

Aggtelek Report – James Broomfield

Day2, Sept 4th

Due to travel, fatigue and culture shock my first encounter with Budapest was tainted with surreality and misgivings.

It's raining and the city is grey and tired looking. I'm not much for cities at the best of times but being driven through the city streets in the Aggtelek coach, peering through a rain spotted window at miserable looking people heading to work, it could have been anywhere, it could have been London. But coaches are an awful way to see anything, a few millimetres of glass manage to put a distance between you and everything else that's insurmountable.

One thing that pleases me greatly is that the car of choice for the average Magyar seems to be the Suzuki Swift, the same model I have at home, and I calculate that they make up at least 75% of the cars we see on the road in Budapest that day. I wonder how cheap parts are here and consider acquiring an exhaust system to take back with me.

We are driven past the building that houses the Hungarian parliament – apparently the largest in Europe. It *is* pretty big, I have to admit and the Hungarians seem proud of that. I am not sure whether the point is that the Hungarian parliament had a vast number of members or that the sheer scale of the decisions being made within necessitated such a big building. In either case it all seemed to be past tense. These grand gestures, from what little history I picked up, are from another era when there was a lot of money here. We are told that money is returning in the form of tourism and with tourism, I guess, comes Westernisation.

For some reason I am totally surprised to see billboard posters for forthcoming concerts by Gwen Stefani and Black Eyed Peas. I thought I had a reasonable handle on the pervasion of US culture and I don't know why I thought it wouldn't be here too.

Our next stop was Hero's Square. Another grand gesture, this time in honour of the 7 warring tribes that somehow mellowed into the Magyar people of today's Hungary. I don't normally have much interest in statues but these are remarkable. Very dynamic and utterly masculine. There's something in the painfully enlarged nostrils and the hollow eyes of the horses that lets you know in no uncertain terms that these were hard times. And the Heroes were hard men. They didn't need the biggest parliament building in Europe, they had the biggest balls.

And that was more or less it for Budapest, the rest of the day was spent on the Aggtelek coach, heading across the Hungarian countryside.

Day3, Sept 5th

After a good night's sleep we awoke to what was supposed to be our first day of work. However as it's pretty cold and pouring with rain the decision is taken to put off work, not because we're a bunch of wusses, but because the working area will be dangerous. At this stage I haven't really got much idea of what the work is going to entail, people keep telling me 'scrub clearance' but exactly what that is I don't know. I'm also concerned that I'm not up to this physically – I mean I'm young and reasonably healthy but I spend my days sat in an office, it's not exactly laborious. Part of me is frustrated not to get started, the other part is glad the day will be spent in more leisurely pursuit.

Breakfast is, as it would be for many days to come, a mixture of breads, meats and cheeses preceded by a scrambled egg dish heavy on the paprika. This is all very tasty but heavy going for a breakfast.

Sandor followed up this with a long presentation about the national park. In terms of orientating ourselves this is good stuff and certainly helps me feel a bit more like I know where I am and why. Even better, it's followed by a walk up the hill to check out the work sites. These, we are told, are abandoned meadows, once grazed by animals, which are slowly but surely being reclaimed by the forest. This is having a detrimental effect on the wildlife of the meadows, in particular the butterflies, which is why we're here. I am enjoying the isolation of this place, to hear no trace of humanity beyond the movements of our small group is a rare treat. Even on this rather miserable day, the views from these hills are impressive and we can see the ruins of the castle on the adjacent hill – a spot I resolve to visit.

The afternoon takes the form of a visit to Rakoczi caves, a nearby abandoned mineshaft offers us access. As always, ruined buildings hold a strange fascination for me and I'm appreciating the hollowed shells of

the works, grassed over railway lines and rusting machinery. Going into the mine too was fun, with rails and the occasional upended minecart to trip over in the poor light. I should add that this is not a visitors cave in the commercial sense, there's no handrails or non-slip rubberised concrete floor. The cave itself, discovered when miners broke through the wall, is more or less vertically orientated. To explore it is to descend rusty iron ladders, some of which are dizzyingly high if you're at all given to vertigo (as I am). But it feels real in a way that caves in England don't. We are told that the mine only shut down about 10 years ago, and it seems like the plan is to turn it into a show cave, with visitor centre in the old mine buildings. This is probably a good thing in terms of tourism and ensuring the cave's protection but I'm pleased we got to see it with minimal human intervention.

