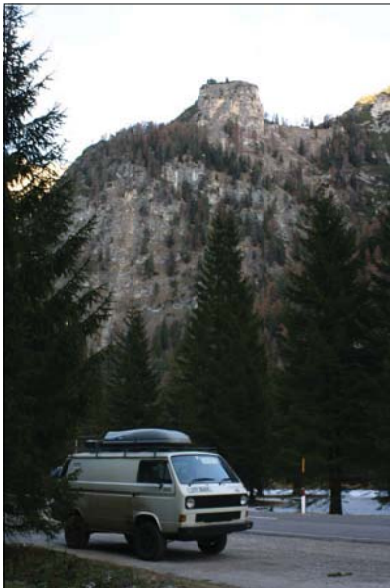


# Easternish European Journey Winter 2011 – Alan Hayes & Harriet Lumby



Croatia



Italy



Slovenia



Italy



Slovenia

We planned ourselves a vague route starting from Dunkerque taking in some of Germany with our first stop in Innsbruck, Austria to visit some friends. From there we planned to drive into the Dolomite mountains in the North of Italy and across to Slovenia, then down into Croatia before heading back up into Slovenia, across the top of Italy into the French Alps for Christmas.

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So, after chatting with Jed and a few others about their experience of travelling in Slovenia and Croatia it was decided that we would follow suit and take a winter vacation down as far as we could get in the time allowed. We had about 5 weeks to complete the mission (it would've been longer if i hadn't discovered that my passport was missing before we left....but that's another story). We planned ourselves a vague route starting from Dunkerque taking in some of Germany with our first stop in Innsbruck, Austria to visit some friends. From there we planned to drive into the Dolomite mountains in the North of Italy and across to Slovenia, then down into Croatia before heading back up into Slovenia, across the top of Italy into the French Alps for Christmas.

We pretty much stuck to our vague plan, with a few little detours which we hadn't factored in, all in all an awe inspiring trip. There were a few complications, a few lessons learnt and some brilliant happy accidents along the way (some of which that could have ended rather unhappily.....but all's well that ends well.....more on that later...).

Upon arrival at Dover we got pulled into Customs for a quick check of the van contents, surprise, surprise. After having a look around the van the guard asked us if we could open the front for him....snigger....slightly confused looks when i said i couldn't, but he was happy enough when i said I'd open the back for him. after a quick rummage he asks "have you got any weapons on board.....other than this one - holding an axe in his hand, he he. I replied no of course and we were on the ferry quick smart.

So to start proceedings here's a few pics of the journey down to Austria for our first proper stop in Innsbruck.

First stop over for the night, an Aire de Camping on the banks of the Rhein river, barges majestically cruising up and down. Very nice!

We had to take a ferry across the river to get the Aire de camping and the chap on the ferry suggested that we visit an xmas market that was a few villages away, so the next morning we headed there to see what was happening. The Market was great, a proper traditional German affair with lots of pretty craft stuff on sale and of course the obligatory Gluhwein.



The next night we just dropped off the side of the motorway into the countryside and found ourselves a spot to camp for the night, turned out to be rather nice in the morning



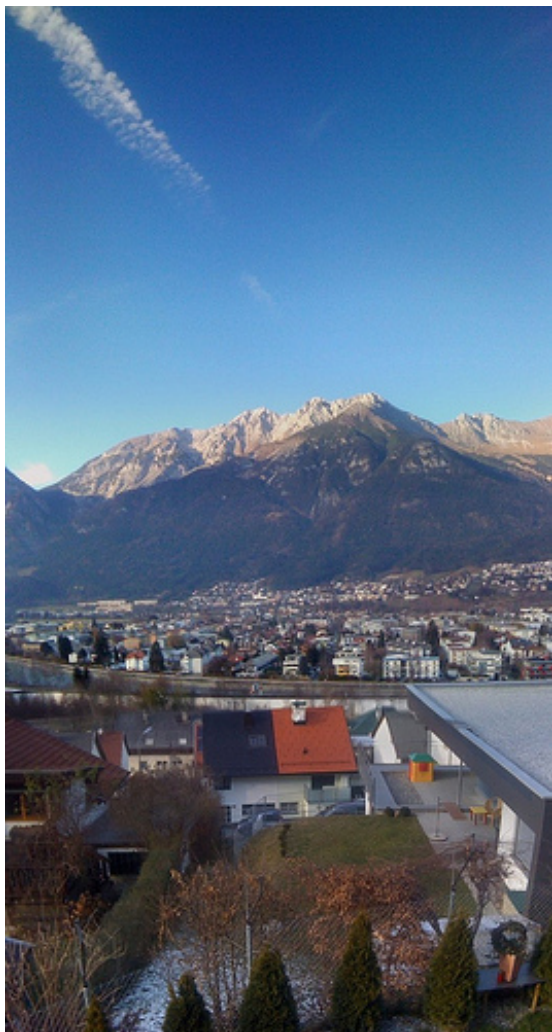
Next stop Austria, after a few hours we started to see mountains.....at last....the journey through Germany is certainly quick, but its seriously dull in terms of views!

