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Twilight in front of the Triglav mountain in Slovenia.

# Balkan Backroads

*To Istanbul on racing bikes*

Story and photos by Christopher Shand



Heat and humidity in Chiusa, South Tyrol, Italy. The town also has a German name, Klausen, as the region was formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

It was August. And accompanying her were her loyal companions of heat, lethargy and languor. In the midst of this late-summer inferno, could we have imagined anything more pleasant than to setting off for Istanbul on bikes? We could have fled for the mountain heights in search of glacial springs, or to the seas for their caressing breeze. Instead we aimed for simmering asphalt, the heavy heat of deep Alpine valleys, and the fiery temperament of the Balkans.

We were two. Marc, old high-school classmate, now musician as a concert trombonist. And I, Christopher, once a singer, now freelance reporter. Both of us trained in years of competitive cycling, running and ski-mountaineering, honed by our thirst for the absolute.

We had planned our route and its destination almost by a toss of dice across a map of Europe. Options that we quickly eliminated: Saint Petersburg through the

Baltic countries – too flat with predictable pathways. Spain and Portugal – too hot and touristic. Then our eyes veered eastward to Istanbul, and the images that pervade European Orientalism popped up – whirling Dervishes; the music of another temperament; Islam, the Ottomans and the Caliphate; an unmatched language that descended from the Altai Mountains across Central Asia.

But what about the current political context? The recent state of emergency, a leader facing growing unpopularity, the devaluation of the Turkish Lira, the drastic turn in domestic politics after the European Union's constant rebuffing of Turkey's candidacy for integration.

Yet on the road to Istanbul, there would be Greece, the beaches of Macedonia, and the sweetness of its olives. And the Balkans, still smarting from the trauma of civil war only twenty years ago, remaining remote and off the beaten track, with people we imagined as passionate and hot-headed. There were the Eastern Alps, colourful Tyrol, rural Slovenia, and majestic passes.

In short, there was the promise of grand nature, steep landscapes, a rich heritage, and contrasting geopolitical situations. Overall, we anticipated much to captivate us, both my artist friend and me, the hungry reporter.

We needed sponsors. Our program was clear: As we were keen on speed and flow, we decided against weighing ourselves down with tent, numerous bags and spares on heavy, cumbersome bikes. We chose light racing bikes with strong four-season road tires and two small bags, one on the handlebars and the other under the saddle.

Peach Cycles, from Alsace in Eastern France, provided us with light, but sturdy, carbon road bikes. Continental gave us their Grand Prix 4-Season tires, 25 mm wide for enhanced comfort in case we rode on rough, rocky trails. [Ed: !] Time offered their wonderful titanium racing pedals to eliminate unnecessary weight. Gore Bike Wear provided us with ultra-comfortable outfits for perfect breathability and protection. Quad Lock, an Aussie start-up, supplied an ingenious phone case, making it possible to navigate or to film at leisure with an iPhone.



Gear-wise, we were set. We realized that a third of our trip would take us across rocky, mountainous Balkan roads on bikes designed for smooth surfaces, yet we felt confident we would be able to muddle through. We were looking forward to the delight of flying over roads and tracks, the pleasure of covering great distances each day, the joy of being able to climb passes, without pounding away on heavy machines like convicts crippled with chains.

This did not compel us to ride fast all the time. On the contrary. Travelling light allowed us to stop whenever we fancied, as we were able to restart the machine dynamically and fresh as ever, set free from workhorse inertia.

Traveling light is a luxury we can afford in our European latitudes. With a high population density, we were able to find rooms to rent almost everywhere along with gracious rural hospitality. And yet, unless I have to cross a desert, I am prepared to demonstrate the

practicality of this light setup in any corner of the world.

And so we rode out on a late-summer morning, our last image of home that of our bike sponsor, still worrying whether we would make it or not, realizing that we had not tested our bikes nor our bag system prior to the departure. We traversed the unique perfection that is the Northern Swiss countryside close to the Rhine river. Rape and wheat filled the air with their fragrances. Soon we took side roads, straying onto fair gravel paths. We were eager, shouting and singing, greeting old couples enjoying the protection of ancient linden trees that shaded opulent barns. Our journey was beginning at last! In the high tempo of our excitement, Zürich was here already.

The next day was a bright sunny one. The Alps were calling us, and we literally dived into the drama of sheer valleys and pastures high above us. Although we did climb around

Racing down the Flüelapass in Switzerland. We were lucky not to get caught in the usual storms near the pass.



Left: Christopher enjoys his daily wash in the Drave torrent, Austria, which looked like Wyoming.

Opposite: Gravel riding among beech and pine trees in South Tyrol. The scent was exquisite.

1,500 m (5,000 ft) on that second day, the region that links Zürich to the Rhine valley close to Liechtenstein is flat and farmed. At an average speed of 35 km/h (21.7 mph), Marc's ardour was tangible on the road between vineyards and Zürich's lake. Behind, I tried to calm him down, reasoning that there was still significant distance to be covered. Futile.

We paused at the medieval town of Rapperswil with its flawless tiled roofs before reaching the pearl blue lake of Walenstadt, where we had our first dip. That afternoon, we rode through the only storm we encountered during the trip. It was so hot that we chose to ignore our rain gear. We got drenched, which provided a welcome cool-down.