Back at the hostel I attempt to learn a bit more Hungarian but it's not sticking yet – I'm usually alright with languages but this like nothing I've seen before and it's hard to grasp.

After dinner we were chauffeured up into the hills courtesy of one of the park wardens (Imre) and his Land Rover, the rest of the group suffered the military suspension of the UAZ – a ridiculous four-wheel drive Russian vehicle sort of like a VW campervan crossed with a tank.

The point of this trip was to have a listen for some wolf ululation but the persistent drizzle seemed to be putting the wolves off a little and we heard nothing more exciting than a red deer impersonation from Imre. A second position was taken up right on the Slovakian border but to equal amounts of failure.

Day 4, Sept 6th

Today started with a little stroll down the track away from the hostel for a look at the wildlife and scenery. There would be no work today either due to continued bad weather and again I have mixed feelings about it.

The main event today was a trip to a town called Rudabanya (literal translation 'iron mine') which was the location of a very good cake shop. Also there was an iron mine.

Our purpose here was to visit the mining and mineral museums, apparently a big player in the scheme to draw tourists to the area. The distinct impression we're being given is that Hungary is a very poor place.

All the young people have made a dash for the cities where they have half a chance of earning a decent salary and getting to go see Gwen Stefani or Black Eyed Peas once in a while. Who can blame them?

This has the obvious side effect that the small towns harbour an aging population – there's no money coming in. It seems that the National Park would like to see an increase in tourism as a way of kickstarting the local economy. Weirdly, considering the uniform flatness and agricultural dirge of the plains we travelled through on our way here, and the suggestion that much of Hungary shares this aesthetic blandness, there doesn't seem to be much interest from the Magyars even, in coming up here for change of scene holiday. The museums are interesting and clearly the mining industry is vitally important to understanding the history of this place but it's not really hard to see why people aren't too fussed about travelling here. Industrial decay is, essentially, just a bit depressing. The conditions were miserable then when the industry had a purpose and now it's defunct it's even more miserable. I can't help feeling that tourism is not going to be the answer to these people's problems. The mineral museum was okay too, some nice sparkly rocks in there and the head of a monkey woman. We were taken to a quarry nearby where this head was found.

The afternoon was the first chance we had to work. We walked up to a meadow and got to it. Scrub clearance, I discovered, meant cutting down the unwanted growth of several invasive species of shrub and tree. Mainly Blackthorn it seemed, which is the mean, vicious and spiteful invention of a malevolent force hellbent on ensuring the discomfort of conservation volunteers worldwide. Its primary weapon: inch-long barbs placed copiously along the length of its limbs. In the vertical plane they are strong; piercing glove, sleeve and skin with ease. Horizontally brittle, the barbs break off and remain embedded in the soft pristine flesh of the unhardened worker causing irritation until the body can effectively expel them.

It was fun though, we had brushcutters whacking at the stuff and the rest of us hauled it into the woods. It's fairly satisfying work, you certainly feel like something is getting done.

We only worked two hours and then went back to the hostel, ate dinner and sat down to enjoy the words of Dr Peter Gyulai on the butterflies and grasshoppers of the ANP. Imre turned up with some home made Palinka – a traditional spirit (very strong judging by the state of some people) made from fruit, peaches or plums I think.

Day 5, Sept 7th

Finally, the first full day of work. We headed back to where we had been working yesterday and got back into it. There's not a lot to say about the day other than it was hard work and I enjoyed it. Being unqualified with any sort of powertool I was on dragging duty. I didn't mind this at all, it's quite meditative in the sense that you don't need your brain for the work so you can use it for other things. Saw a preying mantis today which was good – not seen one of those before.

After dinner Adam Szabo, the local wolfman, talked about the wolves in the park. I seem to be developing an inability to stay awake during presentations. So far they've been interesting but it seems the minute the lights go out my eyelids head south. The wolf talk was good though and Adam had brought in a wolf skin for us to feel – it's the closest you're likely to get to a wolf it seems.

The Polish guy Marcin had a presentation to give too about butterflies and insects in Poland but I was much too far gone for that and rather than insult him by snoring through it I took myself off to bed.

Day 6, Sept 8th Day of Culture I

This was the first 'Day of Culture' but I didn't want it. Having done a days work and having enjoyed it more than anything else up to this point, to lose momentum and go back to sightseeing was just frustrating for me. Also I was feeling the social strain by this point. As someone who values solitude the pressures of the itinerary (there's precious little break in the schedule) and being constantly surrounded by people was taking its toll. I knew it would happen when I signed up to do this and I couldn't really have asked for a nicer of group people but I wanted to switch off again the way I had the day before while dragging bits of tree around.

