



# MCG News

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# A visit to eastern Europe

By Tony and Denise Knibbs, Toulouse.

On 27 July 2002 we left all our territorial worldly goods in the safe hands of John, Barbara, Keith and Trish and headed for the A 61 motorway from Toulouse to Narbonne thence, taking the A9 eastwards along the Mediterranean seaboard, reached the A 50 beyond Marseille en route for la Seyne sur Mer near Toulon. This first overnight stop with family friends allowed a coastal walk and a dip in the sea before driving on into Italy next day.

The day started hot and sunny but finished grey and wet. At Genoa we changed motorways from A8/10 to A7 north towards Milan which we bypassed eastwards via Cremona and Brescia. The A4 now led via Verona and Vicenza then passed north of Venice. The sun was setting and the clouds gathering as we turned north on the A23 towards Udine and a hotel for the night. By morning the rain had eased and the scenery going into Austria could be enjoyed. Time to get my German out of mothballs! First language failure was not to correctly translate the meaning of VERKAUFEN on a sign showing a “motorway” logo. It was trying to tell us to buy a motorway wind-screen sticker which was a once-only toll payment in Austria. But nobody troubled us as we rolled on northwards, skirting Vienna (and crossing the Danube twice!) before reaching Bratislava. The frontier post looked like a lorry park and our euros were duly changed for Slovakian Crowns before heading northeast up the A65 motorway towards Trenčín and Zilina. The map showed the Carpathian mountains out to the left of us but the sky had sprung a permanent leak and visibility was down to single-figure kilometres. Since our next stop was to be a forest campsite we ignored sight-seeing and pushed on through Ruzomberok, passed Martin and soon found ourselves driving alongside the lake of Liptovský Mar.

This sits in a wide valley which divides the Low Tatras to the south from the high Tatras to the north. Liptovský Mikuláš town was the first local marker where a signpost pointing to the right (south) directed us into the Demänová Valley. The ATC Bystrina campsite was soon found and in a few minutes we were drinking pivo (Pils beer) with Shepton members, young and old. With a thunderstorm building we put up the tent then wandered down to the reception buildings to check out the facilities and eat at what was to become a very popular campsite restaurant where English was spoken.

The 2200km journey had been tiring so the first few days were spent getting our bearings and gathering local information. Dynamic Shepton “sheep” made brave efforts to get a handle on local caving; they left camp early and came back late saturated but still grimly determined. The only caving readily available was the Demänová show caves. That suited us fine. The Demänová system is some 12km long and has several entrances on the right-hand side of the wooded valley.

The Demänová Valley runs south into the Low Tatras and terminates at the popular ski-resort village of Jasná with a nearby year-round lift up to Chopok (2024m). Frequent thunderstorms persuaded us to keep off exposed heights. Unfortunately no English-speaking local cavers were ever met. There was a caving museum in Liptovský but all the annotations were in Slovak. I got the opinion that caving in Slovakia is a state-controlled pursuit which is difficult to participate in without a mentor.



Demänovská Jaskyne Slobody

Demänovská Jaskyne Slobody (Liberty Cave) is the most popular show cave, and, because visitor numbers are limited, it is a place to arrive at early (about 9h00). The Slovak commentary was hard to follow but the profusely decorated caved needed little description. The most common colouring was from ochreous yellow into orange

Lower down the valley Demänovska l'Adora Jaskyne is entered at 840m and its lowest parts contain ice formations. Less spectacular than Slobody.

The cave of Bystrianska Jaskyna lies to the west of the village of Bystra on the southern slopes of the Low Tatras. It is 2km long and entered at 565m altitude. Unusually it offered a through-trip from the New Cave to the Old Cave. Its chief claim to fame seems to be that it once housed a speleotherapy unit with beds.

Also on the southern slopes of the Low Tatras is Harmanecka Jaskyna, northwest of the town of Banska Bystrica (off the E77). One of the best show caves in the area, it is the only one requiring any effort to reach the entrance up a couple of kilometres of steep, zigzag path. It also boasted the crudest toilet (not WC) that I have ever seen: a plank with a hole in a shed over a 20m ravine. Nine species of bat are said to inhabit the cave; *myotis myotis* being the most common with an estimated population of 1,000. Much of the cave decoration is a solidified variety of moonmilk.

Because time in Slovakia was running out, a joint Knibbs/Mills visit to a salt mine in Poland was carried out. The frontier, again, resembled a great lorry park and the usual money-changing stop was made. Cracow was reached without problem and the Wieliczka Royal Salt Mine duly found – they even had an English language tour. Salt was at the heart of the wealth of Celtic peoples and the importance of a salt mine is obvious. The deepest working is at –327m in nine levels and the total length is nearly 250km. The main interest is in the amazing sculptures created by the miners down the centuries; mainly religious in context, including many chapels – St Kinga's Chapel is immense and has chandeliers of rock salt. The quantity of timber used in certain constructions is amazing. The return drive took in a powerful storm but Kirsty coped.

