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After one month, 6,000 kilometres, 18 different beds, and 8 different countries ... I'm reunited with my laptop and wondering what to tell you first!

Perhaps, where those 6,000 k's have taken us. The gang started out at Neusiedler See on the Austro-Hungarian border, getting our opera fix, with *Rigoletto* at the old Roman Stone Quarry, and *My Fair Lady* on the stage in the lake at Mörbisch. Then Margrit and Roman, Mani and I headed south to Croatia and the coast for a week of lolling around in the sea. How I miss salt water! Then it was just Mani and me, adventuring to places we'd not been before. Along the Croatian coast to Montenegro, inland through Albania, into Macedonia, up through Bulgaria and into Romania, and now back to Hungary, through Austria and home!

**Overwhelming impressions...** decay and development in various combinations, the depth of history, and the friendliness of strangers.

**Personal achievements...** there were several. For one, Mani is the pothole slalom champion of the world! To see him weave down a road and miss almost all the biggest holes is to watch artistry in action. For another, translingual communication; in some places English or German were somewhat understood, in others, not at all. Drawing little cartoons sometimes worked. And then there were the surprises... like who would have thought that in Albanian a word that must sound something like "change" means roast lamb! Well ... I paid the ridiculously small cost of breakfast coffees with a 5€ note (they were keen to take Euros there) and asked for the change in local currency so we could buy grapes and figs from roadside stalls. Well that's what I thought I'd asked for, so I was a little surprised when she indicated she'd put it in a plastic bag, but maybe it was a lot of notes... No, it was freshly roasted lamb.

**New best friends** ... our attempts to communicate regardless of language ended up with expressions of undying affection in several languages, and promises to email photos. People everywhere were marvellous - except



Fixing Roman's aerial after the cross-country ride

the Serbian border guard, of whom more later.

And then there's our permanent new best friend - Tom! We got a TomTom navigation system before we left, and Tom has saved our sanity (and relationship!) on many occasions. He knows a lot more about the roads in Central Europe than further east: in Bulgaria and Romania he knew nothing about the routes we chose. Only once did he let us down badly, when in Croatia he directed us down a "short cut" which rapidly became a track, and then

got worse, and worse. It was so narrow and overgrown we couldn't turn round, and we'd gone too far to back back... so on we went for hysterical kilometre after kilometre, bushes scraping the sides of our cars (it was worse for Roman, his car is wider, and he was following...) until finally we emerged. There's a life metaphor here somewhere! The scratches will come off, I'm sure - and Mani

later fixed Roman's aerial by enclosing it in a splint of agapanthus stem tied on with flax!

Decay, destruction and development has fascinated us all the way. Through the eastern countries huge factories built to serve the Soviet relationship are rusting and crumbling. The labourers have disappeared to work in the West, or to try entrepreneurial things. In Albania, every small town has eight or ten "car-washes" ... often



Looking across the Danube from Slovakia to Estergom in Hungary

one next to another .. with a handful of young men standing round holding high pressure hoses and hoping to make a dollar. There's a develop/decay cycle around petrol stations too. Again in Albania, every road is dotted with new ones, built by petrol companies no doubt, who should know better from experience in Macedonia, Bulgaria and Romania, where every road is dotted with abandoned petrol stations.

There's a nice paradox here ... looking at the decaying industrial buildings, we say to each other "they should pull these down, recycle the materials into road-building". Yet the next minute I am exclaiming about the romance of much older ruins, and wanting to stop and climb around piles of earlier centuries' relics. For those of us brought up in a new country like NZ, the sense of the layers and layers of human habitation in these Balkan areas is amazing. Mani is of course much more sanguine: there's a Roman *burgstock* just over the road from the family farmlet in Lutzenberg, and some aunts sold the extended family's last *schloss* only a couple of decades ago (it's now a restaurant so we have visiting rights), so he really doesn't see what I get so excited about.

Other stories are going to have to wait till another bulletin.... But we do have a word of advice for intrepid Swiss travellers. Not all border guards know that the Swiss identity card is the official equivalent of a traditional passport. We had to convince one about that when we were exiting Macedonia (don't know how he thought we'd got in to the country!) - and then when we got to the Serbian entry post, the border guard could not be convinced at all. He stamped my NZ passport, and told me I could enter, but Mani could not. After a few minutes of negotiation in no-man's land, we re-entered Macedonia, and had a very pleasant detour through Bulgaria to Romania. All our preconceived ideas about Bulgaria disappeared in the process - it's lovely! More later!