

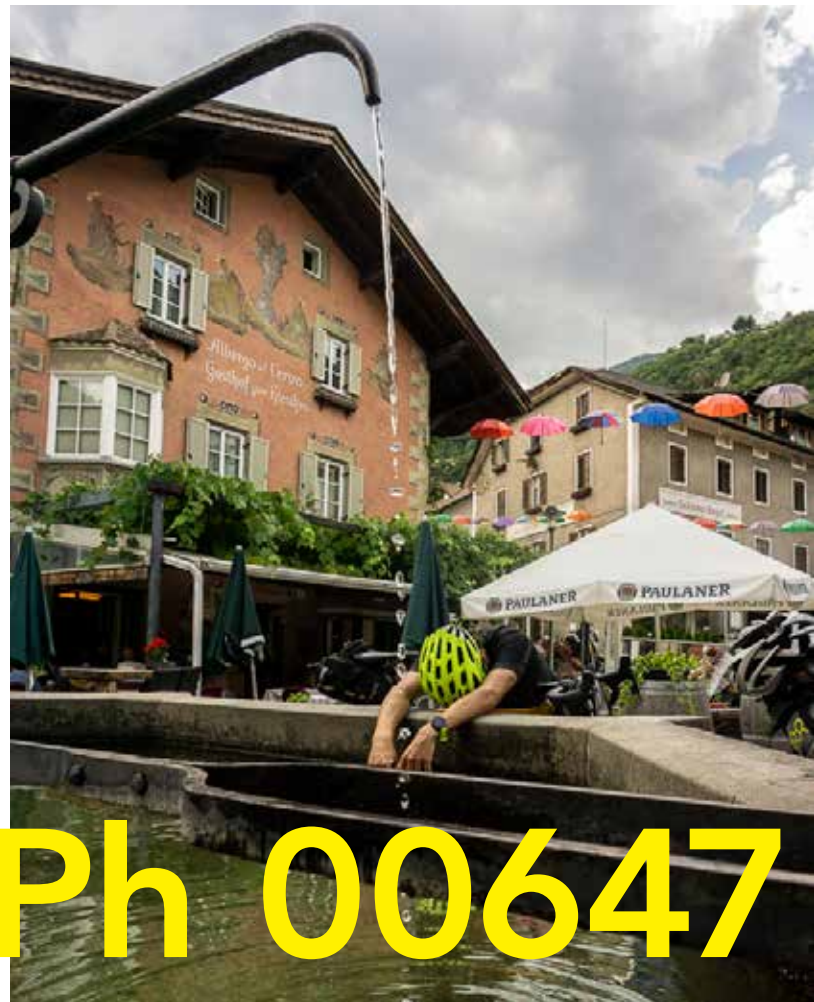
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Balkans Backroads

To Istanbul on racing bikes

Story and photos by Christopher Shand





The Warbird's high-trail geometry inspires confidence on the rough gravel roads. A low-trail bike would feel very similar here.

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 typical images that pervade European Orientalism popped up – whirling Dervishes; the music of another temperament; Islam, the Ottomans and the Califate; 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, 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. Quadlock, 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