To take advantage of a slight improvement in the weather we did a walk along the Suchá Belá gorge in the Narodny Park Slovak Raj (Slovak Paradise National Park) to the south of Poprad in East Slovakia. Walking is obviously a popular pursuit hereabouts (Podlesok) and the artificial aids in the gorge (ladders, traverse wires/chains and catwalks) rapidly caused queues to form. The going was easy and a stop for lunch was made at a park lodge before walking down to Hornad to complete a circuit. Adjacent to the car parking area was a pivo hut where thirsts were slaked. Prominent among the customers were numerous armed (knives and machetes) youths dressed in camouflage clothing and large boots, slightly reminiscent of the ethnic-cleansing episode in Kosovo. Wolf, lynx and bear roam in the vicinity but we saw no trace of them.



Wieliczka salt water duct

Leaving the Bystrina campsite was fairly dramatic. Incessant rain was causing rivulets to form around and through the tents and had turned the nearby grass slope up to the cars into a muddy slide. As anticipated, immediately I moved the heavily laden Omega it slid sideways and required a push to get it back on the track. Hero of the day was Butch who pushed at a rear corner and was rewarded by a copious spattering of mud for his efforts.

A planned move to Hungary caused us to again pass via Poprad, then head south through Roznava and pass the

well-known Dobsinska Ice Cave en route for Plesivec near the Hungarian Border. The cave car park was full, so a visit was ruled out. However, another cave visit was possible a couple of kilometres before the border. Domica Cave is formed in the Middle Triassic Wetterstein limestone of the Slovak Karst. It is 5km long and forms part of the Baradla System which runs beneath the frontier and is 25km long. The car park was half empty and the modern entrance buildings and museum were uncrowded – a passing cloudburst might have had something to do with this.

The cave had a “different” feel to it, no less richly decorated than previous Slovakian caves but the ochre/ red colouring was less pronounced. Remains of human occupation – Palaeolithic and Neolithic – have been found in the cave. Surprisingly no guide book was available.

The frontier post was deserted as we crossed into Hungary at late afternoon in heavy rain. Our destination was Aggtelek National Park campsite where several people wisely decided to rent dacha-style wooden huts as an alternative to pitching tents in the rain. Again, the site had a restaurant which served varied meals including “two-way” fish soup. I thought it tasted a bit “off”.

The reason for staying at Aggtelek World Heritage site was to do the “long” trip (pre-booking required) in Baradla Cave which has an entrance in the park, at the base of a prominent 50m high triangular cliff face. The trip was rather like a caving safari lead by two “professional” guides of which the young girl spoke English. Those who so required were issued with handlamps (two tourists joined the group). After a few minutes we entered a large chamber, the Concert Hall (equipped with a sound system and rows of seats). Here we were treated to a “musical experience” – an unidentified piece of music played through their sound system. Poor system; good acoustics. Despite copious rainfall the main underground river was very low (the stream was confined to a lower streamway) and we were able to stroll along the riverbed without getting our feet wet. Progress was easy walking in passages 20+m high and up to 15m wide. A couple of hours brought us to the turn-off to the right into the Radish Branch side passage. This was well decorated as you might expect, the radishes being botryoidal stal on walls and roof. After 1250m the passage terminated at a climb up into dry, muddy chambers. Observing our general ability to move easily in the cave, our guides asked if we were professional cavers. Having sat on a low ledge to watch us climb and return from the chambers, the girl stood up under a roof which was lower than she was and the result of not wearing a helmet was painfully demonstrated. Eventually, some eight kilometres from our starting point we entered the Josvafő show cave (impressive in its own right) where our guides indicated a flight of steps leading up to the Observatory, a gigantic stalagmite 17m high and embellished with secondary calcite deposits. We exited at the busy reception area and headed for the café before being driven back to the campsite. Because the through-trip had taken in almost 10km of cave passage the formations had seemed less concentrated and therefore less impressive than in smaller caves. Nevertheless many of the individual formations were quite spectacular.



Domica Cave



Rakocki iron mine

It should be said that the Aggtelek park contains many other caves (not all open for exploration) and a wide selection of nature and mountain-biking trails and features of interest. It would itself have made a good venue for a holiday.

