

CROATIA 1966

By Julian Walton

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Prologue

“Let’s go to Yugoslavia for our holiday this year,” I said to Anne. And we went.

I was then aged twenty-five and teaching a variety of subjects (French, German, English, Religion ...) at the Salesian College in Cowley, Oxford. I lived in digs and spent my spare time playing in the Oxford and District Caledonian Pipe Band and singing Irish songs in the local pubs (the folk revival was then in full swing).

Anne was seven years older than me, a proud native of Northumberland, and a gifted artist and art teacher. We had met at Oxford, become close friends, and shared an absorbing interest in ancient buildings, medieval paintings and traditional music (she played the guitar and sang in a soft, melodious voice).



At this time she was teaching the children of British soldiers at the BAOR headquarters in Rheindahlen. This gave her officer status, one of the main privileges of which was that as long as she remained in the Federal Republic of West Germany she could avail of coupons allowing her to buy petrol very cheaply. I had visited her several times and we had taken full advantage of this perk by going on camping holidays around Germany. We were young, had no money, and hotels were expensive, so we always camped and cooked our own meals.

I should stress that our relationship was that of friendship and that neither of us had any emotional attachments at the time, and we slept in separate tents. The chores were divided between us as follows: Anne was responsible for driving and cooking (she was not only a superb driver but had a good grasp of motor mechanics, and was a pretty good cook too; I could drive but had no car of my own); I was responsible for navigating, packing the car, and putting up and taking down the tents.

Preparations

There were several reasons for our choice of Yugoslavia in 1966. Tito was strongly plugging tourism and we knew of several people who had visited the country. The chance of seeing Split, Dubrovnik and other ancient cities of the Dalmatian coast was appealing. And I had just read *Eastern Approaches* by Fitzroy Maclean and had romantic notions of mountains and forests swarming with partisans.

Preparations proved more difficult than we had anticipated. Yugoslavia being a communist country, and Anne being in theory an army officer, she had to get clearance from her military superiors. This was granted with some reluctance, and with certain stringent conditions: we could only camp in officially registered campsites, and we must keep to the main roads. As the only main roads were the one going down the Dalmatian coast, the Autoput going down the centre of the country, and a few roads connecting to Belgrade, this was obviously going to cramp our style: there would be no escapades to mountain villages after all.

We had no trouble buying an AA road map of the country, but guidebooks seemed to be non-existent, nor were there any English-Serbo/Croat phrase-books. As we expected (correctly, as it turned out) that we would meet no natives that spoke English, our *lingua franca* would have to be German, and as Anne was a non-linguist that meant I would have to interpret everything. (I should, however, say that Anne was almost the only teacher I met in Rheindahlen who had any interest in Germany at all; BAOR seemed to consist merely of a series of British islands.) I just hoped that I would not get a knife in the back from some disgruntled native with unpleasant memories of the war.

Anne did, however, produce one book on Yugoslavia which she found in the library of the officers' mess. It was a substantial volume, part of a series written in the 1930s for the benefit of War Office officials who might find themselves having to organise the invasion of various countries. It was of no practical use whatever, but it did give me the historical background that I needed if we were to make sense of our surroundings. Not all the information was reassuring. Montenegro, we were informed, was so barren that when the writer asked a native why it had never been conquered by the Turks he received the answer: "Is quite simple. Turks send small army – we kill them! Turks send large army – they starve!"

Monetary arrangements in those far-off days were a complicated business. Well in advance of your departure date, you reported to your bank and negotiated for the appropriate foreign currency and a little wallet of travellers' cheques. This excellent invention of Thomas Cook was designed to avoid the need to carry round huge amounts of cash. When you felt yourself running short in foreign climes, you went to the nearest bank, handed over a cheque, and received the equivalent in local currency (in our case, *dinar*). In practice, as we soon discovered, the process involved locating a bank, discovering its opening hours, joining a long queue, then finding it was the wrong queue, then being confronted by a haughty official whose function seemed to be to devise as many obstacles as he could think of to actually parting with cash - scrutinising both you and your passport with grave suspicion, maintaining that you had signed the cheque in the wrong place, demanding to know the full names of all

your grandparents... Eventually, you staggered out of the bank clutching your *dinar*, sweating and cursing, and dreading the day when you would have to repeat the ordeal.