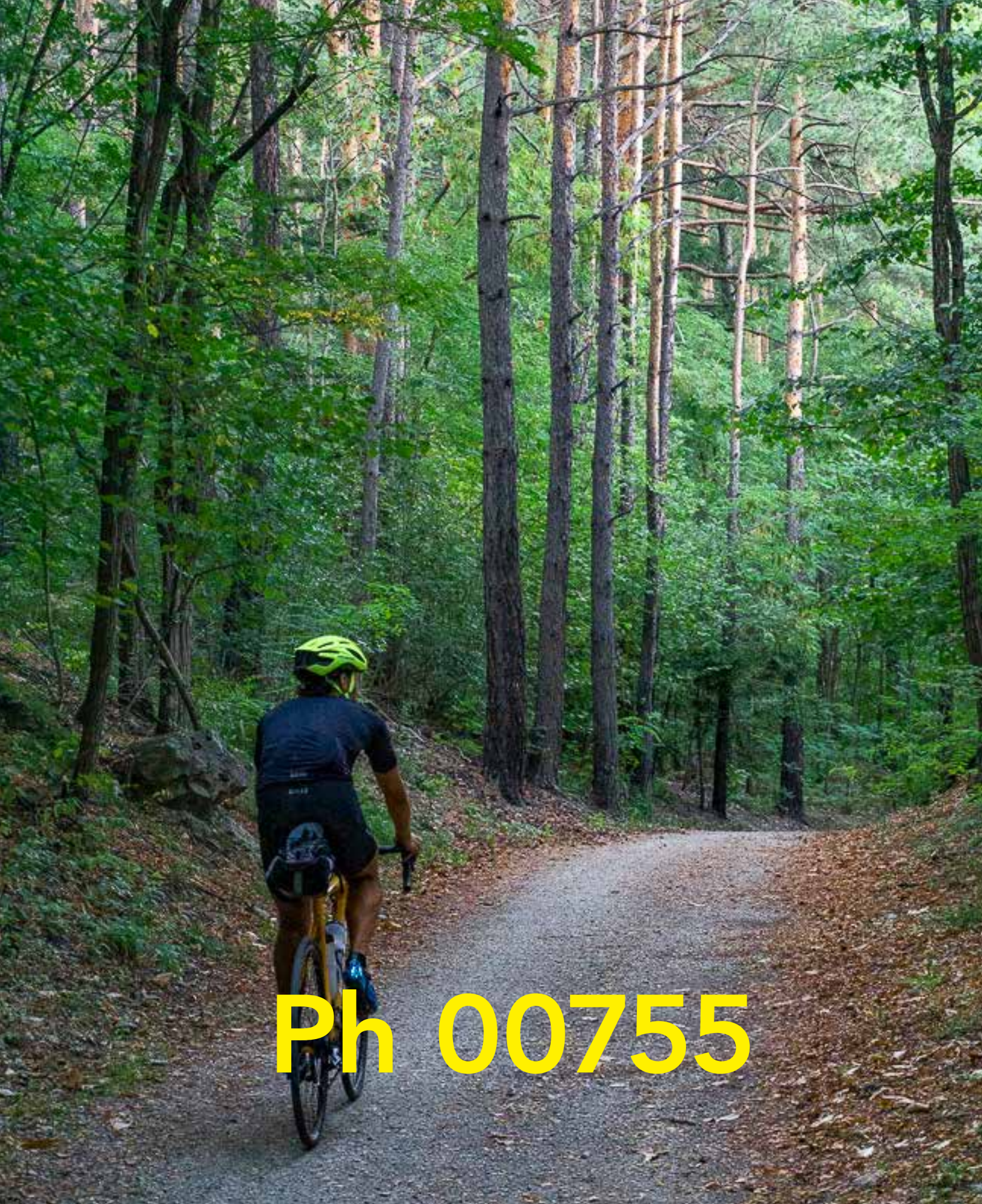
practicality of this light setup in any corner of the world.

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 1,500

Top: The line between spring and winter.

Bottom: Enjoying a cup of hot tea on the unnamed pass.



Left: Enjoying a cup of hot tea on the unnamed pass.
Opposite: Ryan has set up his Smeltzer for rough terrain, with bikepacking bags that distribute the weight evenly across the frame.

m (5,000 ft) on that second day, the region that links Zürich to the Rhine valley close to the 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 Jeramias and Piz Buin on the East. The fancy city of Davos was an opportunity to address a few technical issues, such as the impossibility to engage 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 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 enabled us to maintain momentum, with a



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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

