

Dylan's Trip to Slovenia

End of April 2012

FRIDAY 4/28/2012

Amount of money spent on preparing for trip: €0.00

Having semi-situated myself in Vienna with a place to stay and more or less something to do, I decided it would be a good idea to start traveling around in my spare time. As I had discovered the secret of the hitchhiking-couchsurfing combination, I could travel essentially for free as long as I didn't have a rigid itinerary. I had had an open invite to Slovenia since December, and seeing that Slovenia borders Austria and there's a straight shot with the freeway from Vienna to Maribor, I felt I could do it in one weekend.

I filled a backpack with some clothes and a laptop (just the essentials), drew myself up a “**Maribor**” sign, got out of class about an hour early on Friday, and made my way over to the on-ramp to Freeway E59 south out of Vienna. This was the weekend of the European Labor Day (May 1st), so for most people in Austria it was a 5-day weekend. I concluded that many Viennese would be traveling to Croatia and would be able to drop me off in Slovenia on the way. When I made it to the on-ramp, I found nearly bumper-to-bumper traffic of people trying to get out of the city going south. This was perfect for me: large amounts of cars moving slow enough to notice me and enough room to pick me up. I whipped out my sign and a smile and it was all of about 10 or 15 minutes before I got a ride.

As I was standing right next to the road, the drivers couldn't help but notice me and I made every effort to make eye contact. Some tried to ignore me, others laughed and waved, and many poked the person they were riding with and pointed at me. (“Check this kid out!”) I would just wave. Finally a car with windows rolled down containing three kids waved at me to get in. I grabbed my backpack and my hat, ran between several cars, and jumped in. There was a young guy driving, a girl in the passenger's seat, and another guy in the back sitting with a guitar.

The initial greetings were followed by the driver asking me, “Bist du ein Österreicher oder Slowenier?”

“Ich bin Amerikaner.” I said, which was followed by the standard “woas!” and shocked faces I usually get here. The language was switched to English and the driver addressed me again.

“I think you are a little optimistic to expect a ride to Maribor.”

“Well, you just picked me up.” I said back.

“Yes, but how long were you waiting?”

“Ten, fifteen minutes.”

This was followed by another shocked and impressed look and a simple, “Oh.” We pulled onto the freeway.

I had to go through the obligatory conversation explaining just what the fuck I was doing in Europe, and more specifically, why *Austria*? What was I doing, where was I working, what I was I studying, etc etc. I think I got a few crazy-American comments throughout this, and eventually I was able to switch the conversation to them and on Slovenia. I learned that the two guys were studying music in Vienna and the girl was the girlfriend of the driver, who was studying medicine in Maribor. They were all going home for the long weekend. I asked for some basic information about Slovenia in general (I really knew nothing about it) and asked them to teach me some Slovenian words. The ride was rather quick (they were driving down the freeway around 90 or 100 mph) and I found myself dropped off at the Maribor train station before I knew it. The total ride was a little over two hours.

Amount of money spent on trip so far: €0.00

I called Mirela, my contact in Slovenia, a few minutes before we had reached the border and she told me she would be in Maribor within an hour. As it had taken us about fifteen minutes to get to Maribor from the border, this left me with a good 45 minutes to find something to do in the meantime. I decided to take a walk through the city center. The city was quiet and many places were closed for the holiday, so I ended up taking a walk through nearly empty streets. There were some vendors selling ice



Church in the city center of Maribor.



City center.

cream and a few restaurants and cafés open, but other than that not a whole lot going on. I found a park nearby to sit down and eat the small amount of food I had packed and gaze upon the surroundings.

Central Europe was experiencing an early spring heat wave (upper 80's and lower 90's) and I was excited as hell that it was so hot that I had to sit in the shade, especially after freezing my ass off in eastern Europe over the last winter.

After munching down my lunch, my Moore-gene kicked in and realized that the time was nearly at the hour mark that Mirela had told me earlier. I got up and hurried my way back to the train station and proceeded to wait for another twenty minutes or so. I watched the drivers in all the cars pulling into the parking lot, looking for someone who looked like they were looking for someone. Mirela finally showed up in a van with her friend Sandra and her 11 year old son Luka. She got out to greet me and we got into the car.



A little background information is necessary here. Someone might be wondering who the hell this woman is and why I know her. The story goes back to December 2011 when I was going through the Austrian-Bureaucracy gauntlet and applying for my residence permit. When I realized I had to leave the Schengen border area for possibly up to three months, I did some research and found that closest

countries to Austria that weren't in Schengen were Croatia, the UK, Ireland, and Romania. Of all of these, I had thought Croatia was the easiest, cheapest, and most interesting to stay. The only problem was that my usual method for finding a place to stay (helpx.net) yielded no results for Croatia. However, I had an idea: my great-grandfather immigrated to the US from Croatia, so emailed my grandma and asked if we still had some distant relatives in Croatia that I could contact. Grandma said she didn't know of any, but that she had a cousin who possibly knew of some that she would email.

I got a response from the cousin, saying that he knew of a family who lived adjacent to the village from which my great-grandfather came and they were interested in letting me stay. This was Mirela's family, and to my dismay, after making arrangements to stay there in December I learned that the village my great-grandfather came from (Kumrovec) is right on the Slovenian-Croatian border and Mirela's family lived on the Slovenian side. Slovenia is in Schengen and that meant that I couldn't go. At the time this caused much frustration and ended in me going to Romania. Since then Mirela had been inviting me to come to Slovenia, and it wasn't until now that I took her up on it.

Anyway, Mirela parked the car close to the town center and we all went for a walk around the center of Maribor. I took a few pictures near the river, we got some ice cream (they refused to let me pay), and we climbed the bell tower of one of the larger churches to get a good view of the city. Due to my lack of decent camera skills (and decent camera), the pictures I took really don't do justice to just how beautiful the area is. But they at least give an idea.



Drava River running through Maribor.



This is apparently the oldest grape vine in Slovenia (400 years) that still produces grapes for wine.



Overlooking the city from the bell tower.



A courtyard adjacent to the church.

