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One Reader's Adventures In Eastern Europe



By [Tom Nash](#), Photos by Tom Nash, Intro by [Alex Edge](#)

Tom Nash is an American motorcyclist living and working in Denmark, and a frequent [Motorcycle Daily](#) reader. When Tom offered to tell our readers about his motorcycle-mounted business trip through Eastern Europe, I thought it might provide some vicarious fun for those of us who don't get to spend much time outside of the US. Here is his tale of navigation and investigation over a large region, a good part of which was for years hidden from Western eyes behind the now-opened 'Iron Curtain'.

My job requires me to visit prospects and customers in many places around the world, but one of my prime geographical areas of activity, and the most interesting to me personally, is Eastern Europe. Through chance I ended up with a quite hectic May business travel schedule involving a trade show in Bratislava, Slovakia, a week of meetings in Prague, Czech Republic, followed by a week-long trade show in Berlin, Germany. I asked my company travel coordinator to try to arrange weekends at home during these three very busy weeks, but the airline schedules just would not work out for me. I had meetings and trade shows that lasted into late Fridays, and one cannot get home to western Denmark from anywhere else in Europe on a Saturday. It made no sense to arrive home on Sunday just to get back on a plane on Monday, so I marched into my boss's office and announced that I was taking the motorcycle on this business trip and he was paying for it, weekend side trips and all. He knows not to argue with me, especially where the bike is concerned.

I left my home in Denmark on a partly cloudy spring day and rode 963 kilometers (roughly 600 miles) to Prague, Czech Republic. I stopped at the Danish-German border stores where the Germans sell cheap liquor to the heavily-taxed Danes. One time I saw a Danish-registered Ford Escort pull out of this place with so much beer in the trunk and back seat that the front wheels were barely touching the ground. I have always wondered if that guy actually made it past the border and how he explained his compliance with the "for personal consumption only" rule. My goal was not booze, however. Located in the same shopping center is a store for a well-known German brand of [motorcycle clothing](#), and I wanted to check on some new rain boots. I forgot that May 1 is a holiday in Germany. The liquor store was open. The grocery store with German pretzels and American chewing gum, which you cannot get in Denmark, was open. The sex shop was open. The restaurants were open. The motorcycle clothing store was closed. I gave a fleeting thought to German cultural priorities as I rode back out to the autobahn and headed south.

The trip was pretty much uneventful through most of Germany. Using the GPS I bypassed both Hamburg and Berlin, blasting down the autobahn at obscene but still legal speeds, limited only by the aerodynamics of my hard side bags. Above 200 kph (125 mph) my aftermarket side bags set up an uncontrollable front end oscillation, so I am effectively prevented from even more ludicrous speeds. All was fine until I got to former East Germany.



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Just prior to this trip I did what I thought was a very clever TomTom GPS installation in the fairing, with the GPS mounted right next to the instrument cluster. However, about 50 kilometers into the trip I discovered that the TomTom screen is not very readable in direct sunlight, especially when mounted out there with the rest of the instruments. I was having trouble reading anything except the very large arrow for the next direction change and the distance to that change. As I approached the German city of Dresden in what was formerly East Germany the road surface became progressively worse, and pretty soon my fairing was vibrating heavily from the constant bumps and ripples in the road. It has been 15 or so years since the wall came down, but many east European roads are still communist-era, even the motorways. It got to the point where I could not even read the large text on the GPS, but that no longer mattered. The road had become so rough that the TomTom 700, which uses a computer-like hard drive instead of memory cards, kept crashing and rebooting. I was losing my GPS entirely just as critical turns came up. German road signs are only marginally better than those in France, which are the worst on the face of the planet, so this began to get interesting

Out of frustration I finally removed the GPS from the fairing and shoved it into the map pocket on the [tank bag](#), tearing the tank bag's clear plastic in the process. (Awww #"%&@...) The tank bag dampened out the worst of the vibrations, and I was able to continue on my journey. What I discovered next was that putting the GPS in the tank bag provided two very nice design features: my body provided enough shade to block the sun and make the screen readable, and the GPS was now close enough that I could easily read the screen with the reading portion of my bifocals! OK, so my original design looked slick and professional in the garage when I was building it, but no, I did not actually have time to test ride it for usability before launching on the long trip.

Leaving the Dresden area everything settled down for the final high-speed autobahn blast to the Czech border. The last 50 kilometers or so were two-lane roads through the foothills between Germany and the Czech Republic. I rolled up to a quiet border crossing point on my Danish-registered motorcycle, and handed my American passport to the German border guard. He looked at my passport, and flipped through the pages trying to figure out this American on a Danish bike crossing into the Czech Republic. I do so much international travel that I had to have the U.S. Embassy insert extra pages into my passport, so the guard was busy for a while. I was not the typical local German or Czech crossing the border for cheap booze or legal prostitutes, but he was looking for suspicious patterns. He looked at my outdated (by 5 or 10 kilos) passport photo, looked at me again, finally shrugged his shoulders, and stamped the passport. He then handed it to the Czech border guard who was sitting right next to him. She looked at my passport, flipped through the pages, looked at the photo, looked at me, and ran it through the computer. Apparently nothing weird came up on her screen, so she stamped the passport and handed it back to me. I rode off.