At last, however, all was ready: documents and money were in order; the tents were secured to the roof-rack and covered with a tarpaulin; coupons had exchanged hands and the tank was full of petrol; the NAAFI had supplied us with enough food to last for the first few days; two small gas cookers and a few small cylinders of gas were on board; spare clothes, toiletries, and the precious instructions for organising an invasion were carefully packed away. And off we went.

Progress

My only recollection of the journey to Yugoslavia is that our last night on German soil coincided with the final of the World Cup between West Germany and England (30 July 1966). Inebriate Teutons blundered through the camp making a great deal of noise, and one veteran tripped over our ropes while giving us a drunken rendering of:

Die Deu - tschen wer - den Welt - mei - ster

Welt - mei - ster, Welt - mei - ster

Die Deu - tschen wer - den Welt - mei - ster

Welt - mei - ster!

Die Russ - en wer - den ge - schla - gen

Ge - schla - gen, ge - schla - gen

Die Russ - en wer - den ge - schla - gen

Ge - schla - gen!

Neither of which assertions was true.

We drove through Austria, then into Italy, crossed into Yugoslavia east of Trieste, thence to Rijeka, and began the long drive down the Dalmatian coast.



It was not at all as we had expected. The road wiggled round an apparently unending series of tortuous bends; there was nowhere to pull in and admire the view; traffic was constant, and we soon became reconciled to crawling bumper to bumper for mile after mile. There were cars from all over eastern Europe, including communist countries, and we soon got to know the driving styles of the different nationalities: the Italians drove very fast in the middle of the road and hooted furiously when thwarted; the French drove very fast on the wrong side of the road and hooted furiously when thwarted; the Hungarians drove slowly and were always getting in the way; the Czechs drove extremely slowly, generally in the middle of the road; the British drove carefully and correctly and seemed to be in a state of perpetual terror.

Progress was slow and frustrating, and we were quite glad when we eventually reached a campsite. It was vast. We drove round and round until we eventually found a place for our tents. Our next task was to locate the site office and surrender our passports. Shops and washing facilities were located as far as possible from our tents – woe betide anyone who got taken short while trying to locate the lavatories.

Next morning there was a long queue to retrieve our passports. At last there was only one bewildered Englishman between me and the frustrated official, who was getting angrier and angrier while searching the various pigeon-holes and refused to believe the Englishman ever had a passport. Eventually he snapped: “Britain is part of France, isn’t it?” On being assured it was not, he did eventually find the missing passport, and mine was successfully discovered in the pigeon-hole labelled “Iceland”. Then we were on our way.

Progress was so slow that we began to run out of camping-gas, so at our third site I asked for some more at the shop. “Camping-gas?” was the response. “Sure we wouldn’t have the like of that here! The only place you’ll get camping-gas is in Split.” Split, incidentally, was several hundred miles further south.

Shops in the towns we passed through were not much help either. Yes, there were shiny new supermarkets – but the shelves were almost empty. To buy any food we might possibly be able to eat, we would have had to be there in a queue by six in the morning. One thing that they did have in plenty, however, was a generous supply of large bottles ominously labelled **SIROP** and which we found to contain concentrated fruit juice, rather like lemon squash. A small dollop of *Sirop* in a tumbler of water was not only refreshing but kept us from collapsing from dehydration in the intense heat. Indeed, but for copious supplies of this wonderful elixir we might not have survived the holiday at all.

Novalja

The perpetual traffic and the absence of any sign of peace brought us to the point of despair. However, a nice German couple with whom I was unveiling my woes told me that they had just spent several days at a place they thought would suit us fine. It was a little town called Novalja, on an island called Pag, reached by a ferry. There were very few tourists, they assured us, the campsite was right beside the beach, and moreover on the other side of the island was another, deserted, beautiful, sandy beach where they had bathed every day. It seemed to be too good to be true.

And so, a day or two later, we illegally broke away from the main road and eventually embarked on the car ferry heading for Pag. To celebrate the occasion I produced my bagpipes and serenaded the company from the stern of the boat. Unfortunately, the combination of heat, physical effort, and a glass or two of *prošek* caused my head to whirl and I nearly fell overboard. Luckily I was not the driver, only the navigator.