After that we got more ice cream (where again it was refused that I pay) and we headed out for the village at which I would be staying: Bistrica ob Sotli. The ride was about an hour long and when we arrived Mirela told me about how they had bought some property just outside the village and were planning on building a house there. This was the first place where we showed up, and I got to meet Mirela's husband Jože and her eight year old son Phillip. Mirela had to drop Sandra off at her house, so she took the kids and left me there to chat with Jože.

Amount of money spent on trip so far: €0.00

After preliminary greetings, Jože (pronounced “YO-zhay”) told me about his plans for his property and his house and showed me drawings of his ideas. The property he had bought had a dilapidated 150 year old house on it. He had decided the walls were still good and moved them to another piece of the property and figured he would use them for the basis of a garage. The garage was to have a large roof built on top of it and after that was finished, the real house could be started near the old one. The way he made it sound, this project was planned to be a long and slow process of him saving money in bits and pieces and swinging a hammer in his spare time. Boy was I in for a surprise.



Remains of the old house.



The (reportedly) still structurally sound piece of the old house to be used for the garage.



An old museumified house in the village.



A pretty sweet view from the property.

Mirela showed back up and asked me if I was interested in going over to Sandra's place and trying out some of her wine. I'm not really sure who wouldn't be interested in this and I was practically jumping up and down when saying yes. Before we picked Sandra up we stopped at an old house in the village and I got off a few pictures. We continued on to pick up Sandra and we drove up one of the nearby "mountains". Here, as well as when we were approaching the village earlier in the day, was a creek that served as the border between Slovenia and Croatia. It was *right there*. Seriously. I could throw a rock and hit Croatia. This added some retroactive frustration to my situation back in December.



We pulled up next to a shack on the side of a mountain covered in vineyards. Mirela sat down on a well and I followed her example. Sandra went into the shack and Mirela told me about the landscape. That's when I learned that the vineyards were Sandra's and she had made the wine herself from it! Sweet! We sat around drinking wine until after it got dark and looking out over the valley (which was Croatia). The sky was completely clear and the heat wave so strong that even after it was completely dark I was comfortable in a T-shirt.

Unfortunately my camera takes worthless pictures at night, so I didn't even bother with it. I managed to prevent Sandra from getting me totally plowed (memories of Romania were still fresh in my mind) and we finally drove back to Mirela's apartment in the village where I passed out on the couch before I could get my clothes off.

SATURDAY 4/29/2012

Amount of money spent on trip so far: €0.00

Before I had left Vienna my throat had become a little sore and I woke up Saturday morning around nine finding it too painful to swallow and spending time trying to clear as much snot out of my system as possible. I could feel the bug trying to get me and I was determined not to let it settle. Thus when Mirela walked in and asked me if I wanted to come see what was going on at the new property (Jože was already there), I quickly agreed. She had come back to prepare breakfast for guys who were

already up at the property. I helped her pile the things into the car, took a quick picture of the village, and we took off down the road.



Mid-village.

Another shot from the property just for good measure. See the church on the top of the hill?



Slovenian breakfast!



...breakfast?

We arrived and started setting breakfast out. My throat was feeling better, but I was still an active snot factory in full production. There was only one other guy with Jože and the kids, and they weren't doing much more than pointing and discussing things. However, it wasn't long before two other guys showed up and I got the feeling that my previous feeling about the house-building project being so laid-back wasn't very accurate. Jože asked me if I minded sticking around and helping for part of the day. Seeing as that is more or less all I've done to date in Europe, I agreed without hesitation. We all sat down to eat and after breakfast and some shots of Jägermeister (I politely declined. That stuff is nasty. I especially couldn't understand why they were drinking it because there was a bottle of homemade moonshine right next to it) we began moving some beams when Miha (the guy who was there when I arrived) busted out a chainsaw. That's right. A chainsaw. My first inclination was that this area of the world was so poor and "backward" that they couldn't afford things like Skillsaws and nail guns, but when Miha started cutting up and carving the beams like he was using a surgical knife, I realized I had been in grave error.

Even though I had only worked a summer as a laborer building frames for houses (and had probably spent more time being a schmuck than being a laborer), I had seen enough to understand what I was looking at

now and to be blown away. The skill, care, detail, and technique Miha was displaying was far beyond the “get the damn thing up as fast as you can” mentality to which I had been accustomed. When I was doing carpentry, we pretty much solved any problem by exponentially increasing the nail usage. Need two beams to get across a room in a single line? Hit them with ten nails. Connecting two studs at a weird angle? Double the nails. Angle of the nails not really good enough to hold the wood together? Use more nails and call it good. It wasn't long before I realized why they didn't have any nail guns; they didn't need them. If two beams were needed to go across a wall or across a room, they were connected by cutting sharp angles on the ends and having them overlap each other. Check it out!



Miha at work.



Nice cuts!

For beams that were going to be perpendicular, they actually cut out holes, grooves, and wedges into the beams with a chainsaw then cleaned them up with a chisel. I didn't get any pictures of the wedges, but I think their shape can be figured out from seeing the holes.



These were done with a chainsaw and a chisel!



Phillip cleaning up the grooves with a chisel.



Testing the grooves.



Rows of fitting beams.

In between taking pictures and occasionally helping to carry stuff around, I stayed out of the way as I was still wasn't feeling so great (still producing snot at full capacity—with some blood to go along with it now), I didn't know any Slovenian, and I felt like I would get in the way because I was unfamiliar with the techniques. I attempted to take a nap in the shade of the tree and when I got back up later to take pictures, I found the guys organizing the beams in triangles. They were doing a lot of discussing, measuring, and drawing. I walked up the hill to get a better good picture when I realized they were measuring out the trusses! In the US normally we just call up the truss-making company, tell them our measurements, and they show up and a boom truck and are lifted to the roof. Here in Slovenia they were measuring them out themselves:



More surgical work.



The work done so far.

Because Jože didn't want to spend a fortune on wood for the roof for his garage, he decided to use some of the wood from the old structure. If you look at the ends of these old beams you can see the types of wedges for which the holes in the other beams were cut out.

While all this had been going on, Mirela had disappeared again to get food for lunch and to get some beer. As I was to soon find out, you can't build a house in Slovenia without copious amounts of alcohol. Every 45 minutes or so everyone would take a break and have a beer or a "spritzer", wine mixed with mineral water 50/50.



One of the two beers made in Slovenia.



Slovenian barbeque!