About two kilometers later something began to bother me about the entire border crossing. Then it hit me. Both border guards looked at my photo and then looked at me. Several times. Neither one of them asked me to take off my sunglasses and [helmet](#) with the dark visor. They have absolutely no idea who actually crossed into the Czech Republic! I guess Osama does not ride a Yamaha, so no worries, right?

Giggling to myself about the sleepy border guards, I cruised down the twisty near-mountain road into the Czech Republic. Passing what looked like a summer cabin on the side of the road I caught something out of the corner of my eye. It looked suspiciously like a large amount of bare flesh through a picture window. Thinking someone just forgot to close the curtains I

thought nothing of it until I passed the next "summer cabin." I suddenly realized that there are a lot of "summer cabins" with large picture windows on that road, just a few kilometers from the German border. Then I remembered that prostitution is legal (and taxed) in the Czech Republic. Every picture window was filled with naked ladies dancing their wares for the passing drivers. This gives the phrase "border stores" an entirely new meaning. I wonder how the accident rate on that twisty mountain road with all those extra curves compares to national averages?

Speeding on to Prague, I arrived at my upscale hotel in downtown Prague and pulled into the parking garage. The kids in the parking garage know me. The hotel in Prague is my second or third home, and I normally rent a car at the Prague airport and drive myself to the hotel. They were, however, a bit surprised to see me arrive on a motorcycle. I arranged for a bellhop to collect my hard side bags and tail trunk, and headed up to hotel reception in my bug-infested leathers, helmet hair and all.

The ladies at hotel reception did the usual motorcycle-related disapproving double-take before recognizing me as a regular customer, after which check-in went smoothly. I went up to my room followed by the bellhop, and after he unloaded my bags I tried to tip him. He would not take my money. I insisted. He refused again. It turns out that he tours on a motorcycle, and refusing the tip was his way of taking care of a kindred spirit. Some things in this world are universal. We riders are part of a world-wide fraternity and we constantly rediscover this in the most unexpected places. More on that subject later.

The next morning when the same bellhop and I got back down to the parking garage, he pointed to an old Jawa 350 cc two-stroke cruiser-style motorcycle parked near mine. The same Jawa two-stroke motor came in many styles of frame, including a sidecar rig and military versions (see photo). This cruiser version belongs to his son, and it is kept in the hotel garage because Dad's Harley takes up



Charles Bridge, Prague

all of the available garage space at home. We chatted for a few moments about his trips, while I silently marvelled about a Czech rider on an American Harley cruising to the Adriatic coast in Croatia for a summer holiday. Mr. Bellhop again refused a tip, wished me a good ride, and took the cart back to the elevator and up to the hotel.

I snapped my bags into place, and had

a sudden inspiration. I took 10 Euros out of my wallet and stuck it in the little leather cruiser bag on the kid's front forks. Maybe Dad will not take the tip, but what kid on a budget riding a bike older than him will refuse gas money magically appearing out of nowhere? Feeling quite satisfied with myself for being so clever, I fired up my bike and got back on the road for the 330 kilometer (approximately 200 miles) ride to Bratislava, Slovakia.



A very old military Jawa

The fastest ride from Prague to Bratislava is on the motorway (freeway or interstate to you North Americans) to Brno, Czech Republic, the home of the Czech MotoGP race. Then take a right turn onto another motorway and head south to Bratislava. The Czech Republic is a lovely country. It reminds me of riding through the rolling countryside of Missouri in the USA, or the foothills of the Sierra Nevada in California, except that unlike California the Czech Republic has trees. There are no tall mountains in the Czech Republic, but it is certainly not flat. Beautiful countryside.

At the Slovakian border I half-toyed with the idea of not removing my helmet and sunglasses. However, I have been traveling through Eastern Europe for the last few years, and I reminded myself that many of these border guards are totally bored former communist guards with absolutely no sense of humor. So I played it safe and took the helmet off as I got to passport control. I should not have bothered. The two border guards were so busy checking out my bike that they took one cursory glance at my passport and waved me through without bothering to stamp it. On to Bratislava!