So this means I wasn't in the best frame of mind today so I probably didn't make the best of the culture on offer. First stop was Encs where we failed to buy stamps but did manage to get Holly some food as the provisions that had been made for her dietary requirements were found lacking. Then we made for the Zemplen Mountains and Boldogkovaralja – a castle on a hill where a rally of bikers seemed to be on the verge of happening. A sample of wild boar stew was offered and accepted and proved to be the tastiest thing I would eat during the stay. I think it was fresh caught boar, which might have been why it was so good.

The second half of the day was spent in a field – part of a grassland reserve in the Zemplen Hills Protected Landscape Area. The birdwatchers among us were on the look out for Imperial Eagles and I was pleased for them when they turned up, although to my untrained eye they were black dots in a grey sky.

The evening was one of wine-tasting which was actually a highlight of the day despite me not drinking, mainly due to the location. I've never eaten a meal in an underground tunnel with walls covered in mould so I was glad of the opportunity. It was nice to see some people actually making money out of something in this place, made a nice change from the poverty elsewhere.

Day 7, Sept 9th

No work today either but it was a free day which was the next best thing. Many of the group went to visit a bird ringing camp but I wanted to go mountain biking and that's what we did. Holly and I got bikes, planned a route and then, after doing some washing, struck out. Our first port of call was the castle ruins. I didn't realise how steep this path was going to be so taking the bikes was starting to look like a mistake, pushing was the only option. But I was determined to get my bike up there because I thought it would be fun to ride it back down the hill. It was a beautiful day and the temperature had really soared since we arrived. I saw lizards and photographed them as best I could given their skittish nature. At the top, in the castle ruins I was alone with the stunning views and I couldn't have been happier. I was sorry that Holly hadn't made it up to see (she was waiting halfway down) but as it turned out Gabriel and Becky were on their way up and helped her with her bike. We spent quite a lot of time up there, taking photos and chasing lizards, it was a highlight of the trip for me.

Turns out I was right and the ride down on the mountain bikes was excellent, if scary in parts when it got too rocky. We biked onwards, got a bit lost and rode through some meadow sections, then found where we were supposed to be and rode to Derenck, a deserted Polish village not far from the hostel. There's not much here, but my fondness for decaying buildings was satisfied by the old schoolhouse with its collapsed floors and ornate door carvings. It looked like it would have been a very beautiful place to live.

Our bike ride continued and we found our way home. I was really happy after today, I had a great time. There was another presentation in the evening and then a few of us went on a night walk. We found glow worms which I'd never seen before so that was a good ending to a good day.

Day 8, Sept 10

Another full day of work, to my glee. I have taken to occupying my mind with the construction of 'holes'. These are gaps in the woodland edge where our draggers can enter and deposit our burdens. A good hole needs many things; a semi-concealed entrance, clear walkways and structured dumping areas which, as the hole develops, become walls and create green rooms in the woods. As the day progressed the holes became more elaborate with corridors and antechambers, archways and in one case a ceiling. Each hole took on a personality of its own and it was always a wrench to leave a hole once the source of building materials had moved on to another area. Starting a new hole would initially feel strange, and you'd believe that this hole could never be as special to you as the last, but they all developed and grew and took on a life of their own.

I confess I became a little territorial over my holes. I started to understand my co-workers by the way they treated my hole. Some would respect the sanctity of another man's hole. Others would enter cautiously, take time to understand the hole and dump their load accordingly. A few however would thoughtlessly blunder in, thrash about causing untold damage and exit leaving a big mess for someone else to clean up. Continuing on the subject of holes, the evening was spent peering down the Vecsembukk shaft. This cave is home to many bats and we were lucky enough to see a few different species. Also there were 5 Hungarian students who joined us at this point.

Day 9, Sept 11th

Another grotty day but we worked until 12 by which time most people had had enough of the rain and we went back to the hostel.

In the afternoon, Attila Huber, who had the best hairstyle of all the ANP staff that I saw and instantly won my respect because of it, gave a talk about the different habitats of the park and the types of things you can find in them.

In the evening we were joined by Simon, an English journalist and cyclist who lives in the village and his friend Joseph who I attempted to converse with in German but failed spectacularly. Joseph has a fine moustache and twinkly little eyes. I wanted to talk to Simon more than I did but I got into some serious stuff with Gabriel and that occupied me most of the evening.

