling to be riding with these three Australians in this almost sacred place for the Aussie people.

Exactly 100 years after that bloody battle we rode through a deep and peaceful forest to a small hamlet up above the Anzac Monument knowing that a century before hell had indeed visited this region.

As I write these words, accompanied not by the sounds of guns, bombs and death, but with the cooing of doves, the crying of goats and the occasional rooster crowing filling the air. The mosque just had the afternoon adhān, the call to prayer, and all seems peaceful and wonderful here in Gallipoli.

It has been a long but fruitful day with breakfast in Bulgaria, lunch in Greece and dinner in Turkey; a good day indeed.

Our small bed & breakfast is owned by a cheerful Turkish family, and I am looking forward to an excellent Turkish meal this night and to see the solemn memorials when the next day begins before we push on to Istanbul.

Gallipoli to Istanbul, Turkey

The mosque and locals kept us in and out of sleep with the 'wake up' prayer call and what sounded like a drum march in the middle of the night, but dawn eventual came and after breakfast we left to take in the memorials of Gallipoli before ferrying across the Dardanelles and into something new for both Shira and I – Asia. This continent is vast, to be sure, but it does officially start somewhere and that somewhere is east of the Dardanelles.

As you would think a place like Gallipoli, where so much death and sorrow occurred on both sides, should be traveled respectfully and that is what we did – Anzac Bay, the Lone Pine Memorial and the museum that had a well done multi-theater presentation showing the conflict from a more Turkish perspective.

I think some of our Aussie crew were not as pleased as they wished, but Gallipoli is in Turkey and they did triumph over the Allied forces in this campaign and history is always written by the triumphant.

We found lunch along the water and then took a short ferry, at Canakkale, onto mainland Turkey and the far western reaches of Asia, where the ancient city of Troy once stood.

Major Turkish roads, through acres of golden grains and green rolling hills, took us to another, far larger, ferry at Bandirma, which would take us across the Sea of Mamara and to Istanbul – once called Constantinople, changed in 1930 by Atatürk who was looking to bring Turkey into the modern world.

The ferry arrived as the sun was setting on this, the longest day of the year, and we rode along the harbor of Istanbul with the lights of the minarets of the Blue Mosque guiding our way to the almost colonial hotel (there were never any British colonies here) complete with a pool of Mississippi turtles in the lobby. Why they were here I do not know but they did catch our attention each time we passed.



Two Free days in Istanbul ... or is it still Constantinople?

Situated at the Bosphorus Passage into the Black Sea Istanbul has been a crossroads and seat of world power for thousands of years. It has been the capital city of the Roman and Byzantine, the Latin, and the Ottoman empires. It is a city of very deep history and has influenced mankind for millennia. Attacked by barbarians, sacked by the Crusades, moved against by the British – its history is as deep as any other city in the world.



Adriatic MT had hired a guide for the day, a pleasant well-spoken Turk named Memetz who would spend the day escorting us around Istanbul and our first stop was Topkapi.

The Ottoman Empire and the Sultans have ruled most of the known world for centuries from the great Topkapi Palace, a place that conjures those images when ancient Turkey comes to mind.

Caravans and camels, harems and eunuch servants, turbaned men and veiled women moving to and from the palace on important business. Although standing in a modern city, Topkapi and the surrounding history that is so apparent in Istanbul still invoked these images.

Today the camels and horses have been replaced with autos and tramway, but the look, feel and flavor are still a world away from the United States.



This palace was beyond impressive, as was the entire city, but Topkapi, which was once a palace and now museum, truly gives you a look back on the Ottoman history and how they changed, molded and influenced the world. The Treasury Room was full of diamonds, rubies and emeralds, gem studded daggers and precious stones of a size that I only have dreamt and movies made about. Where was Maximilian Schell when I needed him?

The weapons room was equally impressive with hundreds of weapons from the Ottoman's past and its conquests - especially one sword, from Hungary's 14th century, that was easily over seven feet in length. Who and how someone could wield this was beyond us all.