Mirela fired up a barbecue and got lunch ready for everyone. Jože's brother showed up and after we ate (and drank), the real work started. Measuring out and discussion were over, it was time to carve up the 24 beams for trusses. This involved making an assembly line with one group moving beams, one group marking the beams (using the one already marked and cut for a reference), and Miha cutting them up with the chainsaw. As I was part of the assembly line, I wasn't able to get any good pictures, but I did manage to get this one before things really started moving:



The assembly line taking form.

This was rough on me in the heat and sun, still dripping snot and blood and dealing with a sore throat that reached up to my ears every time I swallowed, but I had felt like such a lazy slob that I wanted to do *something* (plus I was still operating under the theory that performing as if I weren't sick was the best way to prevent a sickness from settling). My mind felt much better for doing so, even if my body didn't.

After the truss beams were all cut out, the guys worked on getting the floor beams up and nailed in to the top of the old structure. I wasn't much help here except for occasionally lifting a beam, but I was really excited to see all the grooves

and wedges start to fit together. It was incredible how well everything fit and how few nails were needed. Everything was held with one or two normal nails, and for the horizontal beams connected with the sharply slanted edges, huge "nails" were used that looked more like flat slabs of metal with perpendicular points on them.



Miha nailing in one of those huge metal slab "nails".



Setting in the floor beams.



Perfect fit!



Me getting in the way to take pictures.



"Before we start this work on the roof, we better take a break and drink some wine first."

The next part was awesome. You might have noticed the backhoe in one of the pictures. Jože used it earlier in the day to move some rocks around, but for the most part no one was really using it for anything. Suddenly it was fired up and Jože started using it as a boom truck! The beams were lifted, nudged around, and even held in place using the thing!

After taking a break to have a spritzer (shouldn't be climbing on roofs without some alcohol in your system, you know), the overhanging beams were put into place by having one person man the backhoe to lift the beam, while two others inched their way out and guided the beam into place. The beams were then made square

using a come-along and nailed into place.



Squaring up with the come-along.

After this Mirela asked me if I was interested in coming along to help with a project the villagers were working on back in the village. I didn't fully understand what she was trying to say, so I agreed in order to check it out. We drove two kilometers down the road and found a bunch of people working on the village maypole. Yes, they actually make those here. There were people scraping the bark off a freshly-cut tree, others re-arranging branches with ribbons, some dealing with flags, and I was set to work with a ring that would be hanging around the tree. I still wasn't feeling so great and I had just been cooked in the sun during the assembly line (remember it was 90 degrees out), so I brought the plastic ring I was working with in the shade behind a sign. I got to work wrapping it with evergreen branches and ivy and securing it with some red and white-striped string.



Miha securing the beams in place.



Working on the weird ring-thing that goes around the Maypole.



Hiding in the shade.

Once that part was done, the next part was to get everything appropriately assembled to the maypole and get the thing up. I spent most of this time hiding in the shade behind the sign, as my arms

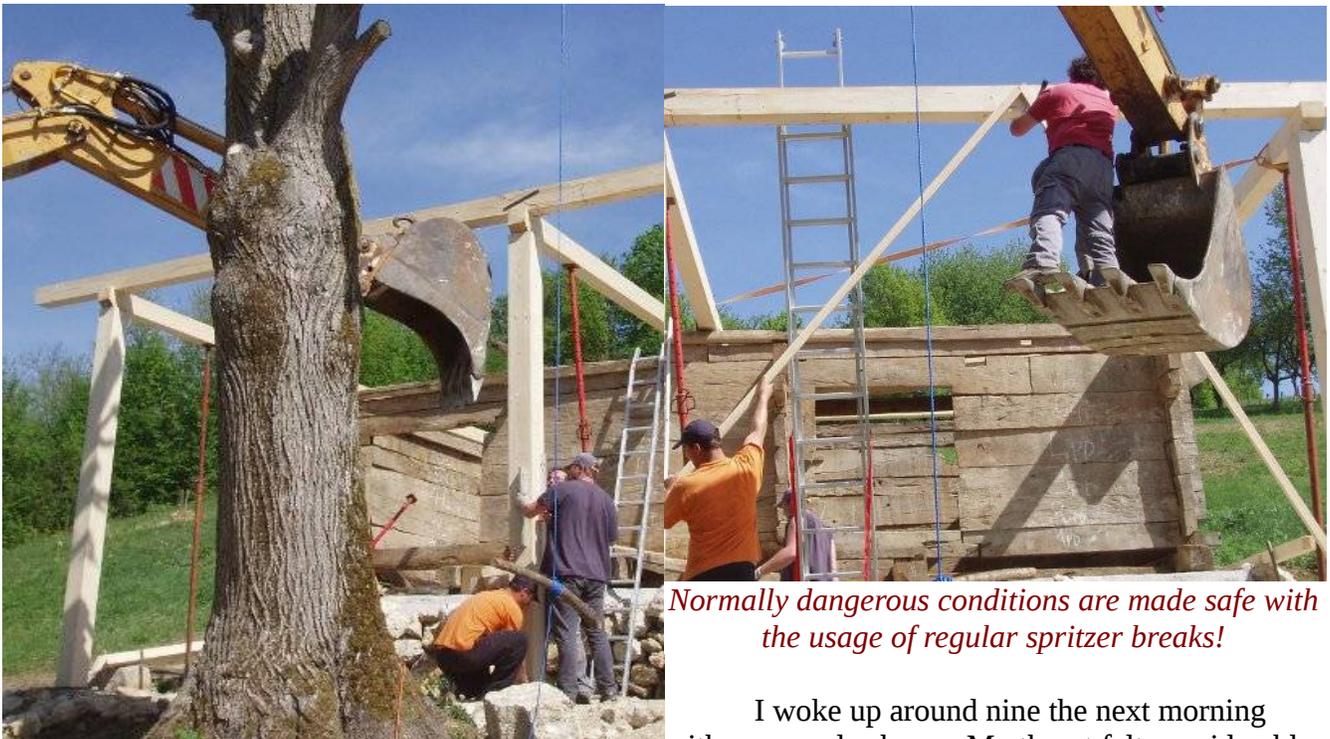
and my neck were already significantly cooked. One of the locals arrived with a huge tractor that had a boom on it and tree was put up in a short time. I forgot my camera over at the house so I didn't get any pictures of it (the previous two pictures were from Mirela's camera), so everyone can just use their imaginations to wonder what the maypole actually looked like. Nya nya.

