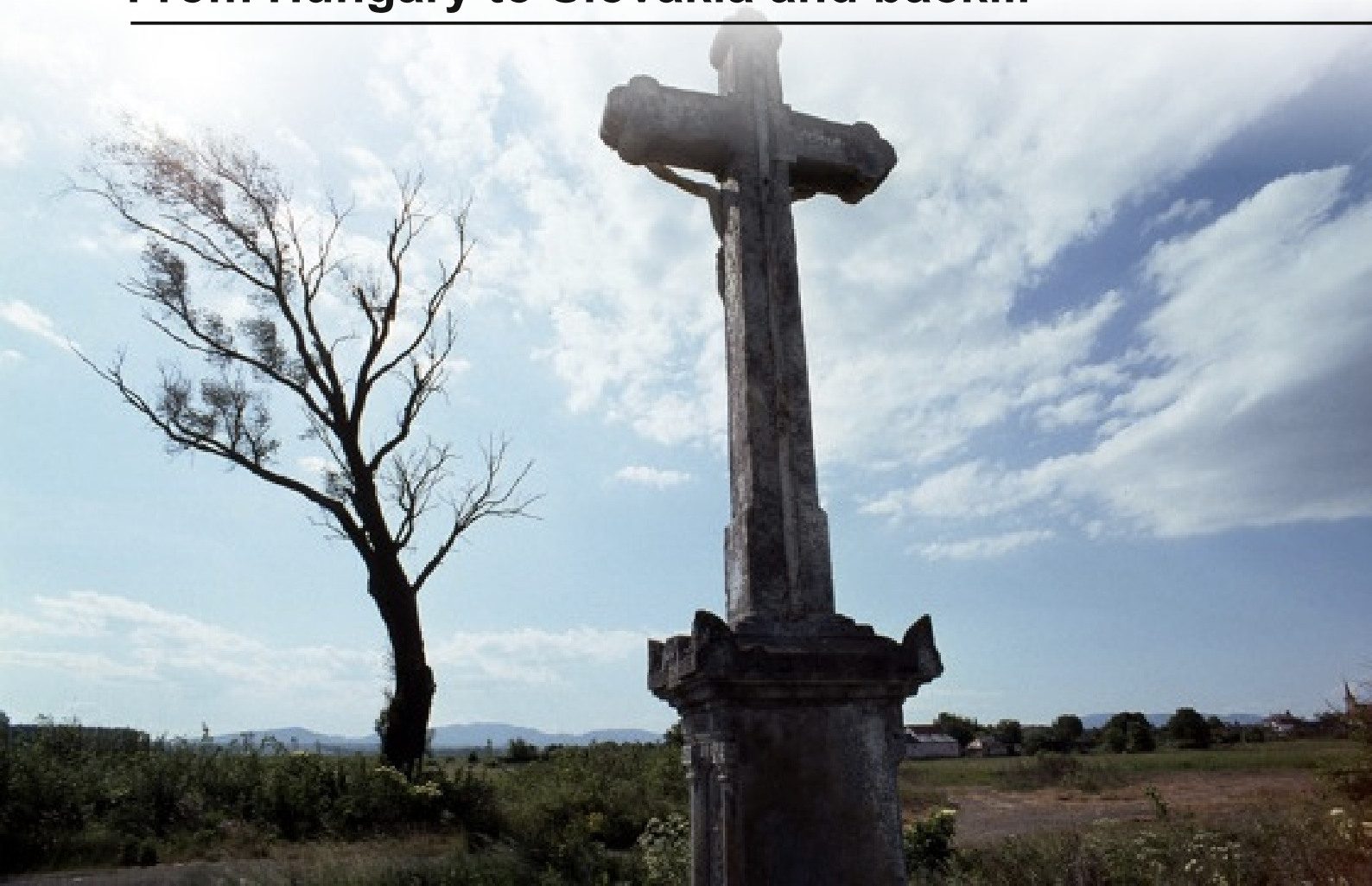




BOP presents, in the "travelogue series":
(a trip by BOP members Hern42 & Seb)

The hunt for Carpathian meat! From Hungary to Slovakia and back...



It started pretty innocently by trying to organise a roadtrip somewhere, shoot some pictures and have some fun with my friend (brother, bro, pal, mate, whatever ...) Seb. After a lot of deliberations, some multi-criteria multi-constraint optimization to find a suitable spot easily reachable from both our small empires, Budapest seemed to do the trick. The Carpathian mountains were attractive to us, primarily for the sportive reason of hiking for Seb, mainly for the possibility of finding some vampires on my (goth) side, and they seemed to be at driving distance.