The following day a park guide took us to the nearby Rakocki iron mine, close to the Slovakian border, which had broken into natural cave. The mine had been worked out and its buildings vandalised. Fixed ladders were in place to enable us to visit the natural section down to water level. Out in daylight again we walked up the hill above the mine to see an abandoned open-cast working and were surprised

to learn that a 300m shaft had been dug into the horizontal mine underneath so that ore could be dropped down for recovery by tubs below. Ferreting around in a vandalised office building, hoping to find some mining documents, I discovered a "Home Guard" manual in which at least the illustrations were understandable.

In order to obtain some Hungarian currency a visit to the nearest large town of Miskolc was necessary. On the way there the heavens opened to transform a couple of kilometres of road into a long, axle-deep lake (just in front of a Tesco supermarket). Miskolc had little to recommend it; one of the two main banks was unable or unwilling to cash travellers cheques. Mind you it was a wet, miserable day!

However another show cave was spotted on the map, Szent Istvan Barlang at Lillafured, just a few kilometres west of Miskolc; in the Bükk Nemzeti (national) Park. A half-hour drive in the continuous downpour brought us to the reception building where it was possible to await the next trip in the dry. A man-made tunnel led into a modest chamber from which steps were followed up a dripping rift, reminiscent of the outside world, soon to reach a terminal chamber. I think we only did this cave "because it was there".

Time was now running out for our East European jaunt and European weather reports were indicating widespread flooding. We decided to return via Budapest where we rejoined Martin and Kirsty Mills for a weekend in the city. It was a wet drive down the M3 (having bought the required windscreen sticker permit) from beyond Miskolc. The rendezvous was a bit hazy; a campsite at Szentendre 40km north of Budapest and on the right bank of the Danube. In view of the now-atrocious weather it was thought wise to have the option of renting a bungalow.

Budapest was easy to find – Szentendre less so. To our surprise we arrived first. Since it was still raining we decided to check out the hotels, finding one that offered secure underground parking in a wall-to-wall pond several centimetres deep. Martin and Kirsty soon hove into sight and we had the pleasure of sipping Budweiser in the bar whilst watching an incredible cloudburst outside. Next morning we took the local train into the city and traipsed around the historic sights in the pouring rain, ending up at a philatelist shop where Martin found and bought some Hungarian stamps featuring cave illustrations. The river Danube was in full flood but carried its charge of huge trees and other debris still within its banks. Szentendre was a happy choice of stopover: interesting in itself and within easy reach of the city. In better weather we would have even taken a cruise on the river!

Martin and Kirsty went northeast into Czechoslovakia – we went southwest into Austria where the rain finally ceased. Our return route was planned to take in the world's largest ice-cave; Eisriesenwelt (Cave of the Ice Giants) at Werfen. The local tourist office put us onto a picturesque hotel from which we set off early next morning to catch the minibus up to the cablecar and the cave. Worldwide popularity results in crowds visiting the cave, so early arrivals are sensible. Setting foot on the mountainside approach path high above the clouds was a quite spectacular start to the visit. Inside the vast entrance portal (alt. 1664m) the guide handed out carbide handlamps and a single sheet of descriptive text in English (quote:"don't worry if your lamps are blown off – I'll light them again in the cave") and we set off up the 700 wooden stairs long-since frozen into the ice floor. Among the points of interest was Hymirburg (Castle of Hymir the Ice Giant) with spectacular ice stalagmites. The visit culminates 134m above the entrance at the great Mörk Chamber, the early explorer Alexander von Mörk was killed in the First World War and his ashes repose in an urn high up in the wall of the chamber. From here we descended the steps back to the entrance where the sun was now shining.

Next day, 16 August we drove around Salzburg thence into Bavaria and via Munich and Freiburg back into France near Besançon. Back home on 17 August we found Anne and Bryan in control of the house and cats.

**Postscript** Visiting Eastern Europe takes one to places where almost every aspect of life is different compared to elsewhere on the Continent. The language barrier is important and the way of life is very different. We really felt we were in foreign countries. The need to spend/waste time finding the way around on arrival is notable; obtaining information in advance of the visit is not easy; communicating in English is rarely successful. Communism probably made everybody suspicious of everybody else, so there is a lack of spontaneous warmth. Caving appears to be very regionalised with limits set as to the autonomy of the caver. We suspect that cavers are "professional" in the sense of being state-controlled and giving information to foreigners is probably frowned on.

Accession to the EU will doubtless bring changes – in both directions. Slovakia appeared to be rather mediaeval in many ways; Poland overtly catholic; Hungary more attuned to "Western values". On any future visit we would consider staying at hotels; they are only slightly more expensive than camping. In good weather there is much to do: Slovakia is a walkers paradise but not in pouring rain!

We should record our thanks to SMCC and, in particular, to Mark Faulkner for organising the visit.

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