Day 10, Sept 12th

Another full day of work. Today, in addition to the 5 Hungarian students who have joined us at the hostel, we had an extra 20 students from Debrecen University. Today's work was challenging for me. Hole making had developed from a mind diverting hobby into a fully-blown art form and I was a grand master at work. The problem was with 25 extra draggers on the team I was wholly unable to retain ownership of my hole for more than a few minutes at least. There are only 5 people cutting, remember, so there's a shortage of supply. I tried staying ahead of the game, looking for the brushcutters with the fewest draggers crowding around them. I tried creating holes further away, so that there was always a closer option for those with no appreciation of a well constructed hole. I even sacrificed the entrances to my holes, making them hard to navigate and perilous with thorn, but to no avail. I was appalled to find, on the other side of the meadow, a giant hole – a crude display of manpower lacking in any craft. Nonetheless I hoped this may lure some of the offenders away from my intricate passages. Nothing seemed to work, there were simply too many draggers fighting for scraps from the cutters and as a result, areas were cleared too quickly to allow for the construction of any noteworthy holes whatsoever. This was a difficult day.

On returning to the hostel I went out into the garden-y bit and sat under a tree to regain myself. Shortly I was asleep, without intending to be, and remained that way long enough to entirely miss the presentation on Butterfly Conservation in Dorset. Also, the sun went down and I got chilled to the bone.

The evening though was good fun, we went to the bar in Szoliget where I had a Twix. Twixes taste slightly different in Hungary and have slightly more angular edges than their UK counterparts.

Joe was there and Simon too and I lost my moustache in a foolish bet that I lament to this very day. Even better, we got to go back to Joes house, or at least one of the rooms with a low ceiling and a lot of military

memorabilia. I think Joe's son is in the army or something. Anyway, more Palinka was drunk that night and it was all good fun.

Day 11, Sept 13th

More work today but it was all change. A new site near the village of Gomorszolos where a river valley was getting a bit overgrown. To be honest, I'm less sure about the purpose of the work we're doing here but I imagine its just about stopping the invasive plants taking over. The good news is, its willow mostly which has no thorns and is a blessed relief. The bad news – no holes. We have a big fire though and that's always fun. Its very hot today though and sweaty. I begin to use a bow-saw today. I'd been avoiding tools up till this point, taking a certain amount of pride in doing the simplest, most labour intensive job going without complaint, but it was entertaining to cut down some bigger stuff with the bow-saw.

When we were done here a botanist called Kati came and showed us an abandoned orchard. We helped ourselves to free fruit and were glad of it. The walk also allowed us some very nice views.

Back at Szalamandra House there was a talk about Hungarian history and culture.

Day 12, Sept 14th

Another day working at Gomorszolos and another fire to tend. It was a heads down sort of a day. Actually we didn't work all day, in the afternoon we went to a hat shop where many grey hats were bought and then on to Kelemar where there is an environmental centre. The dude from the centre then took us up in the woods where we were shown two floating peat bogs.

In the evening the Mayor of Szögliget came to see us and talk about the work she does in the town. Later David busted out his drawling Dorsetshire dialect for a recital of a William Barnes poem. I felt this had the effect of bringing our two different cultures much closer together – she clearly had no idea what David was saying and neither did we.

Day 13, Sept 15th

Crazily, this was to be the last day of work. I don't think we'd done as much as was planned but the weather had been against us for much of the first week. Today was a new worksite, high up on the hill above Szögliget. This was patchy work, there was nowhere to really get your teeth into but we were only there for the morning so it wasn't too bad.

The afternoon was something I'd really been looking forward to – visiting the Baradla Cave. It's the major tourist attraction in the region, and a world away from the cave we visited earlier. Here there are concrete floors and fancy lighting but it doesn't matter because the caves are spectacular. Similar to how none of the pictures I took did any justice to the weird beauty of this place, neither can I accurately describe it with words. On exiting after our 45minute tour I was immediately wondering if it would be possible to do the 7 hour tour on the next free day.

A bit of shopping time and a quick Nogger later, we returned to the cave for a concert of classical music. It had occurred to me that the acoustics of a cave might not be very good because of the reflective sound qualities of the stone. In fact, the concert chamber was large enough to swallow up the relatively small noise the orchestra made without noticeable reverb. As a spectacle, it was a once in a lifetime sort of thing, but classical music rarely does anything for me and this was no exception.