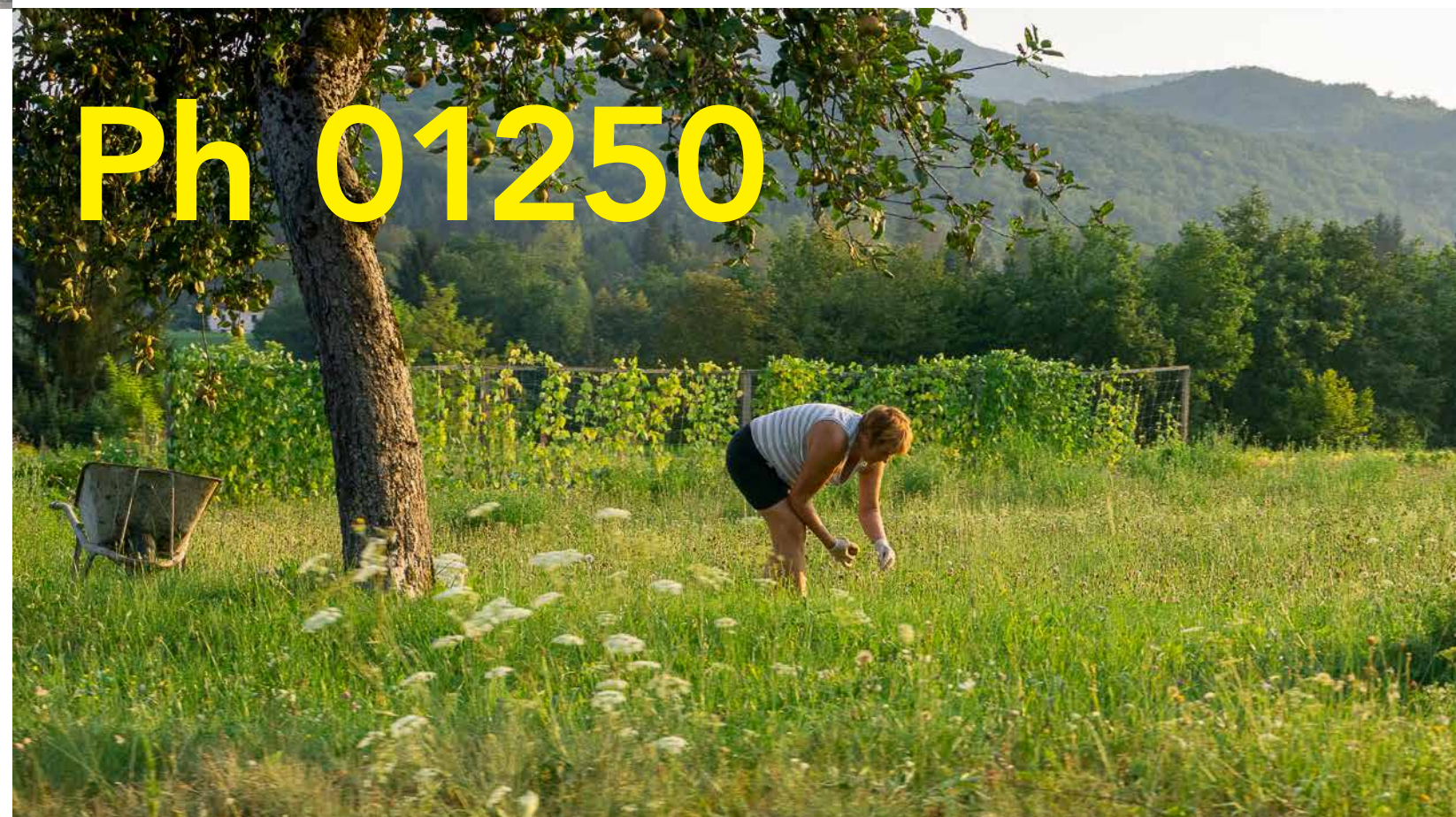
were done with the Alps and had completed the first leg of our trip. Four countries in seven days, not bad!