Seb could reach Budapest pretty easily by flying there but would arrive quite late in the evening. I was, on the other hand, working/conferencing somewhere in Teutonia before, and my plan was to use rail transportation in an old fashioned way to cross Germany, Austria and arrive nicely in Hungary. Karlsruhe, the starting point, is incidentally one of the weirdest cities I've seen: all built as a star as far as I could tell and failing in a happy ending negotiation between forest and town ... The train trip was fairly cheap, 61 euros for the ride from Karlsruhe, and was followed by a nice 2 hours stop for mushroom pasta and beer in München, and then from midnight to 9:some am a good night sleep, to be interrupted by a moustachy dude bringing croissant and coffee right before the arrival, mumbling in



A sausage booth at Munchen's train station, circa midnight
(Olympus OM1, 50mm 1.4, hp5+)



Inside a Krest in Budapest
(Olympus OM1, 50mm 1.4, hp5+)

German some incomprehensible things ... Good things I presume, as I didn't end up dead.

So I was in Budapest, fresh as a small fish, happy as a clam, on my way to drop bags and all at the hotel. That was without the new business model of EasyHotel, which are very easy and cheap unless you ask for something utterly extraordinary such as early registration (10 euros), luggage keeping (5 euros a-piece), etc. Fortunately, smiles from the waitress were apparently free of charge (in my case, probably because it's a double bed room and I mentioned that my friend, *he* will come quite late this evening). Turns out I took a long breakfast, read "La condition humaine" by André Malraux in a nice bar, under trees, cursing the whole EasyX corporation a-plenty. I also spent some time cursing my own inability to check the weather forecast as I was prepared for 10 degrees C with rain (because of memories of last year's road trip in Poland, same time, roughly, which turned out to be a fall back into winter) and was treated with 27 degrees C and bright sun.

I managed to get rid of my bags at a French pancake restaurant (crêperie "La Galette", owned by some people I met in a previous visit of Budapest some two years before - it is sort of classy to have his favourite crêperie in Budapest) so I could do the normal Hernian tour of the city: second-hand cameras and LP stores, all the while collecting information for shows and other stuff to do at night. Budapest is renowned for its "kerst" (I think the spelling might be correct), which is a rogue bar built more or less illegally inside a building in various states of deterioration, resulting in quite nice and cozy places. Several of those have become quite institutional as these things tend to when caught up by tourists in search of exoticism, relayed by a number of so-called "underground guides to the city", yes, Guide du Routard/Lonely Planet I am looking in your direction... Given that Seb indeed arrived pretty late we holed-up in one of the latter mentioned, just missing by a couple of hours a festival of British shorts. Shame though because I found myself in a very strange metal

club during my wait for him, where I could enter for free after some negotiation with the bouncer in broken English and my promising to drink an awful lot of beer. Which I did. But back to the fake-kerst, do not fear, we didn't get bored: a guy from Senegal treated us with his vision of geopolitics and of our beloved dwarf of a president. He was pretty drunk and we didn't manage to get an understanding of what the hell he was doing in Budapest ... Nonetheless, a charming encounter.

Next day started pretty good with a nice breakfast served by a nice lady in a nice old fashioned restaurant. It is still to be decided if we managed to find the one recommended by the hotel waitress, with still a great profuseness of smiles now that she saw the man: Seb. Not that he looks gay but, well ... just saying ... Anyhow we cruised around town in order to have a look at some old cameras I spotted the day before (missed a fantastic camera called Robot because it broke right when I was trying it out in the shop, which is both good and bad luck I guess, but bought a cool little Russian Leica copy for which the old lady specialist had to use at least 20something minutes to load. I guess I'm never going to use that thing again) and also to reach a place a bit further away from the centre where a bar named "Marxism" was to be found, promising good old "commies" fun. It was indeed a pretty fun place with lots of memorabilia from the communist era, but we preferred to have lunch elsewhere and only drank some espressos there. Lunch was very tasty, the waiter convincing me not to eat gnocchi with my fried camember but to accompany it with mashed potatoes instead. I think we shall remember his way of stating his position against the use of that side dish with that particular cheese for a long time. Not to mention the fact that beer was very good! The rest of the stroll in town was pretty uneventful, and we got back to the hotel to get our stored luggage (3 pieces for 5euros! The hotel waitress was finally accommodating, not only all smile) and took the metro to the bus to the airport to the car rental agency and, eventually, on the road.