The road across Pag was indeed empty of traffic, which was just as well as it had the quality of a somewhat neglected Irish *bóithrín*.



At last we reached Novalja, and it did indeed look enchanting. There was the beach, there at one end was the little town, and there at the other end was a tiny shop and a sign indicating a campsite. It pointed us to the sand-dunes, and there, right enough, was a small space in which were two tents at one end, two more in the middle, and one at the other end with just enough space for ours beside it. We settled in.

Once the tents were up I went to introduce myself to our new neighbours. The tents at the far end were occupied by two Dutch families. I approached the man at the entrance to the first and had barely begun to speak when he snarled at me in English: "Why do you speak to me in that horrible language? We can speak English, you know. We had enough of German in the war. I never want to hear that horrible language again." And he turned his back and disappeared into his tent.

The Dutchman in the other tent, who had heard the conversation, came out of his tent and said soothingly to me (in German): "Arrah, don't mind that fella at all. Sure he's not right in the head. Speak to us in German if you like." Then he too returned to his tent. That was the end of my conversations with the Dutch families.

The tents in the middle were occupied by two young Swiss-German couples with small children. They conversed with each other loudly and incomprehensibly, barked at the children, and ignored everyone else.

The tent beside our own was occupied by a man with goggly eyes, a plump woman, and a pale and unhealthy-looking small boy. The man and the child disappeared into the tent whenever we approached, but the woman was both chatty and helpful – indeed, I don't know how we would have survived without her. She explained that her husband was Polish and had been so badly traumatised during the war that he was unable to communicate with any strangers. She herself was from Silesia and therefore bilingual. Over the next few days we had long conversations on many topics.

But where in the campsite were the facilities? There weren't any, our new neighbour informed us. For washing and WC, one went to the shop on the beach, which also offered coca-cola, sweets and crisps. For real food one walked to the town, but she warned us that there was not much on offer and by six in the morning any bread would be gone. At least we would be able to preserve any food we had brought with us, for the woman in charge of the shop would be willing to keep our ice-packs in her fridge overnight to refreeze. This was just as well because the few trees on the campsite had already been monopolised by the Dutch and Swiss, so there was no protection from the daytime sun.

Novalja did indeed give us the peace that our German friends had promised, and on the other side of the island we did find the promised sandy beach. Here we bathed. Unfortunately, we both got sunburnt, and in addition I trod on a sea-urchin and found to my horror that my left foot was covered in venomous prickles.

This proved a turning-point in our love affair with Novalja. We had now run out of camping gas, were dangerously low on the essential *Sirov*, and had eaten all the food we had that didn't need cooking. We decided to cut our losses, return to the mainland, and make a dash for Split, supermarkets, and the promised camping gas.

Gas at last!

It was late morning when we reached the vast campsite outside Split. We duly located a vacant spot, pitched the tents, surrendered our passports, and burst into a shop enthusiastically requesting camping gas.

"Camping-gas?" was the response. "Sure we wouldn't have the like of that here. The only place you'll get camping-gas is in the factory."

"What? Where's the factory?"

"Back there – don't you see the factory?"

Sure enough, miles back and off the road on which we had just come, we had already spotted with some disgust a factory with a tall chimney that belched black smoke.

There was nothing for it. We got back into the car and struggled through the traffic back to the turn-off to the factory. Here we found no sign of a shop selling anything, so I tackled a busy-looking workman.

"Camping gas?" he replied. "Sure, just give me your empty cans."

Somehow, by the grace of God, we had kept two empty cans. He seemed surprised that we didn't have more, but he brought us to a vast tank, where he filled our cans with what we hoped was gas and sealed them as one would mend a bicycle puncture. I must say he was very helpful and I don't think he even charged us.

Split and Dubrovnik

And what, I hear you cry, did you actually SEE during your time in Yugoslavia? Well, in Split we wanted to see Diocletian's villa. I had read all about it. Diocletian, local boy made good, rose to the rank of emperor, decided the empire had grown too big for one man to run, split it into two, appointed joint emperors and joint caesars to run it, and then withdrew to the retirement home he had built here just for himself and his family and two thousand slaves. When his successors began to make a bags of things, a deputation of senators was sent to implore him to come back – to which he replied: "Listen, if you could see the size of the cabbages I am growing, you'd never want me to leave this wonderful spot."