The old kitchens, that would feed thousand at a time, rivaled anything in the world at the time and still were remarkable. This seat of power and the majesty that the Sultan commanded was nothing less than splendid and stunning.

We moved onto the famed Blue Mosque, impressive and dominating its part of a city that is ruled over by so many other structures.

Below the city we found the Yerbatan Sarnici – the Basilica Cistern – here hundreds of stone columns support a soaring roof of arches. The hidden unground chambers containing thousand of gallons of water that

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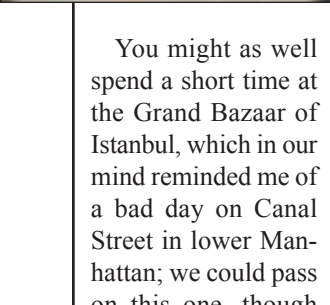
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the Romans once brought in along aqueducts nearly 2,000 years ago.

This cistern was one of the most mysterious and just plain interesting historical places we have ever been. These days, instead of perpetual darkness, it is artistically lit giving the arches an otherworldly look and truly must be seen in person. It would not do to miss time at Hagia Sophia which, with its huge doors, monstrous pillars, uncovered gilded mosaics and ancient feel, had set the standard here in Istanbul. In a city of amazing buildings and structures the Sophia is, in my opinion, the most impressive by far.



You might as well spend a short time at the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul, which in our mind reminded me of a bad day on Canal Street in lower Manhattan; we could pass on this one, though nearby we did get some great deals from one of the many spice sellers found near the bazaar.

Later that evening, the end of one of the longest days of the year and right in the middle of Ramadan, we sat atop the Armada Hotel roof café and listened to the day's last call to prayer with an impressive view of the Blue Mosque lit in the night.



Day Two: The big Turk tossed me over onto my back and began to soap and scrub me in an almost militaristic manner. He was in charge, but it wasn't what you might be thinking. His working English mostly consisted of "sit, lie down and roll over."

Okay, Atatürk, take it easy on me.

Looking up I could see the sun burst forth from an earlier rainy day, the light making its way through the spherical holes cut into the domed stone ceiling some 40 feet above my head.

I thought about how many men have looked up at the radiance shining through this roof here at the 534 year old Cemberlitas Hamami – the famous Turkish Bath.

Just a couple hours earlier I had a friendly Turkish barber scrape away a few weeks worth of facial hair and beard with a straight-edge and now, while Shira was enjoying her Turkish massage, I was being manhandled like Notso Happy, my little yellow puppet pal.

It was like some bizarre Turkish version of spa day in the City of Oz!

*Rub, rub here, rub, rub there
Whether you're tin or bronze
That's how we keep you in repair
In the merry old land of Oz...*

I could do this every now and again.

With a free night Shira and I made the best of our new found freshness (that wouldn't last on the road for long) and found a comfortable seafood restaurant within ear shot of the Bosphorus with Istanbul, in its ancient glory, behind us. Out on the waves the dolphins were putting on a show for us.

Tomorrow we'd be back on the bikes and heading north towards the Bulgarian border and the coast of the Black Sea.

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Istanbul to Nessebar, Bulgaria

We fought our way out of Istanbul morning traffic, past the Bosphorus and back into the Turkish countryside. We ate up the kilometers quickly along smooth tight two-lane thoroughfares, past the rolling hills littered with small, dusty towns and then along a wide and fast Turkish road heading up the mountains that line the border between Turkey and Bulgaria. This piece of pavement was fantastic and Turkey must have spent a gazillion on its creation. And, for all that money, it was missing one important thing. Traffic. There was none as we made a quick paced best of that; remembering that we came here to ride motorcycles!

We stopped at a small family owned fish restaurant that served up some excellent trout, found at the end of a kilometer of hard packed gravel and well off the beaten path. Without Niko leading our pack, we surely would have missed this jewel.

We once again had to play nice with the ever persnickety Turkish border guards and then the Bulgarian customs began to search the bikes as well; only to give ours a pass when they saw Notso Happy and Pepe sticking out of the tank bag.