Dropping down towards Innsbruck spotted this groovy little punimog (or Mini Mog if you prefer) gotta love em!





Finally arrived to see friends Christina and Thom, this is the view from their veranda.....nice or what! Albeit somewhat lacking in snow for the time of year.....



Christina was unfortunately involved in a very bad mountain bike crash a few years ago which left her paralyzed from the waist down, on the day of the accident Thom vowed never to ride a mountain bike again until Christina could ride with him. So he set about being trained in engineering so that he could build her bikes to ride. The Quad in these pics is the latest incarnation (mk2) and is amazingly fast, hats off to Christina she really has got balls....or a big clit....or something,... i dont know. All i know is they are both amazing!

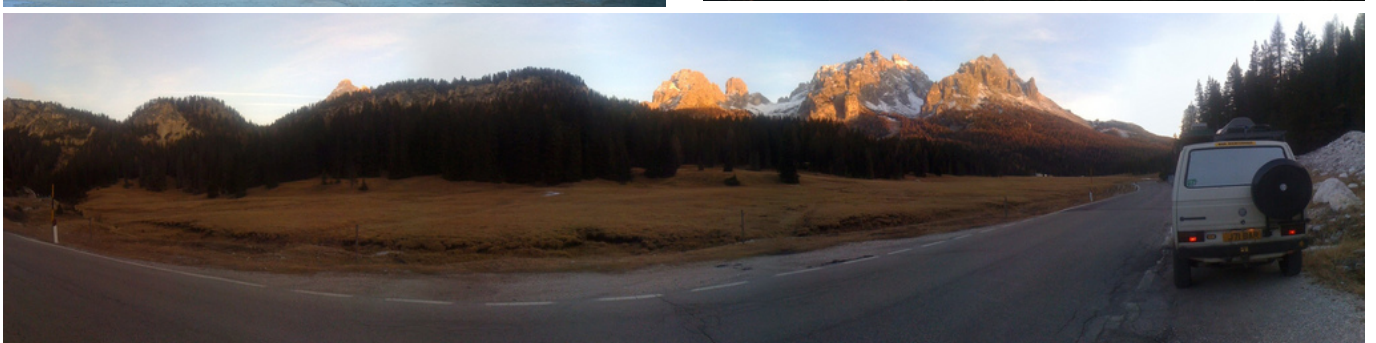




So after a few great days in Innsbruck, it was time to move on and head for the Dolomite National park, through which we took a meandering route taking in as many wiggly mountain passes as we could which led us to some quite spectacular sights along the way.



After finding that using your handbrake anywhere above 1500m is a bad idea. (if there is the slightest bit of water in the cables - quite common on a syncro that does some offroading - then they **will** be frozen solid in the morning. I had to get some tools out and wrench them off manually!) we moved on down the road a little way and encountered this interesting phenomenon..





From the dolomite mountains we chose to drive into Slovenia via the most interesting route available. Thanks to Jed for pointing this one out, its an awesome winding singletrack road that makes its way up across a pass before dropping down an equally wiggly singletrack road down to the Slovenian border, west of the Triglav national park. Its an awesome drive, considering its an actual road which many must drive in to-tally normal cars its challenging to say the least. Oil temps were reaching +90°C by the time we were at the top and that's with an external oil cooler and ambient temperature at around 0°C. Once we reached the top we stayed nearby for the night so we could make the descent in daylight.

Our first port of call in Slovenia was Bovec, which has a really nice feel to the little town and the most brilliant tourist information centre i think I've ever visited. After a coffee and brief chat with some locals we headed off to find some natural wonder.