After the maypole was successfully up, Mirela and I drove back to the construction site. It was about this time when she got really apologetic about me coming all the way to Slovenia and having to work. I laughed and said it happened to me all the time, and for me building a house was just as interesting as anything else. She explained to me that there was a conflict of timings. The guy who had lent Jože the backhoe was supposed to have come on Wednesday but didn't show up until Saturday, so now that the backhoe was there they *had* to work. If she had known that the backhoe was coming on the weekend, she would have told me they were too busy for me to come. I just laughed again and told her that building a house in Slovenia would make a good story.

After we got back, Jože asked me if I would be willing to help Mirela and the kids get roofing tiles for the roof from the neighbor. That's when it sunk in that the plan was to build the entire roof over the weekend. I agreed because I was feeling rather useless. This was just up the road and took us about an hour. When we got back we had to drive over to another neighbor's house to pick up their roofing tiles, because the amount from the first one wasn't even close to being enough. By the time we were finished with this, the day was about done and after finishing up everyone went home. I was exhausted, mostly from my first direct-sun experience of the year. My arms and my neck were quite sunburned, but I remained firm in my theory that the nasty list of chemicals found on the ingredients list of most sunscreens is far worse than a sunburn. Mirela gave me a homemade sunburn treatment and I fell asleep rather early, being careful to not roll around on my arms.

SUNDAY 4/30/2012

Amount of money spent on trip so far: €0.00



Just nudge it on in there...

Normally dangerous conditions are made safe with the usage of regular spritzer breaks!

I woke up around nine the next morning with no one else home. My throat felt considerably

better but I was still full of snot. My arms felt pretty crispy, but I decided to just suck it up and dressed normally. Mirela arrived and told me work was already started back on the property and that she was back to get breakfast ready for everyone. I helped get everything into the car and we headed down the road.

Back at the construction site the men were putting up the supporting pillars with liberal usage of the backhoe to do several unorthodox backhoe-like things. I kept out of the way other than taking some pictures so I could hide in the shade of the tree—my arms burned every time I stood in the sun.



While this whole garage-roof construction was going on, neighbors would periodically show up either with alcohol, to help, or both. One neighbor showed up with what I first thought was a tank of diesel before I noticed it was a deep maroon and realized it was wine! While I was staring at what I estimated to be a two gallon jug, he pulled out another bucket which contained another 5 bottles of white wine and just left it next to the table. He threw in package of plastic cups, stood around to chat (and drink), then left us there with all the alcohol. Everyone had stopped when he arrived to try out the wine and stopped again shortly after he left. What I had originally considered to be dangerous

Check out that jug of wine!



(drinking alcohol and climbing on roofs) was clearly incorrect; it appeared more and more that the men couldn't do the work without it!

When we got back the guys already had up the frame which they were going to build the trusses around and were getting to work putting up the trusses. Despite feeling like I was in an oven every time I went into direct sunlight, I was really feeling like a dweeb for just sitting around and occasionally taking pictures.



The grooves from each beam fit in perfectly!

By the time the beams which would hold the roofing tiles were being nailed onto the trusses, I couldn't take it anymore. I no longer had the excuse of feeling like crap, so I put down my camera, decided I didn't care about getting in the way or any potential heckling I would receive in Slovenian, ignored my sunburned arms, and climbed up onto the roof. I stood right on the edge where the first tile-beams were being nailed on and grabbed a hammer. Instead of receiving a bunch of heckling, I was promptly given a handful of nails and everyone adjusted themselves to fit me into the team.

Now the real fun began. I was able to do two of my favorite things: climbing on stuff and hitting things with hammers. Miha would use a chalkline to measure out where to put the tile-beams as far as he could reach and then we would get to work.



Half-way done!

the same procedure on the other side.

I started hovering a little closer to take pictures and to help move the beams up to the roof. It was really incredible to see how perfectly all the trusses and beams fit together.



A team of men on the ground would hand us up the beams and we would nail them in. The beams created more place for us to climb, so we would be able to stand higher and use the chalkline again. The best part was that it took roughly 2.2 beams to get across the roof, meaning that the 0.2-beam was measured and cut on the roof using, you guessed it, the chainsaw. I understood now that in Slovenia a chainsaw is a vital carpentry tool and was used much more effectively than I had seen anyone handle a Skillsaw or a Sawzall. I wanted to get a picture of this but I was too busy climbing around and swinging hammers.

We took a break after finishing the first half to have a spritzer (I was beginning to understand why it was so necessary) and got back to work with



Round 2!



Gotta get'em in just right.

Light was fading as we hit the halfway point on the other side of the roof. In my must-finish-by-the-deadline American-dominated mind, this meant that we all needed to get our asses in gear so we wouldn't have to spend too much time in the morning nailing in the last few pieces. Apparently in Slovenian mindset this meant just stop and leave me and Jože on the roof holding a tile-beam and scratching our heads. Jože and I attempted to finish, but it was rapidly becoming too dark to work. By the time Jože and I got off the roof, the men were already working on the dinner that Mirela had prepared.

While we were eating, there came a distant musical sound in the distance. It wasn't long before a short guy draped in an accordion came stumbling up the driveway, drunkenly singing in Slovenian but still managing to play his instrument cleanly. He quickly got the whole group singing and was obligatorily handed a drink and offered something to eat. He tried to talk to me in Slovenian, and when he discovered I was an American out of Vienna, switched to (what I'm sure he thought was) German. He proceeded to make more of an ass out of himself than communicating with me. He tried to get me to chug a cup of wine with him, but my recent vomitory experience of doing that in Romania led me to accepting my cup of wine and putting it down on the bench while he drank his. He eventually gave up on me and switched to playing what I assumed were love songs for Mirela (the only female on the site). Mirela did a good job acting politely interested.