The boys got us through a hassle again as border officials seem to like these two.

On the Bulgarian side of the mountain it seemed that though Turkey had spent a King's ransom on the road leading to the border, the Bulgarians, well not so much. They most likely spent that money on tobacco. Everyone smokes here – even the dogs and cats.

Eventually the bombed out road ran easier and we vectored onto a new road, that was actually maintained, and made a beeline to the Black Sea coast.



Heading into the seaside peninsular town of Nessebar my mind began to think nautical, oceanside, beach, bars and, of course as you would think, Soviet era fighter aircraft.

My eyes popped when I saw the MIG-21 on the side of the road, reminding me again that all this was run by the USSR not all that long ago.

Nessebar is extremely special, with its flair and feel and the fact that it is a UNESCO heritage site as well. Its archaeological sites are known world-wide and there was an excavation going on right outside our hotel that was shoehorned into this Black Sea community.

In fact walking around the small community, with its 16 small churches, they have done an exquisite job of building around the old Greek structures, which are all open to the public. As I had mentioned earlier in this part of the world you can actually live in your history, not just see it from behind a fence, from the seat of a bus or over the shoulder of some bureaucrat.

Nessebar to Kavarna, Bulgaria

Today would be a short, uneventful jaunt north along the coast with an early afternoon arrival in the Bulgarian city of Kavarna.

Of course we would have none of that, and as soon as we got free of Nessebar I noticed the red warning light on the R 1200GS' dash all lit up.

I was losing air in the rear and a quick look-see uncovered the wood screw embedded into the carcass.

If this was home it would have been a ten-minute operation with a Stop & Go kit, but my kit was back in NJ. But, a good guide is always prepared, and as such Niko dug into his tool wrap and came up with a Stop & Go tire repair kit of his own.

Fifteen minutes later and after topping off the tire at a local fuel station we were all on our way north along the Black Sea. The road, when not slowed by bus or pedestrian, was fairly quick; as were the stiff winds that were blowing along the shore this morning, bending both trees and motorcycles alike.

Zephyrs be damned we soldiered on making a long late morning stop along the beach coast and a Bulgarian Biker Bar called the Red Rock.



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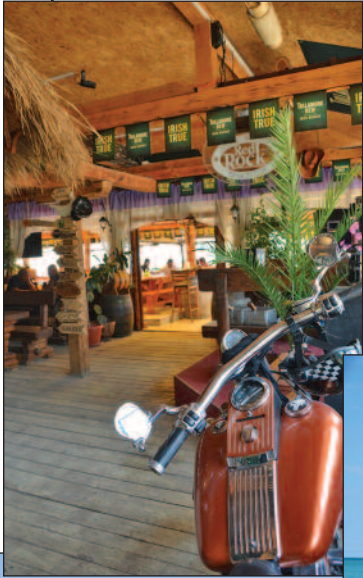
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The owners, two burly guys who could have been called from Central Casting for Sons of Anarchy, came over – excited when we said we were from Australia and the United States. True brethren, they came back with Red Rock swag (bandanas and socks - I swear - I guess socks are an acceptable gift to strangers in these parts), two pitchers of cold Bulgarian beer and shots of tequila with fruit to wash Bulgarian brew down.



It was very nice but we begged off on the kind offering.

By early afternoon the Thracian Cliffs dominated the coastline, rising high, chalky and white along miles of this coast.

Our hotel for the night was a bit different from where we had been staying, as we took hold of a two bedroom, two and half bath suite at the famous Thracian Golf & Beach Resort – allegedly one of the world’s toughest golf courses – designed by American Gary Player. I wouldn’t know or care. We had other plans....

Bikes parked early we could hear the beach, a hammock and a cold one calling.

In a place like this anybody could take the afternoon off from rough mountain roads, angry border guards and excitable eastern European drivers; and we did.