But where was his villa? Apparently we were in it! Seventeen centuries later, it was not only still inhabited but was home to some forty thousand people! And everywhere we went through the narrow streets, there they were.



After Split, we made a determined dash to reach Dubrovnik, which was the southern limit of our tour. And here we encountered the main problem about our mode of travel. It took so long to get out of our campsite in the morning, traffic on the one and only road was so heavy, and the process of settling into the next campsite so cumbersome, that by the time we were ready for sightseeing everything had closed for the afternoon – if not for the day! In Dubrovnik we could walk the walls in solitude, but churches, museums (if there were any), cafés, shops were all closed.



We break our parole!

Somewhat despondently, we began to head back north. And here, mutiny set in! Not far from the main road to which we were legally obliged to stick on pain of court martial (or something) we sighted enticing small places that with any luck would be relatively tourist-free. We took a chance, and were rewarded. We especially liked the little town of Zadar.



And having heard of an interesting monastery at a place called Nin, we drove there and chatted up an ancient man reeking of garlic who produced keys and let us in.



Our wickedest deviation was to strike out east and visit the city of Mostar, with its spectacular bridge and ancient mosques. This was my first encounter with real live Muslims.)

But apart from that, it was time to head drearily north again, winding along the Dalmatian coast with little opportunity to stop or even admire the views as we drove warily between the motors of many nations.

Slovenia

We had decided to head for Germany by a different route that would take us through Slovenia, a region of which I knew nothing. And here at last we found ourselves driving through spectacular mountains and forests along roads not too heavily populated by tourist cars. But something was missing. It was hard to define, but I could only say that Slovenia was like Austria with all the personality sucked out of it by the impersonal communist régime. There was a lack of spontaneity, of friendliness even. And of course we eventually found ourselves in the inevitable huge campsite. At least, we thought, we will be over the border tomorrow.

The campsite was on the side of a hill. The ground was like iron. In vain I struggled to erect our tents, the metal pegs simply bending against the hard earth. Eventually, a kind German who had observed my plight lent me a bigger mallet and some stronger pegs, and at last my task was done. It had taken me an hour and a half to erect two small tents.

That night it rained stair-rods. The earth turned to mud, the pegs popped out, our tents collapsed, and by morning we were soaked.

Next day, Anne was afflicted with a stomach virus. There was nothing for it but to stop there for the day, while Anne dosed herself with the medicaments one always carried in those days for such occasions, and dragged herself to the lavatories every few minutes.

The campsite emptied of inhabitants except for ourselves – and a French family consisting of a mother, a father, and a small boy called Philippe who was always getting lost. At least once every hour the father would prowl the campsite bellowing: “Philippe! Où es-tu? PHILIPPE!” How I hated them both! If Philippe had come near me I’d have sorted the matter by strangling him.

At last Anne was fit to travel, and we resumed our route through Slovenia, over the border into Austria, and settled down in a campsite near the lovely medieval town of Lienz. The campsite was small, devoid of bureaucracy, picturesquely sited on a mountainside, and possessed of a shop that actually sold things we could eat. It was run with military precision by a heavily-built man who must surely have been a *Feldwebel* in earlier life. At ten o’clock precisely he stomped around the camp bellowing: “RUHE! RUHE!” and everyone settled down for the night.

And at sunrise next morning he was there again, roaring: “BRÖTCHEN! FRISCHE BRÖTCHEN!” There was a stampede for the shop, myself foremost among the stampers, lured by the intoxicating smell of fresh rolls.

It was good to be home!

Epilogue

Today you can fly to Dubrovnik with Travel Department, and they will also take you to Split and elsewhere. Your luxury hotel is included in the overall price and will also provide you with a substantial breakfast and dinner. Away with the travellers’ cheques – the ubiquitous cash machines will change your euro into *Kuna* at the press of a few keys. Staff are trained to actually be nice to tourists – the Croatian economy depends on them.

And Novalja? It is now a top tourist destination, throbbing with night-clubs. The beach is (I quote) a “summer destination for partygoers, with several all-hours discotheques and beach bars operating during summer months. ...Activities include bungee jumping, jet-ski, party boats and inflatable catapults.”

That’s one place I shall not be going back to. I prefer my memories of fifty-three years ago, starvation, sunburn, sea-urchin and all!