The plan was to drive without any plan. That

is always a good plan because if you do not have a goal then you do not run the risk of missing it.

The first pit stop for food and sleep was in Eger. There is this big, or sort of big, castle on the heights of the city, and supposedly a nice bed and breakfast type of accommodation not far from it. It took some roaming about town to find it, but it was indeed a nice place with a friendly old landlady. It was pretty late, and we were a bit afraid not to be able to find good food, so we asked the lady, and she recommended, with photocopied ancient looking map and all, some restaurant. It is always kind of suspicious. One cannot help but think of these places where everyone is the cousin of everyone else and then, at the end, you are tricked into a smallish restaurant aka "delicious local food" place, which turns out to be the kind of food place where they kill foreigners to manufacture soy lent green in the basement or something. We nonetheless went to the recommended place which turned out to be run by an old moustachy guy (are they following me, the moustachy people?) who badly wanted to close down but wouldn't let us starve anyway. I don't remember what we ate that time, but it was probably based on venison of some sort, and we probably abused the local wine because we got lost on the way back in the town which was very small! There was about three main streets and after some sentiment of déjà-vu, we had to pull out the map from the old lady to find our way back to the little cottage in the garden of the big house which served as our night rest shelter.

Breakfast was quiet, even though it was taken amongst a profusion of cats and dogs. Right before going back to roadtripping again, I took pictures of some water lilies in the garden pond of the little pension ... I know I should be shot in the knee with a beretta for taking such



A mustachy waiter, classy...
(Olympus OM1, 50mm 1.4, hp5+)

pictures, but in the rhetoric of my defence, I was accompanied/licked by one of the small silly ugly dogs ruling the place while laying on my belly in awkward (and I hope far from erotic) poses, and that should count as good, shouldn't it?

The next stop was at the Bükk mountains national park. We were in search of a place where we could stroll a bit in nature. I would like to say that it was hiking, but it was definitely not, the park proved to be more of a hill than of a mountain, and the walking was quite lame, no particularly good landscape, trails or anything. Fortunately, for my photographic ambitions, we had parked the car pretty close to one of these tiny cabins where people can practise the lost art of crapping in the woods, and I could go on and complete my collection (collection started the previous year/roadtrip in Poland, disturbing isn't it?). So we were left craving for more walking and after some mulling over the road map, we decided to try another of these hills (no offence but they definitely are not mountains) and ended up at the end of one road, in Basko, home village of the killer grannies ...

There needs to be some explanation here. The grannies were not actually killers. Or they just did not kill us, this time. I don't know. Anyhow, we reached the end of the road, really not metaphorically, and had to turn around and



Seb's good friend and one supposed killer granny ...
(Olympus OM1, 50mm 1.4, hp5+)

then around again after learning from a grocer's where they did not sell any water (!?) that one could go walk towards the hills if one would go back from where we came (meaning, yes, the end of the road). So we went to park the car close to one of these devices that gives you water, a manual pump fountain of some sort, in prevision of the adventuring that would undoubtedly happen when we tried to go up there, in the forest. Close by said-pump was a nice display of old people on a stick, I mean, on a bench. Seb, armed with his legendary communication skills, tried to make sure we were indeed at the right spot to start a hike in the foresty hills and managed to get a conversation going

with one granny. The scary part was that each time he would point toward the hills, she would cross herself, in a very "Ah, these hills, nobody came back alive from there. At night we hear the banshees wail and can smell the rotten smell of the ghouls ..." fashion. I was busy immortalising the moment with my various photographic artefacts so I cannot really tell what was said. I take from Seb that the reason for the manic crossing behaviour was that, in between his finger and the hills, there was a small chapel.

The picture became famous on flickr as I, quite stupidly, titled it: granny lover. One cannot imagine the number of google-hits one gets "thanks" to a picture with such a title. I thereby suggested in the description of the picture to use keywords such as "mature porn" in hope that the poor bastards who get castaway on my photo stream in search of their libido would actually get some ...

This walk was nicer than the previous one, and the forest turned out to be indeed really creepy for some parts. I understand better now why some very good blackmetal bands come from Hungary (not to mention arguably one of the best blackmetal vocalist ever: the mighty Attila Csihar, of Mayhem and Sunn O))) fame, yes, fame) but for some reason I recall the conversation with Seb more in the league of that one heavymetal band where the guys are dressed as big bees on one poster seen in some men's toilets. The ways of my memory are impenetrable, at best. The ghastly atmosphere was topped by some rain and fog, to my delight and to the despair of the inside of the car because of mud we brought back. That was



The mythical Trabans' graveyard
(Hasselblad, 85mm 2.8, fuji colour slide)

a reconciliatory stroll between us and the Hungarian landscape though.

