

Third of September

After a truly English minibus ride with all the trimmings from Dorset to London, we arrive at the London hostel, heavily laden and hungry. We sit down with our new friends whom we will spend the next eighteen days living and working aside and eat dinner. I was pleased to see a good mix of ages, gender and backgrounds of the group and the enthusiasm of some was infectious.

No actual sleep was achieved at the Rotherhithe youth hostel, due to narrow lodgings, general excitement, alarming banging doors and paranoia of alarm clock malfunction (if this were an accommodation review I would give it a one star rating). Out in the street in the morning we watched the Waterloo Station bus drive past, during a lengthy discussion about whether we were on the correct side of the road.

Conservationists seem oddly lost in the concrete jungle. My backpack proves to be unmanageable beyond ten minutes or the equivalent step allowance. Maybe too many pairs of pants?

Nigel's gun shaped tripod bag causes a ruckus at the Eurostar terminal but we escape with only a repacking sentence. As ever the quest for a perfect train seat was forefront of my mind. An empty Eurostar train with practicable head rest wings for the snoozy traveller, made a good start to a long but exciting journey. We flew across Kent, under the sea – sadly no octopi were spotted, and along the top of Europe to Brussels.

We had high hopes, having nearly four hours to gorge ourselves on waffles, pate and chocolates and more importantly a stroll in the city. I, unusually, allowed myself to be led around the city by a competent Mel, a man on a mission and one with whom I would grow very fond. The train journey had been so quick and easy that it took a great deal of time to understand I was no longer in England, and was consistently almost run down in the reverse flow of traffic, as I was distracted by the new architecture.

The group parted at The Grand Place and James and I acquisitioned the aforementioned chocolate waffle, for him to eat, and me to begrudgingly admire through wheat intolerant eyes. Walking around the streets surrounding the Grand Place we were blessed with a bronze statue of an oversize man with an impressive moustache. I felt it was only polite to sit on his knee and have my first tourist shot to christen the trip. Much cooing ensued from James, who had been growing and tending a moustache of his own, to him this was a splendid indication of the Eurohair to come. And again the appropriate photographs were taken. After walking as much as time allowed we headed back to the Gare du Midi, the place I deem lightest on toilet facilities in the whole world.

We boarded the train to Cologne and on arrival an elite team, that were not seduced by a sausage and beer restaurant, took flight out into the heart of Cologne. The amazing cathedral was right outside the station and fitted in nicely with our shorter stopover. An imposing gothic building with gargoyles and impressive stain glass windows, which had shops and restaurants built around it but that failed to detract from its grandeur.

On to the penultimate train of the day – the supersonic ICE train and after a bit of seat swapping, settled down to gazing out the window and dreaming of our forthcoming couchette, hopefully horizontally enjoyed.

Munich exploration was limited due to lethargy, rain and time, so we finally boarded the sleeper train that would magically transport us to our country of final destination – Hungary. Trying hard to not lose my temper in front of my new colleagues due to overtiredness, the challenging but eternally good storytelling of the couchette journey began. Having shared a couchette with 3 strange woman in Africa from Mombassa to Nairobi, who really seemed to have very different ideas about polite gaseous exchange, I felt, as a well-travelled (if now a little domesticated) person, that the concept of the couchette would not faze me even in my tired and decrepit state. On entering, the room was three bunks high both side and only room for one person to stand at a time, I immediately became claustrophobic and tried to reverse through the other five girls on their way in. After an altercation with the train guard on my commandeering of an empty room, I finally found a room along with my James and the three 'banished' self confessed or accused snorers, where I could calm down and eventually sleep. In their defence, very little snoring was heard and I appreciate them letting me gatecrash their comparatively spacious room.

Fourth of September

Arrived at Budapest Keleti Station after breakfast and a swapping of couchettes stories. We then had the pleasure to meet the much heard about Sandor Boldogh, our Aggtelek National Park host and trip organiser. Our group was joined by Patrycja and Marcin who were Polish volunteers and we were ready to begin. On our way North to Aggtelek we visited Heroes' Square, A majestic monument to the seven tribes of warriors that founded Hungary.

Enjoying the changing landscape from massive and beautiful city of Budapest to Miskolc with its out-of-town industrial wasteland, then thankfully to the Northern Uplands and finally the stunning Aggtelek hills. Arriving in Jászvásáros in time for dinner at the Tengercsém Restaurant, we finally had the chance to all sit together to meet each other and share our thoughts on the forthcoming weeks. Together. We were then taken to the Szalamandra Guest House in Szögliget, A spacious ex-border control house, and I was very happy to be there, and to get to my bed.