I had never been to Slovakia before. My business has taken me to other Eastern European countries on a regular basis, but this was my first visit to Slovakia. I had no idea what to expect in a former communist country of five million people out on the far edge of Europe. Poland has the worst roads in Europe, with the possible exception of Turkey. Romania is pretty much like Poland, but with the addition of horse- and donkey-drawn gypsy carts lurking around the blind corners. Bulgaria is slightly better than Poland and Romania, but not by much. So my first surprise in Slovakia was the final stretch of road from the Czech border to Bratislava, which is a brand new motorway that puts many North American motorways to shame. The speed limit is the typical European 130 kph (80 mph), and it was a very pleasant final ride into Bratislava. The big trucks were new and politely driven, the cars were mostly new, and the whole scene looked very much like somewhere in North America or Western Europe.

My GPS does not include a map of Slovakia. I was back to the "poor man's hard copy GPS." I followed the motorway to and through Bratislava, and then 25 kilometers to the east to the

hotel where I expected to meet my Czech colleagues. When I got there, my colleagues were nowhere to be found, so out came the mobile (cell) telephone. They had elected to work on the trade show stand that afternoon and evening. I had to ride the 25 kilometers back to the trade show facility in Bratislava to meet them, but I had never been to this trade show facility before. I got directions from them to follow the signs on the motorway towards Budapest, Hungary, and take the first exit after two motorways intersected. Then I was to follow the signs to the trade show facilities. What got lost in the translation was the fact that I was now EAST of Bratislava, not NORTHWEST (as if I was first traveling from the Czech Republic). It turned out to be a rather important distinction.



Slovakian motorway

I dutifully rode the motorway back to Bratislava, followed the signs to Budapest as directed, and looked for the first exit. I could not find any exit. I was now on a limited access motorway headed south. As I watched Bratislava begin to shrink in the rear view mirrors, I slowly realized that "limited access" had turned to "no access." Next stop: the Hungarian border, 45 kilometers away

What is the first thing one does when headed in the wrong direction? Speed up to save on wasted time and quickly reach the next place to make a U-turn, of course! Stupid me came around a long tree-lined blind sweeper on the motorway at 180 kph (110mph) and had to do a panic front tire squishing, front fender mashing, rear wheel twitching maximum braking effort so as not to run clean through the Hungarian border check point, armed guards and all. All I could think of in that instant was a Bill Murray-like stunt worthy of the movie "Stripes." Arriving at the passport control shack in fine style just short of screeching tire smoke, out came the passport from my tank bag

"Sir, would you please remove the helmet and sunglasses?" Oh man, not again... "Are you in a hurry to go somewhere?"

"Ummmm.... Bratislava."

Dead silence, a deadly serious beady-eyed police stare, and I could hear the silent thought "stupid American" in stereo from the guard and his buddy. But I think my gray hair helps in these situations.

Finally, "Sir, Bratislava, Slo-VAK-i-aaa, is that way. This way is Budapest, HUN-gar-eee." (Not verbalized: "you idiot")

"Yeah, I know. When can I turn around?"

"Go 500 meters down the road, make a U-turn, and come back through over there. Please go a little slower this time."

"Yessir. Of course. And thank you."

So I rode 500 meters, turned around, and headed back north. I pulled up to the passport control office, which is located precisely 5 meters from the other passport control office, took off my helmet and sunglasses BEFORE handing over my passport, and I am not making this up, the guard says, "How long have you been in Hungary?"

I lost it completely. I started laughing so hard I nearly dropped the bike. It was not until the guard gave me a look like he was about to initiate a long detailed and very thorough search through my bags and my body cavities for illegal substances that I finally calmed down and tried to be serious and respectful enough to answer his question.

"Um, two minutes?"

"Are you in Hungary on business or pleasure?"

(Am I missing something here? Are these trick questions?)

"Uhhh, Is there a check box for: by accident?"

Wrong answer, stupid. The guy starts toying with me, and takes a long look at my passport, flipping pages while he walks slowly around the bike. Twice. I start to wonder if he has X-ray vision and a drug dog's nose, not that I have anything to hide except perhaps some pretty smelly socks and a bottle of perfectly legal scotch. Scotch is legal in Hungary, right? Maybe he heard my aftermarket exhaust on that ill-considered 180 kph blast followed by high RPM tire-chirping downshifting directly into his little fiefdom. Is a 3-year-old race can with mostly burned-out packing legal in Hungary? Should I shut it off now or is that being a bit too obvious? I begin to imagine the telephone conversations with my wife and my boss about why the bike is impounded in a country I was not scheduled to visit, and why I am not taking care of business in the country I was SUPPOSED to be in.

He finally hands my passport back to me and says, "The speed limit in Slovakia is 130 kph."

"Thank you!" and off I rode at precisely 129.5 kph according to the deadly accurate bicycle speedometer I have installed just for these kinds of critical situations.

So I can legitimately claim that I have ridden the bike in Hungary, for whatever that is worth. 40 minutes later I found my colleagues in Bratislava and settled in for three days of trade show. I parked the bike at the hotel and did not touch it for the next few days while we worked the show.