On our second day in Slovenia, as we arrived in the small spa town 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 along monumental castles and neat round churches crowned with bulbous stee-

Riding along Elk Creek on the way out of the Cascades.





Meeting an old shepherd in Bosnia.

ples. The roads got bumpy to the point where, one by one, Marc lost all the bananas we had slipped into his saddlebag nets. We felt close to the landscape as we proceeded along winding and tiny paths. Farmers cutting the hay with scythes and lining it with rakes greeted us. An old woman beating dried pea plants with a long stick stared at us, taken aback. The indigo damson plums from roadside trees

soon loaded my jersey's back pockets. We would find an abundance of them all across the Balkans, where they play a crucial part in the local kitchen and distillery – notably the *rakija*, or Serbia's famous *šljivovica*, an alcohol made from the fermented and distilled fruits. For us, this also brought the concern of inebriated drivers, who almost brushed against our bikes as they passed!

At lunchtime, we usually ate little and then indulged in a nap to see us through the hottest part of the day. After a dip in the verdant Dobra river and the day's nap, the plums on my back had turned to jam.

The memory of the Balkan wars, source of the bullet holes in ruins that now started showing up along the road, became our regular companion as we entered Bosnia. The first

bright white minarets appeared among old-style turbaned marble tombs from the Ottoman period. Tractors puffed along, pulling carts loaded with hay and kids. We dived in the turquoise icy Una river, at the bottom of which lay an iron bridge, sunk by the Serbian army. We had our first Turkish coffee and encountered our first muddy road, before rising above the canyons on a straight road

Top: The line between spring and winter.

Above: Enjoying a cup of hot tea on the unnamed pass.



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Above: Ryan has set up his Smeltzer for rough terrain, with bikepacking bags that distribute the weight evenly across the frame.

Opposite, top: Ryan has set up his Smeltzer for rough terrain, with bikepacking.

Middle: Ryan has set up his Smeltzer for rough terrain, with bikepacking

Bottom: Ryan has set up his Smeltzer for rough terrain, with bikepacking

built for the army in the 1990's. The road signs warned us that we were surrounded by both mines and wild bears. Drvar, the next town, was something of a ghost town, with entire neighborhoods in ruins. Stray dogs and people whispered in the streets. We stayed at the only hotel around, a tacky ostentatious palace with shiny, but cracked, black marble.

We had established our rhythm. Our muscles were now accustomed to riding continuously for six to eight hours, gaining between 1,000 and 2,000 m (3,300 and 6,500 ft) of elevation every day. The next day had a surprise in store for us. As I was using Google maps, I could not determine whether the roads were asphalted or not. Half an hour into the day, we found ourselves on a 50 km (30 mile) gravel stretch that crossed a plateau near Šator Veliki summit. Vegetation was scarce and dried

by a burning sun. Stone walls ran alongside the track, sometimes disappearing to let us see the remains of hamlets destroyed when general Ratko Mladić's troops scoured the area. An EU dwellings rehabilitation program sign rusted amidst the ruins.

Heat waves distorted horizons and shapes. The figure of a local shepherd appeared like a burnt tree trunk framed by a hundred sheep. We left our bikes under a flock of butterflies to meet him, ploughing the earth with our road cleats. His peaked cap protected his wrinkled eyes. He cautiously carried a bottle of *šljivovic* in one of the pockets of his long-sleeved heavy jacket. The man grinned and hugged us with uninhibited joy.

At one point, hundreds of bee hives brought bright colour to the barren landscape. But when thousands of bees began flying over the

path, we had no choice but to pick up speed and take off our helmets each time one buzzed in. Nothing, not even the hay stacks, would provide us any shade. And our minds had to stay focused as our thin tires sank into the gravel. Our calves were whitened with dust. We biked with joy when we saw a tar road and a roadside cafe with parasols. We gulped a dozen fruit juices and savoured the usual cabbage salad, watched by a baffled policeman.