In deep need for food and drink, the next obvious stop was Tokaj! Tokaj is famous for its wine, once described as the nectar of gods or something of the like by no less than the king of France. Who are we to argue with the Sun King? Some wikipedia later, I found that Louis the XIVth actually said the following: "vin des rois, roi des vins". One has to admit he had a knack for advertising. I bet it did good to enhance the tourism of the province, if it didn't bring a war there ... But aside from the history lesson, the town is smallish and hosts a nice moody church and a river, and also probably a football field as we would soon learn. The plan here was to find a winemaker's house where we could rent a room for the night and, additionally, in order not to have to crawl too far away from where the heavy drinking, I mean "dégustation", of Tokaj famous sweet wines would occur. We were trying out some of the selection of our host when at some point an armada of not very phys-

ically fit looking men came in and they were soon busy cooking some weird stuff on a wood stove and Shakespearian cauldron type thing. After some more communication failures and successes, we learned that they were a team of football players (senior league undoubtedly) in a after-friendly-game party.

To cut a long story short we managed to get invited to eat some of the stuff ... The stuff was fish soup: fish from the river next door and paprika from Hungary, loads of it ... Some guy commented on the flickr digicrap which ensued: "The soup is called Halászlé and is among Hungarian traditional foods." Thanks mate for the info. We were sort of scared because the party was still going on strong when we went to

bed, with the usual terrible karaoke stereo blasting in the night but at midnight sharp all sound stopped and, we guess, everybody left. Maybe they were still partying like madmen but in an underground network of bunkers, smoking the rest of the fish soup and laughing their bottom off at the two foreigners who just made fools of themselves trying to utter a few acknowledgements for the culinary quality of the halászlé, in Magyar.

The next day we were all for a change of scenery and ready to cross the border to go exploring Slovakia. Crossing weird borders is a hobby of ours, and the smaller the road, the better the memories (and the pictures, the crawl in some no-mans-land between Poland and Ukraine the year before was fun). So, after a short stop to enjoy Sarospatak and its weird architecture (the architects in that town were seriously on drugs, and pretty strong stuff if you ask me) and to buy a jack-plug for our iPods in



Slovakian countryside
(Olympus OM1, 50mm 1.4, kodachrome)

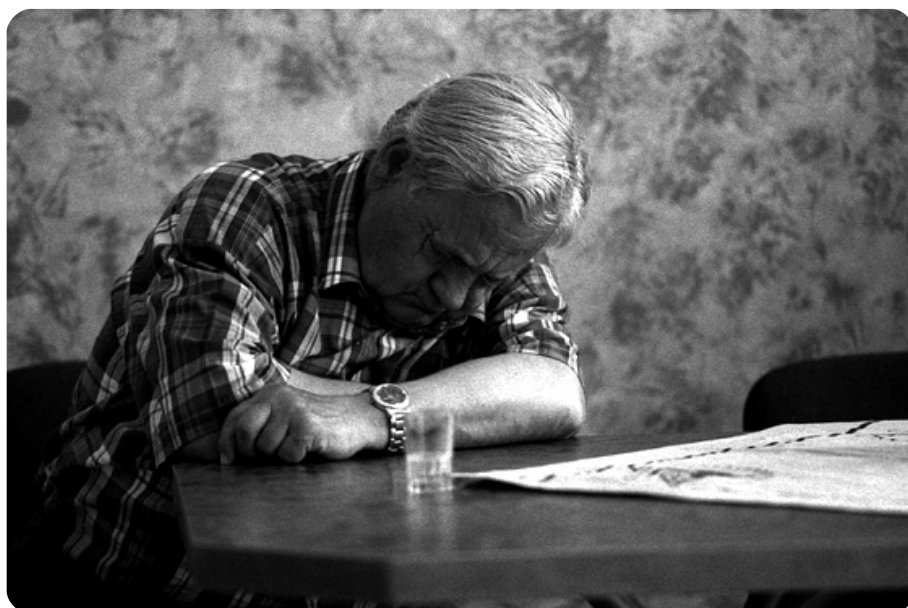
order to avoid suffering the local radio stations, we started the search for the small road, mainly used by bandits trying to smuggle Hungarian goods into Slovakia or the other way round. However, we could not really envision what could be smuggled, really, from one side or the other, but ancient times, eras or so, might have been more propitious for smuggling, what with communists, armies and such. Nevertheless, we found what we were looking for after my having to take a picture of an old man who threatened us with a big knife while we were shooting a car carcass junkyard apparently belonging to him ... It took some time to figure out he did not actu-

ally want to gut us but only to have his picture taken as well. Well, I can do that. We survived, but the border was somehow disappointing ... It consisted basically of a small bridge, quite picturesque but not at all amazing in any way. I sort of recall also seeing a totemic thing surrounded by flower pots.