Fifth of September

Suitably refreshed, unpacked and donning wet weather gear, (due to the non-summer of 2007 following us all the way across Europe) we were given a talk by Sandor about ANP and went on a walk through the woods and up into the abandoned meadows where we would be working. Natural regeneration of the local Oak, Beech, Hornbeam and Blackthorn (soon to become our arch enemy) woodlands, had begun to seriously reduce the meadows, which in turn affects the diverse eco systems that rely upon it. That's where we would come in; with a mixture of hand and power tools we would clear the sites back to the proposed woodland edge.

In the afternoon we were taken to the Rakoczi cave in Esztramos Hill above the Bodva valley between Bodvarako and Tornaszentandras. We were on our own un-commercialised tour, and I liked it. It had been a real working mine and the amazing caverns had been found by accident by the miners, now it was left for us to explore.

Back at the hostel we had a group meeting and introduced ourselves more officially, made our intentions and hopes known for our time in Hungary. Horrible to do, but good to know more about the other volunteers. Then dinner - meal times were always interesting, we were lucky to have a local family cook for us, and they kept it real – real meaty, cheesy and always with a dash of paprika. After some initial misunderstandings, they patiently accommodated for my wheat intolerance and made every effort to speak English to me, as my Hungarian was shamefully weak.

I think by being contained in a group, it made me lazy about learning the language like I usually insist upon. Also it's incredibly difficult!

Later that the evening we drove up to the Slovakian border to listen for wolf ululation. We were plagued once again by rain, but found ourselves standing silently in the pitch black, half the group standing in Hungary and the other in Slovakia. A strange freedom to walk across a border and back without officials making you nervous. Anyway other than a red deer call, that turned out to be Imre the sneaky park ranger, we heard nothing, not that I blamed the wolves; it was a cruddy evening to be out. There had been talk of an amazing vehicle called a UAZ, a Russian four wheel drive. The stories of peril and danger drew me to making a deal to switch seats with some of the less enamoured passengers of the said UAZ.

It was everything they said and more, it looked like a beefed up VW camper with massive wheels and a mean look. Once inside, the plywood seats around the perimeter barely accommodated the average bottom, and the fumes made the journey interesting. One of the main benefits of this vehicle was that you could shovel over ten people inside, slam the door and drive on any surface known to man. In short - I want one!

Sixth of September

Due to the persisting downpours we were not able to work again. So after breakfast some of us took a walk along the track towards the lake near the hostel looking at the wildlife and getting a feel for where we were in the park. I saw my first praying mantis, more alien than I imagined and he was happy to pose for some photos.

Bundling into minibuses we travelled to Rudabanya to visit the mining and mineral museums, we seemed to have been the only tourists for years. A quick trip into the town and we followed our noses to a cake shop of epic portions. After lunch we got to do some work. The site was a little walk away up into the hills, still raining we did our best with a couple of tools we carried up until the tools were bought up by vehicle. A short day but it was good to get started, and the rain started to move away to ruin someone else's day. Our itinerary was completely filled with activities, day and night, but sometimes made no time for showering or resting, so when we sat down after dinner to our evenings lecture, I fear, as an audience we were not as sprightly as we could have been for Dr Peter Gyulai and his wife talking about the butterflies and grasshoppers of ANP.

This was to be the night we properly met Imre, a strong willed Hungarian man. He was the main Park ranger who knew as much English as we did Hungarian. As a gift to us he brought some home made Palinka, which seems to me to be the nearest thing to pure alcohol as I have come across. As a non drinker I was amazed to watch the immediate effects and ensuing chaos it produced to its victims. It was a fun evening, where many conversations were had and since forgotten that bonded the group a little further.

Seventh of September

Up, dressed, breakfast and out the door, chainsaw in hand ready for my first full work day. Back up to the same site, cutting a copse of trees and scrub in the middle of a clearing. Imre gave us all lessons on how to use a brush cutter, whether we wanted them or not. And I became concerned that we would not get on, but once I got to use my weapon of choice – my chainsaw, he became more able to leave me be. I think I was the first female wielding a chainsaw he had ever come across. The work was a bit muddled as it took a few days for us all to know what we were doing and where, but we eventually all found our roles and got on with it. But I felt sorry for the non power tool users, as the chainsaws and brush cutters are so horrible to listen to but inarguably effective. We made a good start and it was satisfying work, clearing large areas at a time with our diverse workforce.

After Dinner Adam Szabo (from then on referred to as the Wolfman) talked about his work with wolf packs and showed a film of the wolves in Hungary, made as part of a 'Life project'. Wolves, it turns out, need an impractical amount of space - 150km for just one family so the ample 200kms of ANP can only accommodate them alone.