Karvarna to Tulcea, Romania

We had one more border crossing left in this Bucharest to Istanbul and back adventure and that was once again into Romania, which was a short ride north from our beach oasis at Karvarna.

This was done easily even though Happy and Pepe could not seem to get a smile from the young female guard heading into Romania. She and the Beretta on her hip seemed to be all business despite the youth, looks and skirted uniform.

The road turned inland from the Black Sea, near the city of Constanta, and we crossed the large canal, created by labor camps in the 1950s, that runs around the Danube’s Delta and straight to the Black Sea.

We then entered the region known as Dobrogea, which showed itself as a wide vast plain that reached for miles. Here wheat, sunflowers and immense wind turbine farms flourished as they have for centuries (okay, maybe not the wind farms). The road was straight and fast with just the occasional curve, turn or bend to remind you that bikes can be a lot of fun.

By early afternoon we arrived at the port city of Tulcea, which was far more built up and modern than I had hoped (Re: crappy, dirty, post-communist). But, there was optimism for a bit of beauty, as this city sits at the mouth of the delta of the Danube River.

Some 1,800 miles long, no other river crosses or forms as many nations as Europe’s Danube.

Through ten nations and through four capitals, the Danube is one of the most famed waterways in mankind’s history. Here at Tulcea its delta creates a 2,200-square-mile wildlife reserve designated by UNESCO as a “Reservation of the Biosphere.”

A small boat was hired to take us around the delta for the rest of the day as we had just a



few kilometers to go to our final stop on the road for this ride.

If you are into birds (and we are) you can find over 300 different species along the waterways, bogs, sand bars and little islands that make up this massive region which began forming over 10,000 years ago and continues to grow by 67 million tons of silt each year.

Nature quickly took back the river from the gritty city, and we powered into the heart of the delta for the rest of the day seeing thousands of birds of all types – cranes, pelicans and our favorite, the glossy ibis.

It was amazing to see so much nature, diversity and river here at Europe’s end. We also got a little extra treat as our skipper detoured a bit to the north and into the waters of the Ukraine. We’re not sure if that qualifies as tagging another nation on this trip - so we’ll leave that up to you guys to decide.

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this was very, very strong stuff.

By early afternoon we were motoring along a busy highway and into the more urban outskirts of Bucharest, the capital.

We rode down the Victory of Socialism Boulevard (How'd that work for them?), lined with fountains and dominated by Ceausescu's Palace at its end, before topping off the fuel tanks and parking the bikes for the last time at the Intercontinental Hotel that we had left fourteen days earlier.

Two weeks, some 3,500 kilometers, four nations, some of the most famous roadways on the planet, a step back into Ottoman times and a run up along the Black Sea coast had made this journey one of fascination, history and moto-fun.

Here, in the eastern edges of Europe, you will find a part of this planet that has seen so much history, both manmade and of the more natural kind.

From the age-old mountains, plains and river deltas to the Thracians and Greeks to the Romans

and the Ottomans to the Communists that ruled the region with an iron and bloody fist for so much of the last century – we found a people and a land that was still shrugging off this yoke, but looking to the future, and a place of natural beauty and resources that has outlasted all the machinations of man.

Although maybe not on top of many American rider's 'bucket list,' like the Alps or western parts of Europe, the east and the Baltic nations have a draw and allure all its own and many Americans can and will find their blood-line roots here.

I know Shira did and I was happy to ride along.

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Back on the bikes we quickly made our way to a local nature resort right above the Danube for one last night on the road.

The sunset that evening was worthy of the delta and this last full day on the backroads of Eastern Europe. The next morning it would be a long ride back to Bucharest and we'd get an early start.

Tulcea to Bucharest, Romania

Our ride back to our starting point in Bucharest was a mixed day of small country routes and bigger Romanian highways.

The first half could have lasted all day as far as we were concerned, with hours of two-lane roadway that wound in a most pleasant fashion along the countryside with fine tree-lined pavement flanked with miles of sunflowers, wheat, corn, the ubiquitous wind turbines and many bee hives.