And with the rainstorm came those Alpine essences and sounds that would escort us all the way to Slovenia: the sharp smell of resin from spruces and larches, the high mellow meadows with their yellow and blue gentians, the trill of coal and crested tits along with the echoed hammer of the black woodpecker.

The sun struck us as we woke up in a chalet where we had found refuge. The owner, an old lady, plied us with food, warmth and cheerfulness. Typical of these heights, the air was chill and clear. Marc slept deeply under a thick granny duvet. This would be our great Alpine

day, and we would reach Italy after climbing at least 2,300 m (7,500 ft). While ascending Wolfgangpass at a spirited pace, we saw the whiteness of the snowy Piz Jeremias and Piz Buin to the East. The fancy city of Davos was an opportunity to address a few technical issues, such as the impossibility of engaging the small chainring, and the loss of a flip flop during the storm.

Flüelapass was next, with lavish BMWs and motorbikes rumbling behind us. Sometimes we were on our own, admiring the foxgloves, sheep's sorrels and angelicas by the roadside; sometimes we labored under the sound of engines that reverberated in the mountains.

We were lucky with the weather: Leg and arm warmers proved unnecessary. Pastures and mountain ranges were illuminated against a darkening sky, which became black while we climbed the Ofenpass in a Rockies-like mineral and pine wood landscape. We had entered the Romanche region, Switzerland's fourth official linguistic area, a heritage straight from the Roman Empire. Its language is close to Latin and its architecture, with *sgraffiti* frescoes, evokes Italy's *Cinquecento*. The fortified farm-like monastery of St. Johann is a sample of pure Roman art.

We slowed down while climbing the gently sloping, but high, passes, yet our lightness



Austria remains strongly Catholic, and the region is dotted with religious icons.

enabled us to maintain momentum, with a minimum speed of 10-13 km/h (6-8 mph).

Having approached heaven, we had no choice but to ride down again. But not to hell. The Italian South Tyrol turned out to be a proper Eden. Riding through apple and apricot orchards, we soon arrived in the bright cities of medieval Merano and baroque Bolzano.

We stuffed ourselves with apricots and gulped liters of water as the air had become sultry. We continued along an extraordinarily well-kept path network that brought us through town centers and gorges with 'bike cafés' along the way. Here we found most of the tools required to maintain our mounts and met fellow cyclists sipping exquisite *caffè lungi* in the shade of massive century-old chestnut trees. We met with an abundance of substantive food at the places we slept: apple strudel, *Speck* ham and spinach dumplings.

This cycling paradise continued as we entered Austria. The meadows remained verdant as ever, but the forest green mountain walls

were replaced by stark limestone cliffs when we sighted Tre Cime and Gailtaler Alpen. Architecture was now more baroque, and church towers sharp as alabaster rose before us. It was a Sunday, and every village and town found excuses to celebrate – they celebrated the firemen, the haymaking, the bounty of summer...

Descending the Drave torrent in Austria was like following a Wyoming river, and we wondered whether a bear would pop up at some point. We spent our fifth night in the quaint city of Lienz, before crossing into rural Carinthia. We had difficulty finding a spot for our daily dip as we got closer to Slovenia. Access to the lakes were on a pay-only basis. Beaches were loud and crowded, enhanced with the scent of hotdogs. Finally, we slipped naked into an acceptable marsh. We cooled off among reeds and frogs until two girls arrived to enjoy the view.

That refreshing dip was more than welcome as we were about to enter Slovenia by ascending a pass with an 18% slope. We were grateful not to have to drag a heavy mount along. The

steepness of the gradient gave us no alternative but to stand on our pedals, praying that momentum would keep us from falling over. Imagine our bliss when we reached the top of the pass and contemplated the plunge down into the twilight purple of the Triglav mountain range. Half an hour later, we sipped our first Slovenian dark beer in Gozd Martuljek.

The landscape had become even more rural. We rode along wild raspberry underbrush and openwork barns stuffed with perfumed fresh hay, against the postcard background of the toothed Julian Alps. The distraction was such that I dropped my camera – I had been taking all my pictures while on the go. The lens mechanism broke and the screen turned black.

After a long ride down the Sava river valley, I found a replacement in the capital, Ljubljana. Saved! We spent some time wandering among the city's vivid, shimmering buildings, drank countless coffees, splashed in the channels of the city, and swam zigzagging between barges filled with tourists.

This was our first substantial pause. We

were done with the Alps and had completed the first leg of our trip. Four countries in seven days, not bad!

On our second day in Slovenia, we arrived in the small spa town of Dolenjske Toplice. A lack of affordable accommodation led us to backtrack, in the dark, our tiny lights twinkling in the glare of the blurring flares of cars, to a modest village. A friendly old lady baked us pizzas, which we devoured as soon as she served them.

The next morning, we enjoyed the bed and breakfast we had unexpectedly found. Like many people here, our vigorous and hardworking host had saved some capital by working in nearby Germany and Austria before returning home. Thanks to Slovenia's membership in the EU, the Austrians and Germans he used to work for were now his guests.

The next day, our usual minimum of 1,000 m (3,300 ft) in elevation gain brought us to Croatia, another newcomer to the EU (2013). We rode among monumental castles and neat round churches crowned with

Rural scene in Croatia. People were busy in the fields and meadows all through the Balkans.