On the other hand, the first (or second, but not far from the border) town we hit, in search of food as usual, can probably be best described as the place where Sergio Leone got all his

actors in his best spaghetti western movies. Honestly, it is a Darwinian mystery to me that any kind of reproduction is possible in this place! We had some food in a very weird building, a huge restaurant thing which is very likely to be used most of the times as a wedding party room (although the use of a plentiful of various green decorations and lightning could lead to the people looking quite pale, badly fed and maybe even zombie-like, on account of the colour temperature of said-light being toward the cold area). It was also the place where we found the cheapest beer ever, ever! 63 cents for half a litre! And not donkey piss; real good regular

beer. After the meal we tried to get a coffee at the neighbouring bar - little did we know that inside a full menagerie of taxidermied animals was awaiting us. I can deal with dead boar heads on the walls, even stuffed wildcats of sorts, small furry animals, whatever. But big ugly fish, birds, combinations of the aforementioned, you name it ... I sometimes still wake up at night, covered in cold sweat and goose bumps, because of the recollection of that one fox doing unspeakable things to



Hush...
(Olympus OM1, 135mm 3.5, hp5+)



Some pretty castle close by Banska Stiavnica.
(Olympus OM1, 50mm 1.4, kodachrome)

the usual good food and good beer (even good hard local liquor at the end, in a nice patio, with some group of elderly locals) and the night was short. Maybe the town is somehow attached to the other one with all the crazy looking dudes and they have a yearly party where they mate. I think I will be having more nightmares ...

Next day Seb had some trouble explaining that he, indeed, was in need of some milk with his cereals and that, no,

that poor pheasant. Not to forget the absent look on the face of the living creatures populating the bar. Invasion of the body snatchers?

Fortunately, the next town was probably where Slovakian people park their beautiful girls, girls who agree to whatever by saying "huhu" in strange quiet utters.

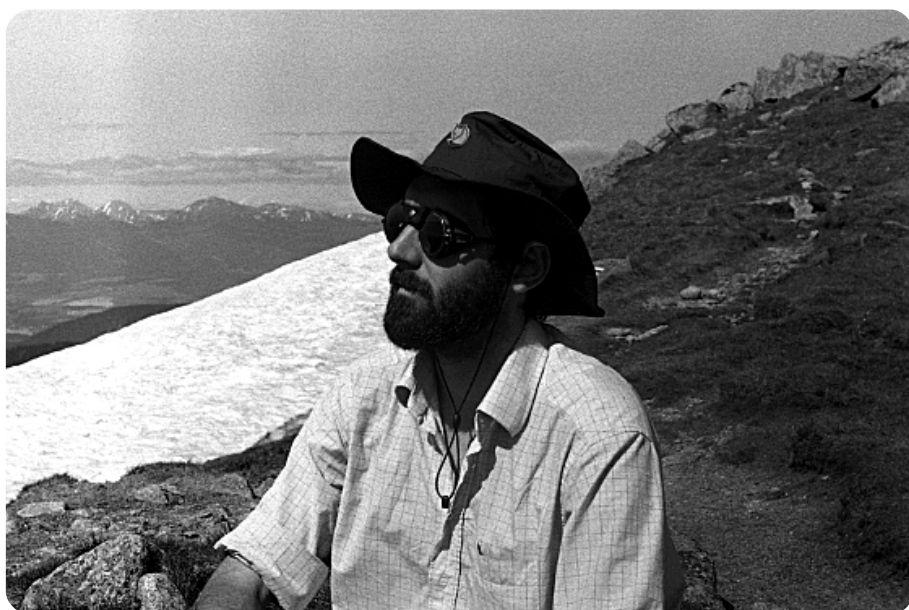
But let us not get ahead of ourselves, there are some other things I have to mention before: there were loads of road kills, I mean, road Christs ... Same thing really, the guy is dead, isn't he? Because, you see, they are big on Christs in Slovakia; they put them everywhere, in various materials and sizes. My favourite ones would be the flat ones in thin metal sheets, peeling out because rust ate the nails that, er, nail them to wooden constructions or stone statues. That could probably pass as a philosophical statement. One could really do a complete art coffee table book by driving around the country and taking pictures of these things. We managed to stop from time to time and fill some film with it, on the way to the next stop: Rožňava.