It was completely dark by now and one by one the men who had helped with the roof took off. It was just Jože's family, me, and the drunk dude with the accordion. Apparently it was agreed to give him a ride back to the village, because he walked to the passenger's seat of Mirela's car, making a path quite similar to a sine curve on the way. Luka and I hopped into the back seat and he handed me his accordion. I couldn't understand anything he was saying during the ride, but it sounded like he was doing the standard drunken-philosopher and life-problem-solver routine to Mirela. We dropped him off at the local inn in the village where he stumbled off toward the bar after getting his accordion from me, shaking my hand roughly five to seven times longer than necessary and garbling some incomprehensible German in my general direction. We all breathed a sigh of relief as I got back into the car and we made our way back to the apartment.

Now, my original plan when I left Vienna on Friday was to head back on Sunday (today). Clearly that wasn't going to happen. Tuesday was a national holiday practically all over Europe and most people had Monday free as well. This wasn't the case for me as I had class on Monday. However,

being out in the sticks in Slovenia on a holiday and working all weekend left me with little time to find a ride back to Maribor, let alone Vienna. I trashed the plan of making it to class on Monday and made a new one to make it to class on Wednesday. The class didn't start until 1 o'clock in the afternoon, so that would give me enough time to make the ride on Wednesday morning, when many peoples' holidays were officially over.

We got back home and crashed. By this time my arms were borderline charcoal (my neck wasn't so bad because I had been wearing my shepherd's hat more often than not) and sleeping that night was more difficult as any blanket rubbing against my arms felt like sandpaper. By early the next morning I was smart enough to put on a long-sleeve T-shirt and finally get some better sleep. Before I had gone to bed Jože explained the plan for the next day: after finishing up the last pieces of the tile-beams, it was roofing tiles, roofing tiles, roofing tiles. He told me that the most of the morning would be spent with Miha measuring the tiles out and that actually putting the tiles on the roof wouldn't happen until around noon. This gave me plenty of time to sleep in and a slow relaxing morning to wake up.

MONDAY 4/31/2012

Amount of money spent on trip so far: €0.00

Around 11 o'clock the next morning Mirela showed up at the apartment. She had been helping to plan the yearly May Day festival for the village. Every year Bistrica ob Sotli (village in Slovenia) and Kumrovec (neighboring village in Croatia) would have a party on the border where the border station would be opened up and people could cross freely. As she worked for the village municipality, it was her job to help get this in order. Apparently she had found some time to make it back home to make lunch for everyone back at the property, so once again I helped her pack up and we headed out to the construction site. Despite the temperature still being in the 90s, I left my long-sleeve T-shirt on. I was still adamant about no sun screen and I could feel the heat radiating off my arms, so I felt that this was the best option to prevent further burning.



What else can you use a backhoe for? I know!

By now my throat was feeling 100% better and I could get a decent amount of air through my nose; I was teeming to start moving some roofing tiles. However, Miha was still in the measuring-out process and Jože told me just to chill out and hold my horses for the moment. I took a couple of pictures and hid in the shade of the tree (I could still feel the sun on my arms through my T-shirt). I didn't have to wait long before the measuring was complete and everyone got off the roof to take a spritzer break. Everyone was discussing in Slovenian and I finally asked Jože what the plan was. There were to be two teams working on both sides of the roof, each with a line of people handing up the tiles (the backhoe method as displayed in the picture wasn't exactly the most practical). We got started on this and I ended up on the back side of the roof with Jože and it soon became clear that the process would go significantly faster with a few more people. Not long after we got started, one of the neighbors showed up, an old man who had brought us some wine a day or two before (no, not the one from the picture. Another one). He jumped into the tile-line and reported that another neighbor would be showing up to help. A portly guy soon appeared on the dirt road leading out of the woods and began helping as well. It was really cool to see a community

working so well together in a village. Everyone was always in a really good mood and whenever extra help was needed, the neighbors would just show up and pitch in, even the old men.

We officially had a well-oiled assembly line and the work took off. I had done a quick calculation before and figured that we needed roughly 1,000 tiles on each side of the roof. I guessed that they weighed roughly 3 or 4 pounds each and with our current method we could only move one up the line at a time (mostly due to the fact that Jože could only put them in one at a time). We were also completely at the mercy of the sun; no shade to be found anywhere. It took several spritzer and beer breaks, but after a few hours we got all the tiles in place. The only problem was we still needed more. I started gearing myself up for problem-solving mode when Jože told me it was no problem because there were still more tiles at the neighbor's. He went over to one of the tractors with a trailer, took the kids, and headed down the road to the neighbors. I took this time to help out the guys on the other side of the roof, but it wasn't long before they ran out of tiles as well. This of course meant a spritzer/beer break.



Doh! So close!

We were chilling out and drinking in the shade of the tree when suddenly all the guys hopped into the back of a pickup and took off down the driveway, leaving me there scratching my head. I was alone for a few minutes when Mirela showed up (she had been preparing for the party the next day). I

asked her where the hell everyone went (only Jože and Mirela spoke enough English to communicate effectively with me and everyone else's German vocabulary only included things like "Leben ist für trinken und essen!", "Was trinkst du?" and "Prost!"*) and she told me that they all went to help Jože with the roof tiles. I immediately felt like an idiot for not jumping into the truck and felt



Assembly line!

sheepish when everyone came back with the tiles.

*“Living is for drinking and eating!”, “What do you drink?”, and “Cheers!”

With the new roof tiles it wasn't long before we were finished. The last column took a little longer than the others because Jože had to figure out a safe place to stand while setting them into the roof. We handed up Jože the final peak tiles while the other side was finishing up their last column. The roof was finally finished. Looking at the final product, it was almost unbelievable how much we were able to do in three days. Check out the before and after pictures:



Notice a difference?



The completion was celebrated by more spritzer and beer followed by food which Mirela had prepared for everyone. The work was successfully finished before the holiday was over and Jože could return the backhoe.

It was still fairly early in the day (or at least several hours before dark) when everyone left. Jože and Mirela then asked me if I was interested in going to Kumrovec (pronounced “KOOM-roe-vetz”) to see my great grandfather's old house, which was still in existence because it had been museumified. In fact, the whole village had been museumified. This requires a little more background information.