My plan for the following weekend allowed for three days of leisure before I had to attend a series of meetings in Prague. Monday was a holiday in the Czech Republic - celebration of the end of World War II. So the plan was to go east out of the Bratislava area on Saturday morning, and head for a mountain area known as the High Tatras that are part of the

Carpathian mountain range that stretches all along the border between Slovakia and Poland. From the High Tatras I would turn back west and take two more days on the back roads to reach Prague on Monday night, in time for a Tuesday morning meeting. I was looking forward to a quiet Friday night packing and getting the bike ready for my three-day tour of Slovakia while my colleagues drove back to Prague. I was also hoping to meet a Slovakian rider or two over the weekend, if there was such a thing as a Slovakian motorcycle rider, and interview him for this article.

After we had sent the last truck full of our trade show gear on its way, one of my colleagues drove me 25 kilometers back to the hotel before he started his long drive back home to Prague. Our hotel was a small resort tucked back in the forest next to a beautiful lake in a quiet peaceful setting with a couple of small hotels and many cute summer homes. However, on this Friday night we ran into a bit of a surprise. The last 300 meters of the road to the hotel were closed. The entire area had been reserved for a weekend motorcycle rally and outdoor rock concert by a Bratislava-based motorcycle club, the Red Barons.

I got out of the car, said goodbye to my colleague, and walked through the rally to my hotel. On the way I found a Red Barons club member who spoke English, and asked him about the rally. He invited me to stay and meet some others who spoke English. After making a quick stop at the hotel to change my suit and tie for my old motorcycle club shirt from San Francisco, which was the only one I had with me, I headed back to what was rapidly becoming 500



I found the Red Barons Motorcycle Club holding a rally right in front of my hotel!

Slovakian motorcycle riders enjoying a few beers, some good food, and a live rock band. There was every kind of bike you could imagine, from brand-new state of the art sport bikes to lovingly restored classics to Gold Wings with Corbin seats. Yes, that very same Corbin Seats from California, USA. On display on a stage were two gorgeous choppers that the Big Man and Paulie would be proud to call their own, although Mikey was nowhere in sight. I was totally blown away by the entire spectacle. Silly naïve me was simply hoping to find somebody out on the road, most likely on a late 80's or early 90's sport bike or sport tourer, and here I accidentally stepped into a modern rally that could just as well have been in Los Angeles or Miami. If you can read the Slovakian language, check this out: www.redbarons.sk.

I met Mr. Peter Toth, the president of the Red Barons. We had to chat through an interpreter because he spoke very little English, but he was quite proud of his club, the rally, and the state

of motorcycling in Slovakia. I could see why. Peter is a big friendly bear of a man, and he was a very gracious host who made sure that I felt at home and was enjoying myself. He also owns a very well-cared-for Gold Wing, with a Corbin seat of course. I was introduced to Mr. Michael Holicka. Michael is in his late 30's or early 40's, and he has his own business with 40 or so employees doing all of the warranty work and service work in Slovakia for a well-known American electronics firm that manufactures everything from digital cameras to printers to scanners and computer accessories. In his wild younger days Michael spent some time in Florida, and as a waiter on cruise ships in the Caribbean. His English is flawless. Michael owns two bikes, a Gold Wing and a cruiser. Michael and Peter have been to the Daytona bike meet (yes, the one in Florida, USA) three times, and they are planning to make the pilgrimage to Sturgis in 2007. I chatted with Michael for a long while, and asked him many questions about motorcycling in this part of the world.

Michael told me that before 1989, there actually was a motorcycle community in Slovakia, although it was smaller. They rode what they could get their hands on - Jawa's, MZ's manufactured in East Germany, and CZ's, a Czech brand. Not much choice, but it was two wheels and that is what counts. In Eastern Europe motorcycling is a disease in the same manner that it is a disease in the rest of the world, and fortunately there is no cure. After 1989 Slovakia became a proper part of Europe, and is now part of the European Union. The motorcycle market has exploded. Today everything is available like it is everywhere else in Europe, and I could see brand new CBR1000RR's, ZX-10's and R-1's parked next to the big Harley tourers and modern Japanese cruisers. Bandits, Fazers, and BMW's were parked in between Sportsters, Vulcans, and VFR's. The most expensive bikes are the Harleys - another universal truth in the motorcycle world.



The Red Barons club flag

Just like in the rest of Europe and in North America, Slovakian riders come from all walks of life. I saw a fairly high percentage of women riders as well. There is a Gold Wing club that tours the region, attends Gold Wing meets in Czech Republic and Austria, and they take summer tours to Romania, Malta, and Croatia. Croatia is the best-kept holiday secret in southeast Europe. Think Italian beaches at Polish prices.

