



Hungary Trip 2008

Our trip to Hungary took place from 31st August until 17th September 2008.

The trip was organised to allow us to complete practical conservation work within the Aggtelek National Park on the Hungarian/Slovakian border. We worked alongside Hungarian people, to encourage them to continue this conservation work and also to assist those who already work within the National Park. We were a group of 13 volunteers from the UK and we travelled across Europe by train to Hungary, where we were met by two group leaders, Nigel Spring and Kathy Henderson. This diary style report describes my experience of the Hungary Trip.

Me: Helen Shaw

Age: 28 years old

From: Worthing, West Sussex

Occupation: Police Community Support Officer

Star sign: Aries

Favourite things: Animals, Nature, Cooking and Food

DIARY

Day 1 Sunday 31st August 2008

Met up with the group at St Pancras Youth Hostel, in London, at 7pm. The journey up to London was easy enough, but I'm feeling rough with a virus!

Good to finally meet everyone in the reception at the youth hostel. Our group are: George Cottam, Helen Morse, Holly Elliott, Simon Jarvis, Sue Daynes, Steve Jefferies, Steve Betts, Paula Hollanders, Noel Hansford, Sara Field, Sandra Jackson, Sarah Keynes and me. A quick chat (and the first of many head counts!) and then we head up to the café.

The café was a very interesting experience! The staff were unhelpful and not at all happy to be serving 13 people! Fortunately the food was pretty good, and the group bonded over the mad, bad service! And then we dared to ask for pudding.....!

Day 2 Monday 1st September 2008

Up at 5.45am to meet in the foyer for 6.30am. My night had been pretty unpleasant; a hot, stuffy room with constant noise from a very awake London; sirens and lots of shouting! Nevertheless, everyone pretty perky and ready to get on the Eurostar for the start of our adventure!

The Eurostar was impressive. A professional, well run service. We were all pretty excited! A quick nap on the train, and before we knew it we were in Brussels!

Brussels was a nice long break so we walked into the historical square, had some lunch and did a bit of postcard shopping.

Trains, trains and more trains: Brussels to Köln
 Köln to Munich
 Munich to Budapest

The night train from Munich to Budapest was the most memorable part of the journey. Trying to fit six women and their luggage into a room the size of a lift was never going to be easy! We managed to wedge ourselves in and spent another night sleeping in intervals.

Day 3 Tuesday 2nd September 2008

9.23am arrive Budapest.

A loud, bustling, dusty, hot city! We had a look around a castle, and I was blown away by the dramatic buildings and architecture. The different influences of Turkish, Romanian and Hungarian make for a dramatic city. I was also amazed at the heat!

Before we knew it we were bundled back into the mini bus to head to lunch (and a doctors appointment for me).

A fascinating 'behind-the-scenes' impression of hospital life in the massive city hospital. An amazing old building, being modernised furiously, but it still felt like a British hospital in the 1950's or 60's. I was firmly told to 'pull myself together' in a very polite Hungarian manner. This was not easy to take, as I felt like death warmed up!

After a Chinese lunch and an icecream I felt a bit better and we bundled back into the bus to head to Aggtelek National Park.

About 4 hours of driving through changing scenery we were relieved to arrive at the National Park. A fresh, woody smell and the cool trees around us.

It was brilliant to arrive at the restaurant. In the middle of a valley and amazing views. We ate a lot and drank a bit, including the breathtaking plum spirit 'Parlinka' which tasted like it could remove varnish!

A much happier group climbed back into the mini bus for a quick drive to the hostel. The peace is immediately obvious and very welcome. A quick shower and sort out and we're all in bed!

Day 4 Wednesday 3rd September 2008

Not a great nights sleep, so still feeling rough. But very exciting to wake up at the hostel! I got up at 6.30am and went outside to sit in the misty silence that surrounds the hostel. Absolutely nothing can be heard, not even bird song. I couldn't believe the expanse of trees and mist on the hills around us.

We spent the day going to visit the places where we will be working. The weather was a real shock. I was expecting similar weather to the UK, but it's BOILING!! The sun is beaming and the sky is blue!