To the surprise and incredible amusement to everyone in the area who found out, my great-grandfather (Ivan Brose) was cousin to Josef Tito Broz, the communist leader/political gangster* of former-Yugoslavia, which makes me some distant cousin to him. Tito, like all good dictators, bestowed his benevolence on his home village at the expense of the rest of the country and thought it was important that everyone could see his village as he had lived in it. He and my grandfather (as far as I've understood) lived in the same house growing up. That meant that me visiting my great-grandfather's old house was equivalent to me visiting a (ex-)national monument. The reason that I had contact with Jože and Mirela in the first place was because some distant cousin of mine, who grew up in the city next to mine and whom I've never met by the name of Angela, had gone searching for the same house and GPS-ed herself into the wrong village—Bistrica ob Sotli. She arrived at someone's house who didn't speak English, and the person immediately called Mirela (who is known as the person who speaks English in the village). Angela then crashed on the couch that I was crashing on for a week, creating my future contact in Slovenia. Fast forward to me building a roof in Slovenia.

*In case of criticism, be reminded that “political gangster” status is more or less a job requirement for this position.

Of course, there was really no way I could turn down this offer. I'm not particularly interested in historical monuments*, but it was just too close and the situation was just too damn weird to say no. Thus we made our way back to apartment, prepared ourselves for the “journey”, and drove out to the next village across the border.

**“There is no spoken truth that is not past—more wisely forgotten.”*

I was a little giddy to cross the border this time—not only was I completely legal, I now had European identification. At the border both the Slovenian and Croatian sides accepted my Austrian ID card without asking for my passport and we drove a stone's throw away to Kumrovec and parked.

After getting some ice cream we walked on to the museumified section of town, where first and immediately apparent is the House of Broz with a large statue of Tito next to it. In front of the house was a small hedge with two closed wooden gates that barely made it past my knees. I walked toward one of the gates and started to open it to get a better look when Mirela told me to stop. I found this a bit abrupt, as I had even gone through the formality of not jumping over the gate. I asked Mirela why and she told me the museum was closed.

“Can't they make an exception for family?” I asked. My joke was lost in the language barrier.

She explained further that about three years ago a group of guys tried to blow up the statue, so now they have the gates closed at night and more regular police patrols coming around. I looked down again at the knee-high hedges and gates and



Tracing roots...



Rules is rules. A grainy close-up is what you get.

wondered what kind of wimpy-ass terrorists they had in former Yugoslavia. However, a border guard drove by just at that instant and I reluctantly decided to follow the rules. I was left to take a picture on the outside of the demolitionist-proof hedge. Unfortunately, it was starting to get dark and the pictures didn't turn out so well. But you take what you can get. You can see the House of Broz to the left of me and the statue of Tito behind me.

We took some time to wander through the rest of the village before it became completely dark. I was amused when I noticed that the miscellaneous “old farm stuff” around the village, which had been meticulously placed in the same haphazard fashion that villagers 100 years ago *surely* must have done, really reminded me of the haphazard fashion in which the old farm stuff was not so meticulously placed at my great-grandfather's farm. The village was very pristine; a pleasant creek bordered by brick walls running under cute old-fashioned bridges in between the clean imitation-dilapidated houses. During the walk Jože gave me small history lessons, but most of my attention was focused on the atmosphere of the village in the summer-warm spring evening.

All-in-all the visit was pretty trippy. What was originally a grand national monument for the peoples of Yugoslavia was now just some historical oddity tucked away in the corner of Croatia, protected by knee-high hedges, wooden gates, and an occasional patrolling policeman from marauding pissed-off “political activists”, and just happened to be the same place from which my great-grandfather came. It didn't help that I arrived during twilight, with nothing more than an occasional local walking through to get home. I was rather relieved when we left back to Slovenia.

On the way back through the border the Croatian side wasn't convinced with my Austrian ID card and wanted to see my passport, but the Slovenian side just waved us through.

Jože then decided to take me on a quick trip around the local Slovenian country side so I could see something more than their apartment and roofing tiles. As it was dark, I didn't take any pictures, but I can assure everyone that Slovenia is absolutely fucking gorgeous. I was already starting to plan how and when I was going to come back again.

Jože drove us up the side of a mountain* to a fenced-in retreat that housed a bunch of deer. There were restaurants and hotels and an everything-deer-related store, all built with incredible craftsmanship. We chatted for awhile and I spent some time tickling and teaching part of my repertoire of strange noises to Luka and Phillip. Before we left, the owner of the place managed to call a large group of deer nearby and feed them, so we got to watch a bunch of deer gobble down something which looked akin to dog food and jump every time a tourist so much as twitched. We drove home after our beers and I crashed soon after applying liberal amounts of Mirela's homemade sunburn treatment.

*Mountain meaning Vermont-sized mountain and Washington-sized hill.

TUESDAY 5/1/2012

Amount of money spent on trip so far: €0.00

It was officially May Day, the day planned for the “international” party. The parents had woken up earlier than I; Jože to take care of something back on the construction site and Mirela was already gone to make the preparations for party. I went through a lazy morning routine of feeding myself, showering, and spending some time on the computer. Luka and Phillip got up one at a time to watch what I felt was a rather clever stop-motion Czech show on Youtube until Jože arrived. We chatted for a little while and finally decided to make our way down the road to the party.

We arrived and there was already a decent amount of people there (I would estimate around 200). The creek designated the border here and the party this year was on the Slovenian side. The bridge was open for anyone to cross as they pleased. People, who used to be neighbors that had suddenly found a border between each other about 15 years ago, were able to be neighbors again for one day. Mirela was working to serve everyone goulash and there were two other stands handing out wine as fast as you could drink it. A semi which had been converted to a stage was parked next to all the tables, with the band playing polka after polka. All the songs sounded the same to me and weren't exactly my taste, but I guess it was necessary for a Slovenian-Croatian party. A few people showed up in traditional dress (I liked what the men wore, but I found the women's clothing to be pretty boring) and even less were dancing. The majority were eating goulash and drinking wine.



Ain't no party without an accordion!

Jože found some old guy to talk to at the tables and told him about my relation to the local museum. I got the standard surprised/impressed look and he told Jože something about a family from Kumrovec from way back when who were known as “the Americans” because so many had moved to America. We wondered if one of them was my great-grandfather.

The afternoon progressed rather slowly. For the most part, I was doing my standard look-awkward-and-not-talk-to-anyone-at-the-party routine, especially because I didn't speak any Slovenian or Croatian. Once again I felt a ping of retroactive frustration at how closely I had missed the border back in December, and I got Jože to take a picture of me just so I could point it out.