Every weekend during the summer there is a rally like the one we were attending. The various clubs in Slovakia sponsor them, and there are five or six big ones during the summer that attract riders from Austria, Slovenia, Germany, Croatia, Slovakia,

and the Czech Republic.

I have done enough travelling to the Eastern Europe region to know that most drivers are, if I may be diplomatic, fairly aggressive. Michael laughed and explained to me that it is a cultural thing. In most Eastern European countries the drivers know that they can negotiate with the Police if they get stopped. If you are speeding or driving like a madman and the officer stops you and says the fine is 1000 crowns, you offer him 200, and the negotiations begin. If somewhere in this process you specify that you do not want a receipt, which is that

annoying piece of paper the officer might have to account for later, you might just get the fine down to something very easily affordable. Knowing this, the typical Eastern European driver does not have the same incentive to keep things at a reasonable level as we do in the western areas of Europe and across the pond in North America. I have to admit that I have taken advantage of this myself, getting a 50 US Dollar fine for not having my headlights on down to an 8 US dollar fine with no receipt for my company expense report...

Yes, there are accidents between motorcycles and autos, and predictably the most prevalent cause is "I did not see him..." Some things never change.

After a good long talk with Michael I wandered around to meet some other people. I found another gentleman who spoke perfect English, and we had a chat over a couple of beers. He lived in Canada for four years, and toured some of the same roads in the western USA that I have toured. It was quite surreal to be chatting about US 395 on the back side of the Sierra Nevada and Death Valley with a guy who grew up on the other side of the



Promenade

iron curtain on the other side of the planet. We were officially enemies when we were kids. Now we are fellow members of an international fraternity that knows no boundaries, chatting over a beer on a beautiful spring evening.



Real Slovakian ladies ride Harleys!

By the time I left the rally to go back to the hotel, I had two mobile phone numbers with me from people who said that if I had any trouble with language translation, or bike trouble, or even negotiating with the Police, I should call them and they would rescue me. Just as in the Czech Republic, and just as my experiences in the rest of Europe and North America, I confirmed again that motorcycling has become a world community. I felt a little more at ease tearing through the twisties over the next few days.

To the Red Barons and their friends - THANK YOU for the hospitality!

Saturday morning I loaded up the bike and headed east. After an hour or so of boring flatlands east of Bratislava I got into the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. I followed every small two-lane road I could find in the most convoluted twisty route I could devise up to and through the High Tatras. The High Tatras are beautiful, and the area is a popular ski area in the winter. The roads in Slovakia are not typical eastern European roads, they are much better. I found twisties that are up to par with anything you would find in the Sierras, the Rockies, the Alps, or the Appalachians. The road surfaces were just as good, the corners just as exciting, and there were no gypsies in horse-drawn carts!

Saturday was a solitary day with just me and my bike in another beautiful and unknown (to me) part of the world. It was fantastic. All along the way I stopped to visit little roadside shops, stopped for gas, stopped to eat, and I found the Slovakian people to be very friendly and modern Europeans. The parents are not so good with English, but the kids learn it in school. If I had a problem I just had to find a young kid as a translator, and they were usually proud to show off their English skills.

My destination for Saturday night was a small hotel in the High Tatras that I had found on the internet. When planning this trip I had chosen the twistiest roads I could find, decided upon the number of kilometers I wanted to ride for the day, and then started looking for a hotel in the area where I would be after that many kilometers. I picked a small ski resort in the middle of nowhere. When I got there I was pleasantly surprised.



Not Massachusetts

The village where the hotel is located consists of 15 dogs, ten houses, and the hotel. The owners of this brand new small ski resort are a Slovakian lady and her Flemish husband. They both had worked typical corporate jobs in Bratislava, but decided that what they really wanted to do in life was run their own quiet little hotel. So they borrowed from the bank where the lady worked at the time, and built a stylish 20-room resort 10 km from three different ski areas in the northern part of

Slovakia. The hotel was beautifully done, clean, modern, very comfortable, and was quite obviously the family's pride and joy. That evening after dinner I sat in the restaurant with my laptop computer and shared a 54 Mbps wireless internet connection with an international collection of travellers from Germany, France, Belgium, and the Czech Republic, while we all listened to a local Slovakian folk music group. The owner wandered around from table to table speaking fluently in each of the languages represented. The total bill for one night in a big suite, dinner with a couple of beers, and breakfast the next morning, was 50 Euros. My boss will love this expense report - I saved him lots of money.

On Sunday I rode northwest through more mountains and twisty roads to a remote part of the Slovakian-Czech border. This time the border guard simply waved me through without requiring me to stop, and I rode into the lower rolling hills of the eastern Czech Republic. It was much like riding in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri and Arkansas in the USA, with the same gradual transition to the flatlands of Illinois.