This town had a nice small hotel (the only real hotel we used, by the way) with beautiful even if quite incompetent waitresses. I swear they cannot smile - my guess is that it is in their genes. We tried hard to make jokes and all but remained unsuccessful. It cannot be that we lack charm or handsomeness, it cannot be. Anyways, the restaurant attached to the hotel delivered

warm milk would not do. He got plenty of huhus in return, but still warm milk. I had to wait for him to phone his family, girl friend, him being a man of the world fully equipped with all modern means of international communication. However, the wait was lightened by a gathering of people into old cars and motorcycles, probably *the* attraction of the year! They all had the look to go with their means of transportation and it was a gathering of moustaches and strange leather hats as well. That same day was also the real hiking day. At long last we managed to find a real mountain: not "cow mountain" (yes it is a Frenchism, and?), with ski resort, steep climb, snow and all. We managed a good 5 to 6 hours hike and almost made it to the top of the peak if it was not for the Slovenian trail makers who prefer to go around tops instead of going straight to them, for some reason. It has to be noted that at some point we encountered a peace monument which was made out of a machine gun, go figure ... The hiking was really nice, we really saw some snow and I had the pleasure to puzzle a bit some very well equipped mountaineers by wearing plain conference clothes, nice trousers, long sleeve shirt (no tie, as I don't even own a tie, ah yes, one but it is a present, one does not desecrate a present), etc. Not my fault, blame the weather! Once at the top of what we thought was the highest point (almost) of the country, we noticed in the back-

ground some mountains looking significantly higher. After checking, I have to admit I misread the map, and the mountains we saw were indeed a bit higher than ours, not much, but still higher. I tried to convince Seb that they were Polish mountains, but the man can read a map, and I had no brandy to make my argumentation fall to my side, or no naked ladies of any sort, always handy when trying to convince somebody with fallacious data.

Some stretching moves later, on the way to Banska Stiavnica, where we decided to sleep, we met some young people having a BBQ of sausages at the top of some hill accompanied by some remains of some castle (the hill, not the sausages) ... They spoke good English, like everywhere in there, very pleasant to be able to discuss with almost everybody at least a little bit (old grannies obviously excluded, shamefully). I also had to get out of the car at times because I was about to fall asleep. One of my famous "total fatigue" crises (something related to motion sickness, as I am sure Seb will not forget to mention, unfair mouth as he has.). But I used it as an excuse for some photography. The landscape was amazing in those parts: hills, forests, small villages, churches, and road Christs of course. The place where we slept in Banska Stiavnica was named "Maria" or "Antonia" or something like that, I cannot remember ... Actually it was the name of the little girl of the owners. They were a nice and friendly couple and I let Seb handle the communication as the landlady was definitely better in German than in English. I cannot speak German to save my life, even under torture or after drinking. The only thing I can say is "Ich been mit meinen learer" which means (and it is probably not spelled appropriately) "I am with my teacher", sentence I learned when skiing in



Our fearless heroes, on top of *that* peak ...
Hern42's portrait shot by Seb
(Zorky 1D, 40mm 3.5, delta100)

Austria as a late teen, to avoid paying for the ski lifts. But Seb seemed to have done a good job, except for the part where we had to drink some heavy weird home-made alcohol because the landlady wouldn't trust somebody who would not drink her stuff. One cannot blame her, and it might actually be a sign of success. She also gave us the now typical advice for a food place and Seb graciously offered me dinner on account of that day being his birthday. I am not one to refuse an invitation, and we had our bellies exploding in no time in a restaurant hidden behind a tree park of some sort.

There is not much to say for the drive back to Budapest airport, through Esztergon (and there crossing the Danube) to give back the car and board our respective planes. A lot of driving, some good food in Esztergon, avoiding the touristy attraction. It was not easy. The main attraction there is a basilica, and it is the biggest I've ever seen. It is huge, huge as a, errr, very big thing. Almost as big as these buildings in the 50s science-fiction movies where American directors tried to imagine what would the future be if run by communists. Scary stuff ...

Well, that is the end of the trip. We have to figure out what to do next year. That will take a year, at least. I must have forgotten some things, but in substance there it is, in all its stupidity and odd glory.



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Please go to the BOP website at <http://www.bop-photolab.org> and often rather than seldom!