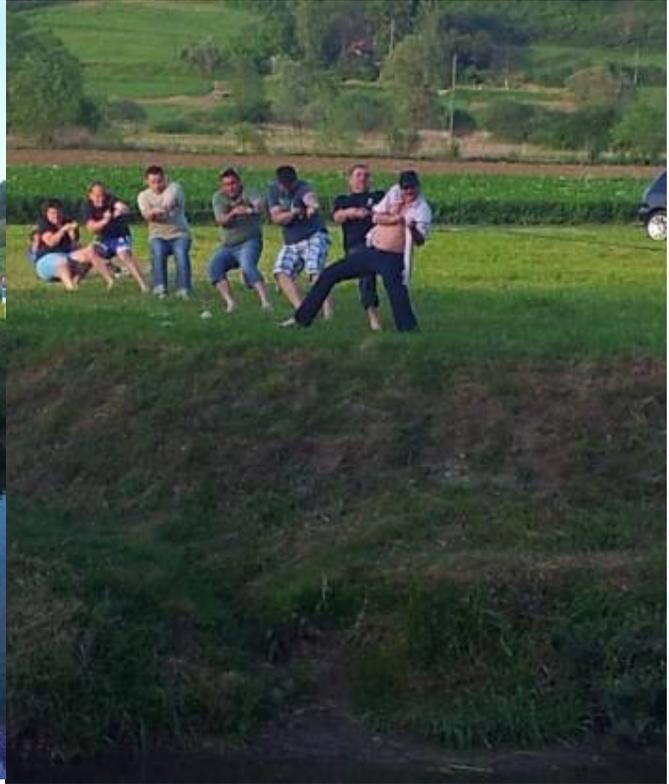
I think this gets the point across.

I walked around to check out the local international soccer games between Bistrica ob Sotli and Kumrovec (there were matches for both the young and old peoples) and eventually the tug-of-war matches on the bridge and over the creek. The mayor of Bistrica ob Sotli was walking around looking mayor-like, being friendly and greeting as many people as he could. When the tug-of-war over the creek started, the mayor decided to go over to the Croatian team. The ref (yes there was a ref) took about three minutes to make sure both sides had an equal number of people, then he blew

the whistle. After about twenty seconds of tugging two more guys ran to the end of the rope on the Slovenian side, which resulted in a quick Croatian loss and a wet mayor.



Everyone watching...



Right before he went in!

Eventually Jože introduced me to some local “young” people (people roughly my age—am I still considered young?) who spoke enough English or German that I could communicate. When they asked me where I was from, I told them Seattle. After a year in Europe I was sick of explaining that there are two Washingtons in the US and that no, I’m not from D.C. I also say Seattle because I’m pretty sure no one has heard of Arlington, and if they have they would probably immediately assume Arlington, Washington D.C., putting me back at my original problem. Anyway, when I told them I was from Seattle their eyes got a little wider and they stood for a moment in shock before saying something like “Woa!! Seattle!” This was the first time I had ever received that reaction and I was a little confused. I pointed out that I was from *near* Seattle, but they didn’t seem to notice.

The day crawled along and I was really starting to feel like I was in an oven, especially considering that I wore my long-sleeved T-shirt again because of my sunburned arms. I was really enviously looking at everyone who was jumping into the creek, but had held myself back because I had no clean and dry clothes into which to change. I had only packed for two days and I was now on my forth, having spent three of them working and sweating out in the sun. Eventually I decided I couldn’t take it anymore, so I crossed the bridge to Croatia and walked down the bank of the creek until I found a place I felt was adequately concealed from everyone. I threw all my clothes on the bank and jumped in. It was no misogi, but it sure as hell refreshed me like one. I came back to the party with damp clothes and Mirela making jokes about me swimming across the border.

I got back to talking to the people I had just met when I discovered they were going to Vienna the next day to see a concert. I explained my situation to them and they offered me a ride, saying that they were leaving at 8am. Perfect! Everything working out in the end, as per usual. This, plus my recent dip in the creek, made me feel a hell of a lot better and I relaxed into chatting with everyone.

After a short time one of the “kids” suggested we should go back to her house at the village and

hang out there, as the party here was getting a little boring. I thought this was a great idea, so I ran over to Jože to tell him I was leaving with someone else. While we were attempting to get everyone in the car to leave (there were five of us total), I began talking to a girl my age who was coming with us. She gave a similar response as the others when I said I was from the *Seattle area*, but I still didn't press the issue. After a good ten minutes of trying to get everyone moving toward the car, I decided to take over by shouting "Gremo! Gremo!*" at everyone to hurry their asses up.

*"Let's go! Let's go!"

Now, in the *Seattle area*, normally when someone suggests to blow a party and head back to their place, it usually means sitting in the basement or a small apartment drinking cheap beer, talking bullshit, and sprawling out on the floor and any available furniture. To my pleasant surprise, we showed up at this girl's parents' house (which was absolutely beautiful), sat down at the picnic table outside, and within minutes the parents were bringing out their homemade wine and mineral water for spritzer and sat down to drink and chat with us. They didn't have any outdoor lighting near the table, so once it got dark they just lit candles. We were in the midst of a heatwave so it was perfectly comfortable at night, and there were *no mosquitoes*. Something unheard of from those of us in the *Seattle area*.

The night went on with more people occasionally showing up and some leaving. A young guy with a guitar appeared and got everyone singing in the blink of an eye. During this one of the other young guys sitting next to me (note: I don't remember a single name out of all these people. Woops) was getting drunker and drunker and deciding more and more that we should be best buddies. He suggested that we go over to his house to check out his wine cellar, and though my Romanian-sense was tingling, I decided that was too cool to pass up and we got up to go check it out. As we were walking away the girl whose house we were at asked us where we were going.

"You will die there!" she said when we told her.

"Nah... I'll be okay." As long as there wasn't going to be any țueka*, I wasn't worried.

*Țueka (pronounced "tsoo-ee-ka") is basically the Romanian equivalent of schnapps, usually made from plums.

We walked maybe three houses down the road (everybody was so close to each other here!) before arriving at his cellar. He opened it up to reveal six or seven barrel-sized tanks of what I presumed to be wine. He had me taste one, filled me up a glass of another, then told me I would have to try the others once I was done with that. I took my sweet time finishing the glass and suggested getting back to everyone else by the time I had. He agreed, so we locked the place back up and headed back up the road, my liver still intact.