The entire reason for the trip

I got bored with the flatlands and turned on the GPS, which contains the entire Czech Republic. I called up the address of the hotel in Brno, chose the "fastest route" option, and headed straight for it. The final 40 kilometers into Brno were on a new motorway where I followed a couple of Czech drivers at several tens of kilometers over the 130 kph speed limit. A 1.9 liter diesel Skoda Octavia running on European diesel fuel is a pretty quick car. We had fun and got to Brno in no time.

The next morning I had only a two-hour ride to Prague on the motorway, so I took a side trip to visit the Brno race track, home of the MotoGP race. A friend and I are going back there in August for the MotoGP race, and I wanted to get a good idea of what to expect in the way of campgrounds, parking, track entrance, etc. It is a good thing I did that, because I discovered that the closest camping to the track leaves one with a four kilometer walk to the track, uphill the whole way! Now I know to bring a backpack and carry sufficient supplies to spend the entire day away from the camp site. My visit coincided with a track day for Suzukis sponsored by the Suzuki importer in the Czech Republic. For this day it was a shame that I ride a Yamaha - had I been riding a Suzuki I could have dumped the bags and done a track day on a famous MotoGP track for free!

I took some more back roads on the way to Prague, enjoyed the countryside, and eventually worked my way back to the motorway for the final few kilometers into Prague. About 20 kilometers before Prague I was passed by a big yellow Ferrari doing well over the speed limit.

He was going so fast that he had his left turn signal and bright lights permanently switched on. My 200 kph speed limit was not enough to stay with him, and I estimate that he was going somewhere around 250 to 260 kph (160 mph.) It was fun to see the rest of the drivers diving to the right lanes to get out of his way. You would never see that kind of courtesy for a faster driver having fun in North America. "Hey - you can't do that!"

I checked back into my normal hotel in Prague, and spent the next week in a suit and tie in meetings and contract negotiations. Ugh!

The original plan at this point was for me to ride home to Denmark, spend a weekend at home, and then fly to Berlin, Germany, for a week-long trade show. However, a work colleague had a death in the family and telephoned me to see if I could cover for him in Berlin on Sunday and Monday, two days earlier than I expected to be there. I called my wife and told her that I was not coming home after all, and left Prague on a Saturday morning for Berlin. I took the same route going out of the Czech Republic as I had taken on the way in, passing the "border stores" which were in full swing (literally) even on a Saturday morning. I got to within 5 kilometers of the border when disaster struck.

Two years ago I installed a German aftermarket hydraulic clutch master cylinder and slave cylinder to replace the stock clutch cable. This system is manufactured by Magura in Germany, and it is intended for offroad bikes, although many street bike owners have purchased the system and like it. Mine has been fine for two years, but on this day, 5 kilometers inside the Czech Republic, an oil seal blew in the slave cylinder down on the engine case. I ended up with a boot covered in hydraulic oil, and no clutch actuation.

I stopped and looked at the problem, but it only took me about five seconds to realize that I had a potential show stopper. There was no way I was going to repair this or find parts out in the middle of nowhere in Eastern Europe on a Saturday. I thought it over and finally made a decision: press on and shift without the clutch. My rationale was that I would most likely be able to find parts in Berlin, after all it is a German clutch system, and from my racing days I knew that shifting a modern motorcycle transmission without the clutch was not that big a risk.

Getting a road bike with 138 liters of totally full luggage rolling fast enough to jam it into first gear and take off without stalling is not necessarily a piece of cake, especially for a short guy, but I managed. When I got to the border station, I nudged the bike into neutral, coasted to a stop in line behind a line of cars, and got off. As the line moved forward, I pushed the bike towards passport control. Behind me came a voice in the Danish language, someone who obviously saw the Danish registration plate on the bike, "if you are going to push that bike all the way home, you have a very long day ahead of you." Yup, I sure do. We laughed a bit as I made the final push to the passport control office. The guard took my passport, did the usual Danish-registered-bike-American-passport double take, and ordered me into the parking lot to wait while he checked things out on the computer. Fortunately they were just as easy as my first time through there, so I was soon on my way. I pushed the bike down the road until I could get a little downhill assistance, fired up the engine, got on, rolled a bit more to gain some speed, and jammed it into first gear. I was on my way to Berlin, or so I thought.

About 10 kilometers later was a construction zone where the road went down to one lane with a temporary traffic light on each end. As luck would have it, not only did I hit the light red, but it was uphill beyond the light. Damn... When the light turned green, I pushed. I could not push fast enough uphill to have any chance of getting on and riding, so I pushed for one and a half

kilometers. Uphill. On a one-lane road with everyone including the big trucks passing me while I struggled. When I finally reached the other end of the construction zone, it was more uphill. Damn damn damn. I am getting too old for this (expletive deleted.)