We returned to the Tengerszem restaurant for dinner. When we got back to the hostel Szogliget Simon had left a note asking if anyone wanted to go to a thermal spa and an organic food fair the following day. Yes, as it happened, we did.

Day 14, Sept 16th Free day

Having got hold of Simon to let him know we'd be coming, we cycled to his house in Szogliget and squeezed into his people carrier. The place we were going, Hajduszoboszlo, was a couple of hours drive away so we got to see a lot more of the countryside – dead flat, crop farmed countryside. It didn't matter though, it was just nice to be away from the hostel and Szogliget and all the roads we were getting familiar with.

Hajduszoboszlo was bustling, the organic food festival seemed to be quite a big deal. There was a stage with what we presumed to be traditional music and dancing and every stall seemed to be fronted by a steaming cauldron cooking up goulash. I was expecting there to be lots of organic food to buy, as in to take home and cook yourself, but this seemed to be almost entirely about eating ready prepared food.

Almost half the stalls were wine too. I found a honey stall with seven varieties and having tried them all decided to buy a jar of the lime blossom honey.

We ate lunch (goulash) and enjoyed some singing and generally soaked up the atmosphere.

The thermal spa was not at all what I was expecting. For some reason I had pictures of a hole in the ground, bubbling away but the Hajduszoboszló spa has the distinct feel of a 1950s English lido. Even more off-putting was the colour of the water which was a kind of orangey brown. When you got in it felt almost oily, and smelled of pine. But it was warm, and there were many different pools with different temperatures, roman fountains and underwater jets. The Hungarians clearly take this sort of leisure very seriously, since none were smiling, and it was very busy.

Out back of the spa there is a more modern water park with slides and the like, which we had a look at but didn't fancy. After a couple of hours in the spa I certainly felt like there might be some medicinal value to the experience, as was claimed.

Simon drove us home, and we invited him up to the hostel where Ester had prepared a BBQ. Joe came too and we enjoyed a boar stew – good but not as good as the one at the castle.

Finally, Mel and I had been talking about going back up to the castle at night in order to get a good look at the stars. There were a couple of good reasons for not doing this including getting shot by hunters and the possibility of being savaged by a bear and/or a wolf. I'm glad we did it though, the castle was a very different place by night and the stars were incredible. The noise though was the best bit. We were surrounded by red deer all giving out their weird bellowing call. Both Mel and I took the opportunity to hone our own imitations of the red deer call having been impressed by Imre's earlier in the week. Still no wolf ululations though.

Day 15, Sept 17th

This morning was spent in Josvafo where the village museum gave us a good idea of what life was like in the average household of yore. To be honest, it didn't look a whole lot different to how many Magyars seemed to be living today, particularly the agricultural 'relics'. We also visited the church and took a carriage ride around the village.

Next up was a hunt for the elusive Fire-Bellied Toad – a known haunt was close by and we strolled that way but were out of luck. No joy either for those hunting for Saga Pedo, a half-crazed, giant, carnivorous bush cricket with a bad attitude. None of this lack of success could detract from a fine walk in the Hungarian countryside which is absolutely beautiful and remarkably unspoilt.

A farewell party took place at Tengersizem hotel – a grand buffet with more Hungarian meat dishes and I think I saw a vegetable there too. We talked with the staff of the ANP, many of whom had been involved in the presentations we'd had earlier in the stay and it was good to say goodbye properly.

Day 16, Sept 18th

And that was it. We packed up, piled into two minibuses and headed back to Budapest. The ANP coach had broken down so while we arrived in comparative luxury, we returned more in the style of transport we had become accustomed to. Things were made harder by the driver being extremely reluctant to wind down the windows for those who were suffocating and overheating in the back of the bus.

Some hours later we arrived in Budapest. It was a better day than when we arrived and I took to sightseeing enthusiastically. We went to the parliament building, wandered around there for a bit and then headed towards the town. We didn't see much to be honest but it was enough just to experience the atmosphere of a Hungarian city without it being raining.

The train journey home was a little subdued, some were unaffected but overexposure was definitely in evidence and many took refuge in books, music or sleep. A stop at Vienna was very enjoyable, a small group of us headed out into the night and took in the bright lights of this city, including those of its tram system. The night train then took us back to Koln, and we had a short while to wander here too. I had not been to Germany before this trip and the immediate comfort I felt when passing through on our journey out was still in evidence now. It's a place I mean to return to and get to know a little better. But a half hour and a cup of hot chocolate was all that there was time for today and we were on the train back to Brussels and back under the channel to home.