Eighth of September

Today was to be a scheduled 'Day of Culture'. We drove east towards the Zemplen Hills and stopped at Encs and then went on to Boldogkóvaralja, specifically to see the castle. From a distance the castle had elements of The Lord of the Rings sets, with turrets, rickety bridges all seamlessly grafted to solid rock. We had 360° views of the southern Zemplen Hills, with vineyards dotted across the valley.

There was a music festival later that day and luckily for us we were offered some extraordinarily tasty Wild Boar stew that was being cooked in a massive cauldron, something we have tried but failed to emulate successfully back home.

We had lunch in a grassland reserve and the sun was shining, and some Imperial Eagles came to have a look at us, but quickly left when they saw it was sandwiches again. In the evening we went wine tasting at Bodrogkisfalud where we had a meal in a cellar with an immeasurable amount of mould covering the walls and ceiling. Wine production seemed to be the one booming industry in Hungary. The evening was fun and we even received some free entertainment with regards from a loud Romanian woman who started singing but was unsure of when to cease. There was jovial retaliation by David who struck back with a traditional Dorset song at the top of his lungs. Our table felt victorious and the noise level reached a pleasant plateau.

Ninth of September

Sunday was a free day and the weather had been consistently pleasing. After a disagreement with the hostels washing machine, James and I borrowed mountain bikes from the hostel and cycled up to explore the castle ruins in Szögliget. The views from the castle were breathtaking and more literally the walk, but definitely worth the effort, we could see the places we had been working and the town below. I appreciated the geography of the place and I felt more of an overall purpose in what we were doing there. The castle had only a few remaining pieces, and nature had moved in and made the site peaceful.

We had the place to ourselves except for lizards and butterflies, but needed to continue on down where we got our first taste of real mountain biking.

James had planned a first-rate route that brought us down through the deserted Polish village of Derenck, which now had only one building left standing. The local landowner had thrown the residents out of their homes to reclaim the land for himself mainly for hunting.

The clay ruts that the UAZ sailed over daily became a real danger on a mountain bike but was exhilarating flying down through the woodland tracks. I really was in my element in Aggtelek, the place felt calm and green, the pace of life was rational and most importantly I was surrounded by trees.

We all assembled for dinner as usual and then Patrycja gave a talk about projects in Poland she is working on at her National Park.

Tenth of September

Worked all day around Acsko, which was a vigorous walk up the hill from the hostel. Brushcutting the blackthorn and chainsawing the hornbeam and conifers, we made some progress, every few hours we moved further up the hill. We were also making clear corridors connecting the meadows for the movement of animals and insects between them. Roland Farkas led a botanical walk at the end of the afternoon and some of us stayed and continued working. Five Hungarian students joined us in the hostel as dinner. As part of their course they were to do practical conservation and had come to work with us. A few of them spoke good English and we took the opportunity to ask lots of questions that we had been longing to ask about the language and the customs. They helped us with our Hungarian and we returned the favour in English.

That evening was back up the hill to visit to Vecsembukkk shaft to see bats. A net had been strung across the main access hole and in small quiet groups we shown by Sandor different types of bats including the Horseshoe bat and mouse-eared bat.

Eleventh of September

Rain stopped work before lunch and we descended the hill.

In the afternoon a talk was given by Attila Huber about the different habitats of the ANP and the protected insect species associated with them. In the evening Simon an English journalist (who had relocated here, and set up a mountain biking holiday business) from Szögliget and his friend Joe joined us. It was again nice to ask them questions, as Simon translated for Joe who had lived in the village for a long time, and it was good to see someone take a risk and benefiting from his bold move to Hungary from England.

Twelfth of September

Another whole day's work around Acsko, extending into a new area. As time went on the ANP staff became more prolific, and we had a number of rangers out with us of a day. 20 students from Debrecen University joined us, which was quite overwhelming to have so many people in our little worksite. But much was achieved and it was encouraging to see so many college students passionate about conservation.

In the evening Nigel gave a talk about the Butterfly Conservation projects he and Kathy run in Dorset. The many of us decided to walk down into Szogliget and sample the nightlife. The local bar was a bit like, well, cross between a laundrette and a chip shop. I however won a bet which enabled me to remove my much disliked nemesis – James' moustache. I didn't wait, scissors were procured and off it came in the middle of the bar. I don't miss it.

Thirteenth of September

A new site today further afield in Gomorszolos. New site - ubiquitous blackthorn. A valley wetland area, covered in the said beast and the preferable willow. Different working conditions here, and the opportunity of having a bonfire was a timesaving measure, that changed the routines we had developed. We had made a good start clearing the area and as a reward we went exploring an abandoned orchard with botanist Kati. The apple and plum trees were heavily laden and we filled our mouths, pockets and hats with the exceptionally delicious fruits. Kati showed us native flora and explained which ones were used for their medicinal properties, something of which I am very keen to explore further. We climbed out of the sweeping valley up onto a hill giving views that deserved hours rather than the minutes we could give it.