I pushed 100 more meters, turned the bike around and pointed it downhill. When the light turned green, I rolled the bike forward, jumped on, and crammed it into gear. Reaching the light I made a rapid handlebar lock U-turn and roared back uphill. You very proper German drivers who are honking your horns and shaking your fists back there can go off and do nasty things to yourselves, thank you very much.

Fortunately it was not much further to the autobahn, and I made it without further problems. For the next 220 kilometers, with one carefully planned and orchestrated gas stop, I had a clutchless ride to Berlin. However, as I got closer and closer to the hotel in Berlin, the road changed to city stop and go traffic with stoplights every two blocks. It was only a matter of time before I was dead and I knew it, so before I completely trashed the gearbox I pulled over.

Every Eastern European city has one eyesore built by the communists as a "gift to the people." In Warsaw it is Stalin's gift to the Poles, the brownstone meeting center with its tall spire and gaudy brass trim. In Bratislava it is the world's ugliest gray suspension bridge with flaking paint and a communist version of a rotating restaurant at the top of a tower that looks like it is ready to fall over at any moment. East Berlin is no exception, with the Democratic People's Television Tower which looks like a very bad copy of the Seattle space needle along with a huge sphere on top, which is now decorated like a pink and white football (soccer ball) for the world cup series. I could see the pink and white football from 15 kilometers away, sticking up in the air like a giant middle finger meant just for me. Three blocks away from that obscene gesture was my hotel, but it was going to be quite a challenge to get there. It was time for plan B.

I have roadside assistance insurance on the bike, and I thought about trying to use it way back there in the Czech Republic. However, the rules are that they will take the bike to the nearest shop, and if that shop cannot fix it within three days THEN they will arrange to get my bike home. I did not have three days, and I was not about to leave the bike outside some unknown shop in the Czech Republic on a Saturday while I travelled on to Berlin. However, now that I was in Berlin, it was time to do a little negotiating with the insurance company about the rescue service. I called my Danish insurance company, explained the situation, and told them that all I wanted was a tow truck ride for the last 15 kilometers to the hotel for me and my bike. I would find the parts and fix my own bike.

You have to have lived in Europe and had first-hand experience with European bureaucracies to truly understand the magnitude of what I was asking of my European insurance company. In less than two minutes I had tossed out every one of their established practices and approved written procedures, and I was asking for someone to make a decision, on a weekend at that. It took a while, but I managed to convince her boss, and then his boss, that I was actually saving them time and money. After they made me promise that I would not call back and ask for further assistance (please don't make us think again), they agreed to authorize a tow truck to take me to the hotel. I am just guessing here, but I think that parting the Red Sea was probably easier than getting this decision to go my way.

I waited for about one hour, and a very big motorcycle rescue truck arrived. In 40 years of riding I had never seen anything like this truck before. It was a huge flatbed truck with a

hydraulic crane on the back. Attached to the crane was a horizontal rectangular frame with canvas straps hanging down. The driver worked the frame to a position directly over my bike, attached the canvas straps to points on the handlebars and motorcycle frame, and lifted the bike up to the bed of the truck. However, he did not set it down. Leaving the bike suspended in mid air, he attached more canvas straps from the truck bed to the lower part of the bike, effectively creating a canvas spider web with my poor bike trapped in mid air over the truck bed like some giant spider's dinner. It was ingenious, and the bike was totally safe even if the truck was to get into an accident.

After we got on our way to the hotel, this very patriotic German driver began to tell me that if I had been wise enough to purchase a proper German motorcycle instead of that Japanese piece of junk, I would not need his services, because German motorcycles are so reliable and good quality, and so on and so on ad nauseum.



Canada? USA? Germany? Slovakia!

You know the drill, and you have heard the hype countless times. As a former BMW owner (twice, mind you) I knew the real score but I kept my mouth shut, biding my time. I have a lot of German friends and colleagues, and I like them and have great respect for them. However, If you have ever spent any time with real Germans, you know how stubborn, fixed, narrow minded, and downright annoying they can sometimes be even when faced with irrefutable facts. I look at it as an endearing national cultural characteristic. So it was absolutely delicious for me to wait for this driver to stop and take a breath, so that I could slip in the fact that all of the Japanese bits on my bike were just fine, it was that GERMAN clutch cylinder that failed and left me stranded. The remaining 10 kilometers to the hotel were very quiet, and only with a supreme effort did I manage to not laugh so he could see it. Every once in a while you get to win a little one, and this was a day where I desperately needed a good laugh. I later tipped the guy 5 Euros for that laugh, and it was worth every penny.