On the way back from the afternoon site we stopped off to see the grey cows grazing. These cows are the only cattle in the National Park and they are constantly on the move, encouraged by a shepherd and his three dogs. They are quite something to see in the flesh, with long straight backs and enormous horns!

One of the shepherd's dogs came over to investigate us and it was sad to see that he was extremely thin. His body language was very guarded and he seemed to be of a medium sized spitz or collie type mongrel. All of the dogs were black.

After cow gazing we went back to the hostel for dinner (cooked extremely well by the lovely Esther). Before the food we had a talk from Sandor about the National Park, funding and land areas. The biggest section of the park is actually in Slovakia.

After a delicious three course dinner we chatted before heading off to our beds.

Day 5 Thursday 4th September 2008

A work day! We worked at the top of the hill near the hostel. This was hard work for me, as not feeling at all well. The blistering heat was an extra challenge!

We spent the day cutting back blackthorn and juniper trees to ensure a clear area for grazing. A noisy day with chainsaws and brushcutters roaring and buzzing away. A group of Hungarian university students joined us so there were plenty to do the work.

We finished at 3pm and headed back to the hostel for much needed showers! Then just a quiet evening; we talked to Sandor about ourselves, our jobs and interests and then had another delicious dinner. Then.....my first full nights sleep!

Day 6 Friday 5th September 2008

Got up feeling much better for some sleep! Had breakfast and then off to work at the bottom of the same hill that we started on yesterday. Clearing the area to make a passageway for butterflies. Another very hot day. Saw lots of different species of butterfly, especially the Silver-Washed Fritillary. Also saw a Blue Adonis and two Green Tree Frogs. The Green Tree Frogs are an amazing green, absolutely beautiful.

In the evening we relaxed after a fantastic Hungarian lesson with Sandors lovely wife, Fanni. This was a real experience as Hungarian is quite a complex tongue twister of a language at the best of times, and some members of the group had had a wine 'tasting' (read: drinking) session. Great fun!

Then chatting and bed.

Day 7 Saturday 6th September 2008

A fantastic day! Worked in the morning, which really felt like hard work for some reason! Cleared the lower part of hill - a real slog, and everybody tired! Then.....a really nice sit down lunch as a reward! It's Kathy's birthday today!

And then the best bit! Kathy, Paula and I went for a horse ride!

I rode 'Louisa', a stunning little Hungarian pony. They were all small, neat, feisty little ponies. We went for about 1 ½ hours and galloped across fields, through forests and down hills! It was amazing!

Being out in the late afternoon sun, galloping across a hill top, with awesome views either side of us was breathtaking.

The evening continued in an exciting way with a BBQ party for Kathy. A bonfire was lit and we sat in the dark eating the gorgeous food that Esther had prepared for us.

Esther and Sandor had both got birthday cakes - one of which was in the shape of a Salamander! We sang Happy Birthday and then sat around the bonfire - 'perfick'!!

Day 8 Sunday 7th September 2008

A rest day! We got up early to go to the bird ringing camp. A walk through beautiful countryside and we arrived at the camp. We saw a Kingfisher, Blue tits and Robins being weighed, measured and sexed.

After this, we went to the Rakoczi Caves. An absolutely amazing cave system with beautiful deep turquoise water at the bottom. It was clear, cool and stunning.

Next: a delicious picnic lunch.

Drove to our next stop, a monastery ruin. A walk through woods brought us to an isolated, peaceful building. Two enormous tree trunks inside the building suggested that whilst it had been abandoned for 250 years, the trees had taken over.

Next stop, icecream!

Then back to Salamander House for dinner! After dinner, a chance to relax, look through photos and chat. Then bed - exhausted!

Day 9 Monday 8th September 2008

Rained off! No work today as heavy rain...shame! So we went to Aggtelek National Park café and had coffee, then went for a walk in the surrounding forests to look for Salamanders.

Everyone was amazed to find Fire Salamanders *everywhere*! These stunning little creatures - all around us! We had to be careful not to tread on them! Also saw lots of frogs and toads...the rain had brought them all out!

Walked to a museum and church. The church was Lutheran, with beautiful paintings and stained glass windows.