We walked back across the top of the valley and back to the work site and minibuses, and home for dinner. After dinner Monika Bodnar gave a talk about Hungarian culture and history.

Fourteenth of September

Another work day at Gomorszolos, and it was satisfying to see the difference we had made, with our little workforce. We then visited Kelemer where Mr Bodnar showed us the environmental centre and then took us to woods above the village to show us two areas of floating peat bogs. Alex was chosen to demonstrate the fact that they were in fact fragile islands by tentatively walking onto it, but quickly being warned not to make any sudden movements.

We had dinner and met the much admired Katarina, Mayor of Szogliget, who had come to talk to us about her role and hopes for Szogliget. She offered an invaluable insight into the local social and political attitudes and the problems seemed globally familiar to our own. As a cultural exchange, David recited a Dorset poem by William Barnes which must have tested Katarina's English to the very limits.

Fifteenth of September

A new worksite today, one we had visited on our first day. This was to be the ultimate and last UAZ ride, the like of which I have not experienced on any theme park thrill ride. We got to work clearing scrub from a meadow on a hill overlooking Szogliget. I swung my last at the Hungarian flora with my faithful chainsaw. Then we declared the sight conserved and left for the last trip down the hill to the hostel. The afternoon was spent on a visit to Aggtelek for shopping and tour of Baradla Cave. Sandor the keymaster to any attraction in Hungary lead us around the amazing tunnels and massive caverns. The caves were beautifully lit, and we enjoyed having them to ourselves before the concert was set up for the evening. The largest cave held hundreds of folding seats and a sizeable orchestra, we were given insulated seat pads to deflect the low temperatures achieved in the caves. They began with Bach and the music complimented the dramatic surroundings making the evening very special. We returned to have supper at the Tengersizem restaurant.

Sixteenth of September - Free day

Garbriel had determinedly carried his green woodworking tools all the way to Hungary, and became the vector for a hive of rustic chairmaking activity, which transpired to be a thank you gift for Sandor and the cooking staff. Wittling and hand drilling went on all day and late into the night.

The much anticipated BBQ at Szalamandra, by Ester, Istvan and Dia was upon us. After a hastened bike ascent from Simons house in the village, I very much enjoyed all finally sitting around the campfire together, sharing some tasty food and stories of the day. We invited Simon and Joe to join us to thank them for their hospitality and especially Simon for taking a few of us all the way to Hajduszoboszlo in the East to an organic food fare and thermal spas for the day. It was wonderful to get out into another part of

Hungary and envelop ourselves into the culture more. After the feast had been devoured, James and Mel were determined to walk up to the castle in the dark for some professional stargazing. Whereas I chose to comfortably observe them next to the cosy fire accompanied by late night discussions between some more the hardcore participants, oh and Gabriel.

Seventeenth of September

Our last day was spent in Josvafo, visiting the museum and church, followed by a carriage ride around the picturesque town. Alex and I decided to ride western style hanging onto the back of the 'stagecoach'. We searched for Fire-Bellied Toads and for the giant bushcricket Saga pedo which alluded us skilfully. We did however explore an area where the local Huccul horses were grazing the open grassland, which also gave use a lovely view. Felt sad to be our last trip out and after a spot of packing we travelled to the Tengersiz hotel where there was a massive reunion of all the people we had worked beside and met during our time in Aggtelek. A few last games of pool and a walk before our final bedtime in the Szalamandra Guest House. We had been very comfortable and well looked after here, and I highly recommend it as a base for exploring Aggtelek National Park and northern Hungary.

Eighteenth of September

We spent all morning travelling back to Budapest, and there we said goodbye to Sam who had arranged to continue his travels on from there. Just enough time before our train to Vienna for a powerwalk around a portion of Budapest, which just wetted my appetite for a return trip further. It was dark when we got to Vienna but James, Mel, David, Alex and I stormed off into the city to soak up as much atmosphere as one can in 45 minutes. We ended up experiencing the 'sub-culture' by our particular choice of route, and The Third Man soundtrack assisted our passage curtously of the groups various renditions. Vienna like Budapest, greatly fuelled our desire to return. Back on to the sleeper train, which was, in places such as the bar, space aged. Unfortunately the bunks were oh so familiar, but tiredness and the desire to minimise my carbon footprint let me fall to sleep.

Nineteenth of September

Arrived at Köln at 10am, stretched our legs again and began to spend last bits our change. Then on to Brussels, a quick bite to eat and a few gifts purchased. Finally onto the Eurostar, where our group suffered more searches finding numerous (conservation tools)'weapons' (penknives and axes) that were held by an official until our arrival in London where we would be released, to cause any anarchy we could muster as British citizens with the weapons we carried.