In Sarajevo, a film festival was on. We exchanged our bike shoes for flip flops and walked, all salty and filthy, a few flies trapped in the sweat decorating our complexion, among slender girls in high heels with tons of make-up. We made acquaintance with our first *böreks*, puff pastry rolling up meat, spinach or cheese, and heavy creamy-stuffed Bosnian desserts. Marc picked up a band-player's trombone and started improvising flawlessly, much to the musician's surprise.

The next day, we roamed the city, exploring the centuries-old bazaar and mosques. We crossed the Ottoman Latin Bridge where the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated by Gavrilo Princip in 1914 in the name of a unified Yugoslavia. This was the claimed *casus belli* for World War I. We came to understand the drama of the Sarajevo siege that lasted from 1992 to 1996, eight years only after the city had hosted the Winter Olympics. Surrounded by steep hills, the city could easily be cut off from the rest of the region by the Serbian military and militias. Dozens of minarets did not hide that this 'Jerusalem of the Balkans' still hosts Catholic and Orthodox churches, and a synagogue, all in the same neighbourhood.

Now into the second half of our trip, the momentum was unbelievable. We raced through pastures filled with sheep and hay stacks centered around a wooden stake, devoured the 1,000 m



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(3,300 ft) of elevation up to Romanija summit, crossed pitch-black tunnels, sprinting as fast as possible in the dark. Two French motorcyclists accompanied us, lighting our way through a series of kilometer-long tunnels. A car's front beam exposed a dog's carcass, allowing me to swerve and avoid an accident.

We followed the deep limestone gorges carved by the river Lim into Serbia. Spruces scattered on the slopes of Nova Varoš ski resort. Wooden barns overflowed with hay. Farmers raked the meadows with tools carved out of a single piece of wood. This was the second crop season of the summer, and entire families could be seen in every field, hurrying before the rain. We stopped to get some vegetables and instead found gigantic slices of meat displayed outside. Horse carriages and minarets showed up. In the town of Novi Pazar, old angular Russian Lada cars stood alongside Mercedes with German plates.

We entered a kind of no man's land as we got closer to Kosovo, with only cinderblock cottages covered with blue tarps breaking our loneliness. In the midst of white angelicas and pink clovers, grasshoppers and crickets devoted themselves to their summer song. A slanting border stone informed us that we had left Serbia.

A sublime violet twilight blushed the sky as we started a long descent into Kosovo, a country whose independence, unilaterally announced in 2008, has not yet been recognized by the UN. We saw people picking blackberries. Descending on gravel, darkness encircled us as we hurtled down rocks and pebbles, our wheels veering into the ruts. We could not see much and left a foot clipped out in case of a slide. Exhausted after that 800 m (2,600 ft) plunge in elevation, our forearms tensed on the brakes and our heads filled with the noise of stones pinging off our wheels' spokes.

The next day, we rode on mud roads paralleling the main highway and at times got bogged down. Dozens of Romani kids rushed out of tire piles and social housing, in the middle of nowhere, and stare at our muddy legs and faces. We found a car-washing business, eager to pressure wash our mounts. In the distance, a minaret faced coal chimneys of

all sizes: food for the soul and hearth. The Albanian flag greeted us as soon as we arrived in Prishtinë, the capital, informing us that Albanians were the ethnic majority in Kosovo. We wandered through the city streets and noted the severe contrast with the destitute environment just witnessed. A carefree jet set elite was sipping cocktails in fancy hipster bars.

As the quieter secondary routes were gravel roads, we opted for the highway. Other drivers did not mind our presence on the motorway, and we had the benefit of wide sideways busy with fruit vendors. In one of them, cheerful Arbeshi, a 15-year-old girl, smiled, showing her braces. The Albanian girl performed a sentimental Turkish song for us. The blending among the three nationalities she represented, Albanian, Kosovo and Turkish, epitomizes the Balkans amalgam for me. And I would discover her again a year later, in a clip on YouTube with 40k views.