Coffee stop in Bovec



Copper roofed church of Dreznica

The day we arrived in Slovenia the friendly girl in the tourist office advised us that we had arrived during the first day of rain in about a month....typical! Unfortunately it wasn't just rain but seriously thick fog in most places so the views were very limited. Due to this we decided to go straight to Lake Bled where we knew there was some civilisation that might offer some refuge and maybe, just maybe a campsite might be open....

We arrived at Lake Bled to find that the campsite was shut and almost everything was closed as the winter season didn't start for another week or so. Darn... So we free camped in a car park next to the campsite for the night. In the morning the fog had lifted a little so I grabbed a couple of pics before we set off.



Overnight we had decided to bomb it down to Croatia in search of better weather and open campsites which we promptly did that morning. So we got on the motorway heading for Zagreb, after a while we started approaching a toll booth, so as you do we started slowing down to take the obligatory ticket, which never materialised.....strange we thought....then observed all the other vehicles just driving straight through.....even more strange.....so we made the decision to play idiot tourists and press on.

Then we got to the next toll booth and thought...bugger....now we're in the "pooh".....but same as before...everyone just kept on driving.....weird.... So we concluded that the tolls appear to be free on a Sunday! Brilliant! Either that or they only have them running when its tourist season....

So we pressed on....

Then a while later, a blue Seat Ibiza pulled in front of us and an LED sign in the rear window flashed up saying "follow me" .....Oh "pooh".....

Thoughts ran from, was i speeding?, is it the tolls?, are they just suspicious as we seem to be the only foreign vehicle in the whole country or what...?

Turns out the two plain clothes coppers were just doing routine pull a foreigner type checks, wanted to see driving license, passports etc. But the best bit was that once again, we got asked if we could open the front please.....er .....no I can't sorry. (confused look from the plod) then i heard some murmur of "boxxer" in amongst the Slovenian, so at least one of them seemed to have some idea. I gladly opened the back up for them. They were very pleasant as it happens and quite jovial. They were happy with everything they saw and sent us on our way. So off we went to towards the Croatian Border.

We decided to take in a bit of countryside rather than head over the border by Zagreb, so took a right off the Motorway through Novo Mesto and headed for the border at a place called 'Metlika'.



Here's our lunch stop from along the way



Once we had finished our lunch in the sunshine we packed up and got on our way towards the border. We followed a winding road through hills and countryside, through a few towns eventually arriving at the Croatian border at Metlika. Pulling up to the border things began to feel quite different to everywhere we had been so far. Buildings had a somewhat ramshackle feel to them and mixed with the lack of people around due to the time of year to say it felt a bit backwater would be an understatement.

Now, venturing outside of the EU obviously meant that this border crossing was going to be different, but as we watched a couple of cars in front of us pull up, do some quick checks and pull away it seemed that it wouldn't be much of an ordeal.

So we pulled up, got some suspicious looks from the guards and were promptly asked to pull over to the side. Ah, ok, here we go with the 'Foreigner checks' again I thought. Sure enough, this somewhat grumpy guard, who spoke almost no English set about his tasks. Passports, drivers license, vehicle docs, insurance, tax, address checks, checking the plates in the van. Then started a search in the van, cupboards, door pockets, glove box, bags, food, fridge, basically everywhere.....except the enormous Thule top box (big enough to smuggle a person inside). Still cant understand the point of searching the whole van without looking in a massive box on the roof, hey ho....



Eventually after about an hour or so of watching all the other cars being stopped and sent on their way in less than a minute or two we had our documents returned to us and the guard begrudgingly said we could leave. So we packed everything away again (he wasn't very tidy about his search) and headed into Croatia, for Pag island. In hindsight i think that our innocent detour off the beaten track and to a backwater border crossing might've made these guys more suspicious, they seemed SO sure that they were going to find something in the van and even seemed like they were still sure after they sent us off.

First stop, we needed to get some local currency, did some quick calculations to determine the exchange rate (based on the price of a litre of diesel) and stopped at the first cash point we came across. Found a filling station, brimmed with diesel and set off on the motorway.



Here's one of Croatia's main highways, busy huh!