Sometimes, despite your best intentions, making a grand entrance is totally unavoidable. As we pulled up in front of this very proper German hotel in downtown Berlin, in this monster truck with my bike in suspended animation in the back, two of my colleagues from the home office were standing on the sidewalk. Seeing the changing looks on their faces from simple curiosity about this big truck to the slow realization that they had seen that motorcycle somewhere before (in the employee parking lot at home) to the incredulous looks upon seeing me crawl out of the truck still dressed in my leathers with the rescue paperwork hanging out of my mouth and my arms full of helmet, gloves, and tank bag, was absolutely priceless. It is bad enough that I am the token American working for a Danish-based company. American-European cultural differences notwithstanding, I insist on violating everyone's sense of very proper European orderliness by being this hard core motorcyclist, and now I show up at a very proper four-star luxury hotel in a smelly diesel tow truck dressed in bug-spattered leathers, a greasy face, and helmet hair. To tell the truth I actually quite enjoy these little social

transgressions, and I think my colleagues secretly do too. It gives them something to gossip about.

Fortunately, the reception desk did not give me any trouble. I checked in, pushed the bike down into the underground parking garage, and decided to have a few drinks with my co-workers and worry about the bike some other day. After all, I had a week to spend in Berlin, and I did not need the bike to get around.

Reflecting on the last two weeks in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, I finally verbalized something that had been rolling around undefined in the back of my mind. I later told a Czech colleague that what I was about to say might sound negative at first blush, but it was actually a compliment. Both the Czech Republic and Slovakia have become "just another part of Europe." Having seen various stages and degrees of rising out of the pre-1989 political-social-economic ashes all over the Eastern European region, somebody should be congratulated for the tremendous progress those two countries have made. If anyone is thinking of touring either country - do it while prices are still cheap and the western-leaning pro-EU enthusiasm and optimism is still young. Motorcycling is alive and well in both countries.

A few days later while searching the Magura web site I found TNT Offroad in downtown Berlin, not very far from my hotel, and rang them up. Jens Kloos, the owner, speaks fluent English and is a very friendly and helpful guy. I took the train over to his shop and bought a new slave cylinder. Back in the hotel parking garage I had a bit of difficulty getting it properly bled by myself, so I removed the entire system from the bike and took it back to his shop. He helped me bleed the system, with stupid me nearly ruining his shirt in the process by pulling the lever at the wrong time and squirting a cloud of hydraulic oil everywhere. With the complete system assembled I went back to the bike that evening after the trade show and installed everything. I pulled the lever and... VOILA! Nothing.

One of the definitions of mental illness is to repeat the same thing over and over with identical results each time, never trying something different to break the pattern. Out of frustration and a bit of rage I pulled the clutch lever so many times my fingers began to get sore. Finally realizing that magic, wishful thinking, and 1000 clutch lever pulls was not going to solve the problem, I spent the next couple of hours adjusting and bleeding and doing everything else I could think of. Nothing worked. I have a sneaking suspicion that the new slave cylinder was defective from the factory with a missing oil seal in the back end, but I was running out of time to verify this with another trip to TNT Offroad. Sometimes you have to cut your losses and move on while you still have time.

I was up against a hard deadline because I was not able to extend my hotel room for an additional day to work on the bike. The hotel had a horde of world cup football fans on the way, and my room had been promised to European football hooligans a long time ago. So the next morning I gave up, and on the way to the trade show I stopped at the local Yamaha dealer. 200 Euros later I had an entire stock clutch cable system, including lever, cable, mounting brackets stolen off a customer bike that was in for service (thank you!), and the connector at the engine case. To be absolutely sure, I even bought new screws to mount the brackets on the engine side case. Now I was 100% sure that I could get home under my own power.

That night at the hotel it took me 30 minutes to install the stock clutch system. I was so elated that I jumped on the bike, pulled in the clutch lever, fired the bike up, put it in gear, and eased

out the clutch for a little test in the garage.

I am in the aerospace business. I have a very cool big long bright red streamer that says REMOVE BEFORE FLIGHT attached to my kryptonite disk brake lock. I religiously clip that in-your-face streamer to the handlebars whenever I install the disk lock. I pulled that (deliberately by design) annoying streamer out of the way and dropped it on the garage floor so that I could install the clutch cable. When I did that, for some reason I did not remove the disk brake lock.

THUNK!

Did you ever get the feeling that while life has been a wonderful adventure lately, you are getting tired and stupid and it is time to just go home? No, I did not fall over, but my lovely cast aluminum swingarm has a nice new dent to remind me what an idiot I can be.

The next morning the bike made it out of the parking garage under its own power. With a dent in the swing arm, a tear in the tank bag, and a weary rider my road-filthy bike went straight into the first rain storm in three weeks, adding insult to injury. I went in and out of rain showers all the way from Berlin to Denmark, but despite the rain there was one very important final stop to make on the way home. At the last gas stop in Germany, right before the Danish border, at the shopping center with the motorcycle shop, the sex shop, and the liquor store, I bought the biggest bottle of Glenlivet scotch I could find. Writing about the trip is much easier when the loose nut behind the keyboard is well lubricated.

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