Once in North Macedonia, the road narrowed. The environment was now definitely Mediterranean. Dusky shepherds rested in the shade of vineyards, their goats crowned with impressive spiral horns. Fragrances were now of cistus and cypress. Traveling at high speeds on almost flat roads, we passed workers bent over in tobacco fields, with yellow barren hills in the distance.

In Bulgaria, we passed old gas stations used to store hay. Reentering the EU, there were

Opposite: The line between spring and winter.

Below: Enjoying a cup of hot tea on the unnamed pass.



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Above: The line between spring and winter.

Opposite: Enjoying a cup of hot tea on the unnamed pass.

several check-ups and a queue of loaded cars that we easily skipped. The border guards offered water when they saw us, probably the main attraction of the day. On the other side, an old lady-shepherd was abiding by her flock. She wore the traditional dark spotted workers' dress. Her eyes were like blue pearls embedded in her aged face. She stood like a character from a Greek myth under an antique oak. But with an extra beer in the picture.

Our path through Bulgaria was to be very short. And after 40 km (25 miles) of riding under gigantic walnut trees, we passed into Greece. Old men occupied countless terraces and played *tavli*, the local backgammon. In a remote *tavola* in the shade of majestic plane trees, we tasted *dolmadakia* (stuffed grape leaves), *saganaki* (fried cheese) and *tzatziki*. Going through the Macedonian Greece was like flying into holidays. Cattle made its way along a dusty horizon.

The water in our flasks became boiling hot, flavoured with a subtle plastic aroma. Sweat flowed down our faces. We made a stopover in the shining harbor of Kavala on the Aegean Sea. It was too hot to continue, so we waited for the late afternoon. In the evening, we rode under oleanders and stork nests. We spent the night in a tourist compound on the Vistonida lake where fishermen unloaded their daily catch.

The heat remained intense as we crossed the cotton fields and marshes in the East Macedonia and Thrace National Park during the 17th stage of our trip. Kites shrilled high up

in the dazzling air.

We reunited with the motorway to cross into Turkey. During the night, a strong wind pushed against us as we tried to maintain our speed. Trucks were jostling us on our left, and we heard the deep grunting of dogs on our right. We could see two pairs of eyes as massive grey Anatolian sheepdogs got closer and closer. I imitated shepherds and stopped to whistle gently to them. Useless. Marc was screaming, which made matters only worse. I jumped on the saddle again and sprinted until the eyes disappeared in the night.

The last two days of riding through Turkey involved lots of heat and wind. There were the charms of Eastern Thrace though, as we sped by olive groves and farmers in vineyards. Once we had reached the Sea of Marmara, we followed a winding coastal road in a setting that was painted in pastel colours. Men took naps besides the traditional *caïque* boats, fishing nets hung from huts on stilts, and old women sold green olives and grapes along white-washed cottages. We spent the evening in a little beach resort. Vacationers paced back and forth, snacking on sunflower seeds and nuts.

For our last ride, we steered among bazaars and cars in the long tasteless suburbs of Istanbul. Once in the city, we found a cycling path that bordered the Bosphorus. Young men contemplated the many tankers queuing to cross into the Black Sea.

Eager to see the old town, we climbed up into the busy Eminönü neighbourhood. The bazaar was so crowded that we had to click out of our pedals and walk among tea merchants rattling porcelain cups and artisans soliciting customers. I fulfilled my dream I of admiring Galata bridge and the Golden Horn. Crowds of fishermen rocked their rods in the water. And we had our first *simit*, that circular bread encrusted with sesame seeds sold on the streets.

As our hotel was in Kadıköy, on the Asian side, we crossed the Bosphorus on a ferry. As the boat left the shore, the splendor of the city emerged before our stunned eyes. We mounted our bikes for the last time, after our 2,500 km (1,500 mile) ride over 19 days. An endless night was beginning, as this was the first night in a city that I held in my imagination for years.