We drove as far as we could that afternoon, finally resting up in a secluded lay by on top of the cliffs overlooking the island of Rab. We set off early the next morning to try and get to Pag as early as we could. We took a detour into Zadar to buy a few things and head to a big supermarket before heading of down the island. Food is very cheap in Croatia and good quality too, the UK could learn a few lessons from eastern Europe it would seem.

After leaving Zadar we started off towards the North of Pag island, at this point we were on a serious hunt for an open campsite, the luxury of being able to pull up, plug in, and go nowhere for a couple of days was all we wanted. We had checked the websites for a couple of campsites which said they were open all year round, so fingers were crossed that the information was correct.

Off we went and after ten minutes of so, out of the corner of my eye, i spotted something. Slammed on the brakes, reversed back up the road into a lay by. I HAD to get some pics of this, you certainly don't see this everyday.....?



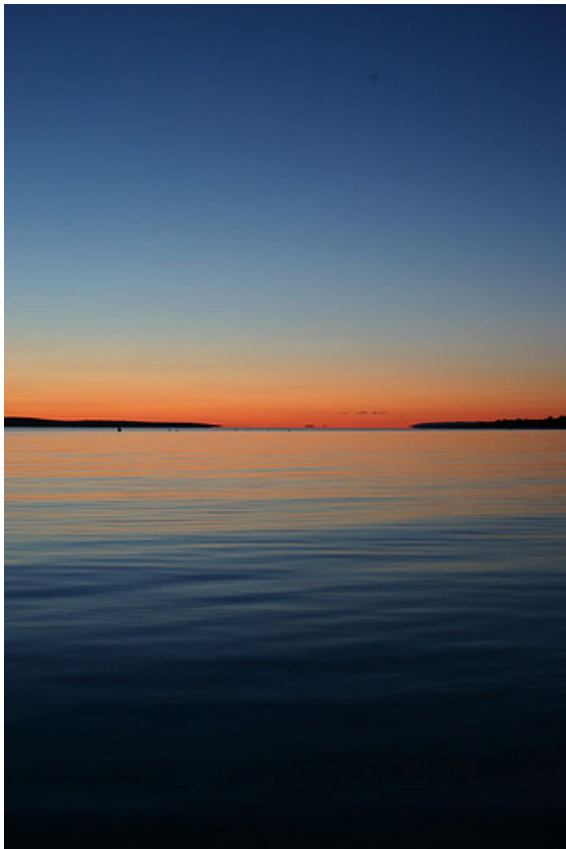
What the hell is that all about? Nonetheless its a very good model of a Donkey head, not easy to build in such gigantic proportions i wouldn't have thought.



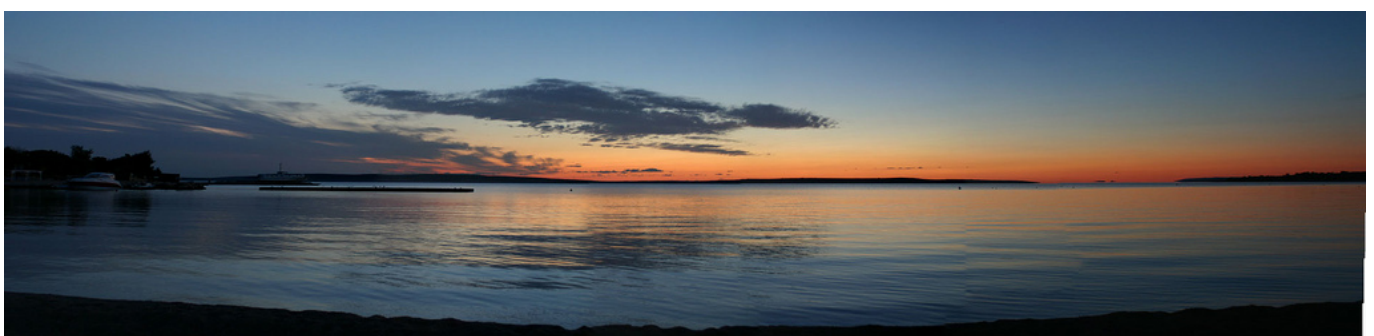
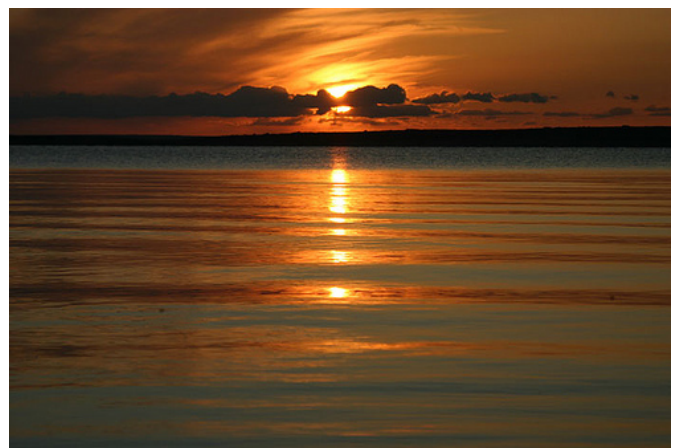
Eventually we arrived at 'Camp Simuni' a campsite that Harriet had stayed on 6yrs ago, still with crossed fingers we pulled up to reception....it all looked very quiet.....