Very hungry after all that so wandered into Josvafo town to wait for Nigel and Kathy to pick us in the mini bus. Got a few bits from the shop while we waited; pombar crisps and a chocolate bar!

Headed to a tiny village for lunch. Met a gorgeous dog, I named him Boris. He was about 18months old and black and tan, and appeared to be a dachshund cross. A real sweetie!

Afterwards we headed back towards the hostel, stopping to pick wild flowers along the way.

Back at the hostel; did some washing, after a refreshing shower, then put the wild flowers into family groups.

Dinner!

Next, a brilliant talk from Wolfman; Adam from next door. Adam did a year-long study on wolves. This was funded by the 'Life'. We watched a video about the few remaining Hungarian Wolves. These wolves roam across Slovakia, Poland and Hungary and unfortunately the future looks very bleak for them. They are still hunted; legally in Slovakia and illegally in Hungary. There are only one or two packs left; each made up of four to six wolves.

We looked at a wolf skin, a wolf skull and a plaster cast of two bear prints. There are thought to be three bears left in Aggtelek National Park. Both bears and wolves are still hunted by men who see this as a way of proving their masculinity.....

After this talk we put out the moth trap and chatted.

Day 10 Tuesday 9th September 2008

Worked very hard in the valley today – deheading Golden Rod! Golden Rod is a foreign species which has started to take over so we were taking the head off, which contains the seeds, so that hopefully these plants will not dominate next year and local species can come back. Very hot and sweaty.

In the evening; Bat watching! Amazing! We went up into the forest with Sandor to the mouth of a cave which holds a variety of bat species. We put out a net and waited.....

We saw; Pipistrelle
 Mediterranean Horseshoe Bat
 Greater Mouse Eared
 Lesser Horseshoe
 Greater Horseshoe
 Shreibers
 Brown Long Eared
 Barbastelle

I even got to hold one, before he was released, which was a dream come true.

Got back late, with a headache, so straight to bed.

Day 11 Wednesday 10th September 2008

Sightseeing! We went to a museum, an art gallery and a craft shop in a gorgeous village. A lovely old man showed us around, as he had set it all up.

His art was fantastic too. I bought a few presents and then we went to see the land that Sandor has bought with money raised by Nigel and Kathy through a barn dance.

Onto a picnic area to sit and eat lunch.

Next stop, Eger, for sightseeing – then wine tasting!! Delicious food and lovely people. I managed to drink most of the red wine I was offered (in massive glasses!), but stopped when I'd had enough! The journey back was 2 ½ hours and a windy route, but everyone managed to behave! A cuppa and a bit of chocolate and off to bed – very tired again!

Day 12 Thursday 11th September 2008

Working in the valley again today. Not so bad today as much cooler and not so much sun. Steve Betts and I worked together, along with the lovely Bailer (A.K.A He-Man)!

After a hard days work....icecreams!

Back to the hostel for a quick shower and then a history talk by Victor.

Next, a night walk! Heard red deer rutting; which makes your hair stand on end when your first hear it! Also heard edible dormice in the trees above us. Unfortunately we did not hear any wolves, but lots of dogs barking! Saw Glow Worms (who weren't very keen to glow...stagefright!) and heard Tawny Owls calling back and forth above us. It was great!

Afterwards, a cuppa and chat.

Day 13 Friday 12th September 2008

Our last work day! Mild weather, so not too bad again today. Worked in the valley again and we can really see the difference we have made here – a clear area for butterflies and grazing.

An icecream afterwards as usual!

Back to the hostel for a shower and then....plum stoning! We stoned huge vats of plums ready for Esther's jam making.

After dinner, a wolf walk! Adam took us up to Derenk Village. We stood in the dark in silence and listened to Adam howling; to call the wolves in the hope that they would reply. Unfortunately no wolves tonight, but lots of Red Deer rutting near us, which was exciting enough!

Off to dinner after pitching our tents. Another delicious meal and pudding too! We roll back to the campsite with full stomachs and another cold night camping!

Day 18 Wednesday 17th September 2008

Up early for a shower and try to put on the last of my *cleanish* clothes! A quick breakfast and then back to the mini bus for another days driving; but at least this one will end with us getting home!

Drive through Germany, Belgium, into France and to the ferry home.