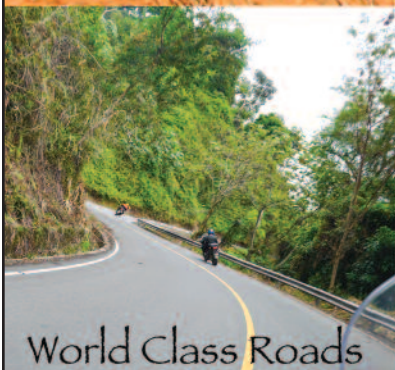
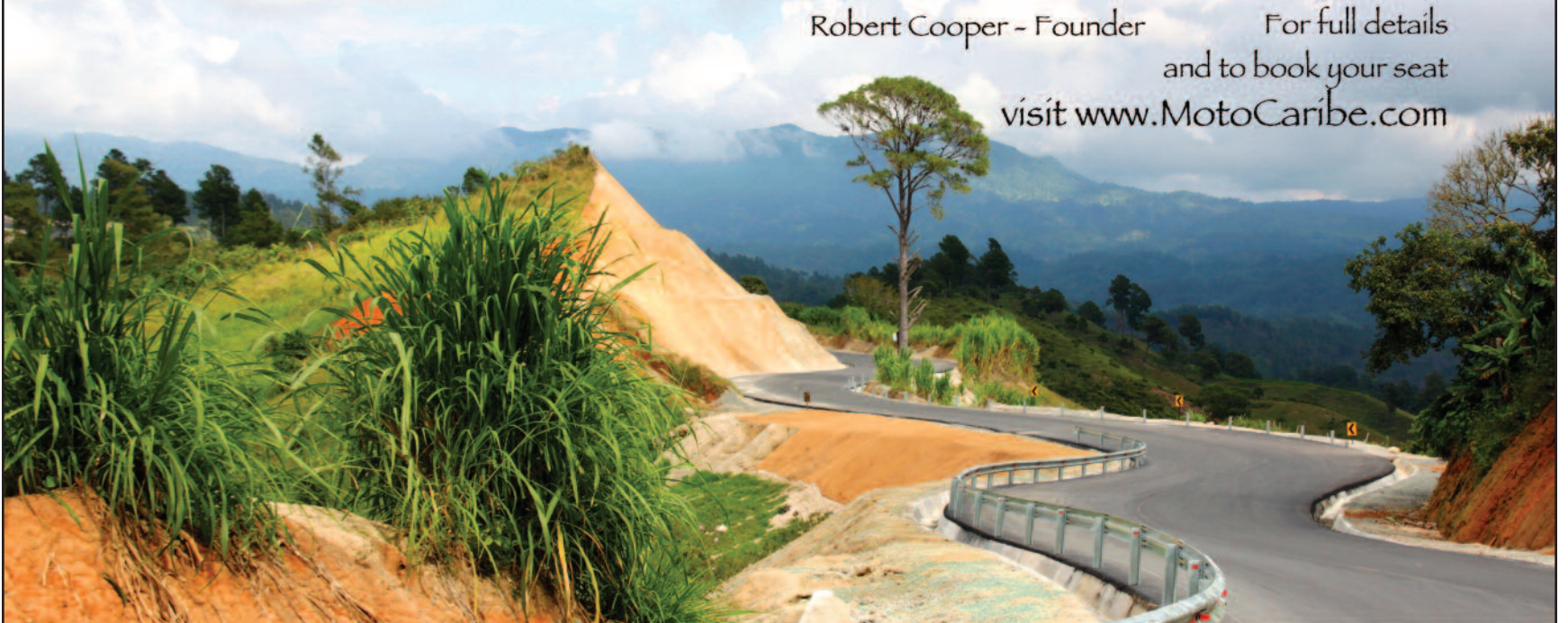
To our left we could see the small, yet very precipitous Macin Mountains, considered some of the oldest peaks in Europe.

Somewhere along the way we ran into the strong aroma of cilantro, with the herb permeating the entire region. We grow cilantro in our garden, but

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