BUT, YAY, there was a very friendly chap in there that said we are most certainly open, thank god for that. We got our welcome information, he explained where the facilities are and then said "you can camp anywhere you like, there's only 6 people on the whole campsite including you" .....bear in mind they've got over 2000 pitches.....amazing!

Simuni is a great campsite with awesome facilities, however it looks as though it would be heaving with people come the warmer months. We decided in true British fashion that we'd have ourselves a sea view and pulled up right next to the beach.



I have never seen the sea as still as it is on Pag. With almost no waves at all the sea created the most incredible reflections come sunset. Don't be fooled by the pictures though, it wasn't as warm as it looks. Daytime temps were around 15-18°C dropping to below freezing overnight.





After a couple of nights at Simuni it was time to find something else to do, there's only so much an empty campsite has to offer really. We went to pay for our stay and were pleasantly surprised that two nights, two people, electric hook up, lovely free hot showers with no time limit etc etc had cost the princely sum of about £17, bargain!

Jed had told us about a wild camp spot he had found a few months previous, armed with directions via text message from Jed we went in search of the spot. It proved to be a bit difficult to find as large bits of the directions were based upon signage for an Autocamp which clearly shuts over winter and takes all of its signs away. So anyway, after an hour or two driving down every dirt track in the local area (surprising a few locals in the process) we found the spot in a lovely old olive grove.



We took advantage of the good weather and got a little fire going so we could cook a stew with the Dutch oven. It took a fair while for the stew to cook perfectly, but then its always better the longer you can leave it for huh! Particular flavour of that evenings culinary efforts was something like "Spicy beef and tomato stew" Onions, garlic, red wine, beef chunks, peppers, potatoes, chopped tomatoes, passata, stock, salt, pepper, smoked paprika, cayenne pepper, cumin....yum!

Cooking with a Dutch oven is a great process and gives food a depth of flavour that you don't get any other way. You don't need a huge fire, but you do need to keep it going evenly which at least provides some entertainment while you're waiting for that meat to tenderise.

Here's the results:

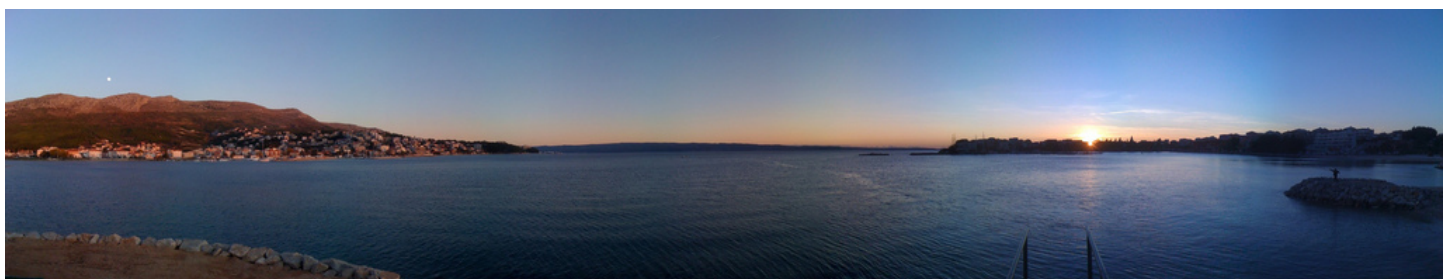


Absolutely delicious, i can still taste it now!



The next port of call was Split, a bit further south down the coast, it was a few hours drive to get there so we left real early so we would have a bit of time to look around the old walled part of the city. Got there at around 11am and parked right on the harbour side.

It was the Roman Emperor "Diocletian" that built his palace on the site of today's Split. The Palace is very well preserved all things considered, wandering around inside the walls you'd be forgiven for thinking its not as old as it is, just for the state of preservation. The walls of the palace now contain many streets, shops, cafes, bars etc and there are now many high class homes actually in the walls with incredible sea views.





We had set ourselves a leaving date for the Croatia leg of the journey as we wanted to spend some more time in Slovenia with (hopefully) better weather. We had checked the opening date of the Lake Bled campsite also which was opening on December the 13th as ideally we wanted another stop over for a day or two before we headed back to where no campsites were open at all. By the time this came around we had spent nearly a week in Croatia and decided we would leave a day earlier to take a different route out of the country passing by a place called 'Plitvicka Jezera'. A canyon of sorts containing a collection of deep aquamarine/turquoise lakes interconnected by waterfalls, caves etc.

We headed North out of Split towards a town called Knin. As we started getting further inland the appearance of the country was very different. Behind that coastal veil Croatia is a very different place. What struck me the most was that there appeared to be no one there, not a soul. There were plenty of houses and farmsteads, but no cars, mostly shutters over windows, no agriculture of any kind going on, nothing? It really started to feel like a wasteland with so little sign of life.

A few hours of this rolled by with houses in varying degrees of dilapidation/possible war damage and eventually we reached Knin. Our plan was to stop at here to get fuel and supplies from a supermarket before heading to the lakes.

As we were driving into the town we turned a corner and were presented with a train station that looked so eastern block we had to grab a quick pic. We missed some of the best stuff through not having the camera ready, but you get the idea.



As we got further into the town, things started feeling a touch more edgy with a large military influence, armed guards etc and then this!!

The supermarket we were intending on visiting is just there next to the Locomotive, but the whole feel of the place was just a bit too edgy. According to the map there might be another out of town a way, so we went for that one instead. Turned out to be a bit bigger and have all the stuff we wanted so all's well that ends well.

All stocked up we head out of town towards the Lakes, the route we chose was to take us very close to the Croatia/Bosnia border and through an area known as 'Krajina'.

Unbeknown to us this turns out to be the area where the the fan was hit by the proverbial during the 1990's. Not long after we had driven past this huge open area of countryside that to me looked like something i had seen before, we pulled over to have a check in the eastern Europe lonely planet. I'd seen this kind of land formation before, on Salisbury plain.....where they practice with live artillery.....

Sure enough it turns out that we had inadvertently chosen to travel through the area of Croatia where some of the most serious fighting had taken place. That landscape we were driving through showed signs of very intensive shelling, with perfectly circular bomb craters littering the ground for as far as the eye could see. This was a far cry from Croatia's coastal beauty but somehow i was really pleased to be there. One of the things i really love about having a van away on holiday is the freedom to explore places, to go and see the things that are usually hidden from view for the average traveller.



Eventually we arrived at the Lakes, we wanted to take a road we could see on the map that seemed to go around the back side of the lake through a few villages and link up to a more main road much further along. This road doesn't exist anymore, well, it kind of does but the signs make it quite clear that they don't want anyone driving up there. So we head to the main entrance to the park, and park in a very large carpark, with only a hand full of cars in it. The main office for the place is unmanned so we stroll in to have a look around (would have been about €8 per person). Mark (mudlark) had told me that during his visit to this place that the crowds were unbearable and its obvious that the place is set up to cater for thousands of visitors. Another thing Mark mentioned was the term 'Disney' and I couldn't agree more. The whole place is set up to extract money from visitors, and the natural wonder is ruined by the obviously man made intrusions. I'm aware that we didn't see the place at its best, I'm sure it would look much better with lush foliage and blue skies, but even then, the Centreparks feel of the place just didn't sit right with me, the bomb craters of the Krajina were more of a spectacle in my opinion. Due to the entire place having been locked down by the Croatian Centreparks Disney sprawl there was no chance of finding anything satisfactory as a park up for the night, so we picked our route away from Plitvicka Jezera and headed off along a winding little back road into the middle of nowhere to look for a spot to camp. Once again, this turned into an experience not to be forgotten.....more on that to come....