When we got back I managed to get the guitar and surprised everyone by playing *Classical Gas*. I tried switching to my more celtic repertoire, but without a guitar pick I couldn't manage it. Suddenly it was suggested that we move on to the neighbor's house, as the parents here were going to go to sleep and it was the neighbor's birthday party. We walked one driveway over and we were there.

After a tasteless chorus of *Happy Birthday* in Slovenian (that is one international phenomenon that I truly regret), a wine glass was stuck in my hand by the owner, followed by a plate of homemade cheese. The girl who I had met back at the party came over to talk to me, and eventually she switched the conversation to what it was like living in Seattle.

"Well," I said, "I'm not actually FROM Seattle. I'm from... close to Seattle. You know. The *Seattle area*. I'm definitely not from the city itself."

"But, but..." I could see she had already had a good dosage of wine, "you're like... FROM Seattle. That's awesome!"

I couldn't take it anymore and I asked just what the fuck was so amazing about the fact that I was from Seattle. The answer was more interesting than I had anticipated.

Seattle, of course, is known for the grunge music scene back in the 90s (Nirvana, Alice in Chains, Pearl Jam, *etc.*). This girl told me that Bistrica ob Sotli, the little village of approximately 1500 people where we were at, was known as "Little Seattle" in Slovenia because a generation of kids from there all got into grunge music, with many of them starting their own grunge bands. She said that these bands are still around and strong today, and that's why all the people my age in the village were shocked when I said I was from Seattle. I was turning out to be some weird-ass celebrity; a distant cousin of Yugoslavia's ex-dictator and a native inhabitant of the locals' music obsession. Whatever. It could be weirder.

As the night went on and we kept getting handed cheese and full glasses of wine, the girl I was talking to was getting closer and closer to me and becoming clearly more interested. When I talked to her earlier in the day, I had done my standard female assessment and found that I wasn't very attracted to her. I decided now to resist succumbing to any beer-goggle effect in order to avoid any unpleasant situation in the morning. It was getting late, anyway, and I decided it was best if I went back to the apartment and get to bed. I announced my decision to everyone at the party and I got a big round of handshakes and goodbyes, but before I could leave the owner came over to me with his pitcher of wine again. I shook my head and pointed to my wine glass that was still over half full, but instead of nodding in understanding and moving on to someone else, he took an empty glass and started filling it up. I tried to interrupt.

"But, I already have a wine glass and I... oh, dammit." The guy didn't speak English and it wouldn't have mattered if he did, because I was now holding two glasses of wine. I took a sip while he was still looking, then nonchalantly set them both down in the windowsill before slipping away.

Several others decided it was time to do the same (including the girl half-snuggling up with me) and I was propounded with offers of food, wine, places to stay, and people to show me around Slovenia any time I wanted to show back up again. With a few more handshakes and some hugs I was finally able to escape into the apartment, where I set my phone's alarm for 7:30 and fell asleep.

WEDNESDAY 5/2/2012

Amount of money spent on trip so far: €0.00

I woke up at 7:29 (my old wake-up-one-minute-before-the-alarm reflex going off) and began making sure I had everything together. Jože got up soon after to see me off, and it was clear that Mirela and the kids weren't going to get up in time to see me off (she had to wait until everyone was gone the night before and clean up). Before I could make it out the door, Jože handed me 100 euros and told me it was for helping him out with the roof. Sweet!!

Amount of money spent earned on trip so far: €100.00!

It was getting close to eight o'clock and my Moore-gene went off. I made my way outside to the neighbor's to catch my ride. This is when I learned about the Slovenian interpretation of road trip.

There were about twice as many people going to this concert in Vienna as I had thought, and we waited while one person showed up at a time. They all took their time rearranging their cars and decided which luggage should go in which car and how (yes, luggage. They were going to Vienna for one day and they had luggage) and decided to get a coffee first at the village café before taking off. It had taken me approximately two hours to get from Vienna to Maribor, and a little over an hour to get from Maribor to Bistrica ob Sotli, so I rounded that up to four hours for good measure and decided I

would still be able to make it to class on time at 1:10.

We all sat down and I got a coffee recommendation from one of the girls I had met the night before. We didn't wait too long before going out the door, and as we were walking out I noticed no one was going up to the counter to pay. I asked the girl I got the coffee recommendation from about this and she said not to worry about it because someone already paid for everyone. I rolled my eyes and stuffed my wallet back into my pocket. People started piling into cars and I shook hands and said goodbye to Jože before doing so myself. We were off!

Or so I thought.

What I proceeded to experience was one of the slowest journeys accomplished by motorized vehicles in the history of internal combustion. We drove at a pace that paled in comparison to every other European I had ever ridden with, and we stopped *every five fuckin' minutes*. Okay, maybe not literally, but holy shit. On top of this there seemed to be a bit of confusion on the side of the drivers where exactly we were going, and it was more than once that we went around roundabouts exceeding 360 degrees of rotation, which was about 360 degrees more than my Arlington-bred driving sense could handle. I think we stopped at three different gas stations, at the Austro-Slovenian border (which isn't actually a border anymore due to Schengen) to have snacks and drink wine, and at some unremarkable place next to the freeway to have lunch (which was carefully prepared and packed before leaving). I'm not wont to complain about a free lunch, and a home-cooked Slovenian lunch at that, but my self-assurance that I would arrive in Vienna early was crumbling into a worry whether or not I was going to make it on time.

When I brought this up to the girl in the car she laughed and explained to me that in Slovenia, because the country is so small and that every place is reachable from every other place at two hours maximum, any trip outside of Slovenia is considered a huge adventure. Thus Slovenians turn the ride itself into part of the experience. As much as I understood and appreciated this, I still wanted to make it to class on time and I couldn't grasp 200 miles as anywhere near the "epic journey" mark.

When we finally arrived in Vienna I was already 30 minutes late to class. The drivers took some time being lost in the city and trying to find a place to park while I tried to figure out where I was and locate a metro station. The drivers figured out where they were at the same time I located a station, and I took off toward it after I had my backpack and as soon as it was politely possible. I walked into class sunburned, disheveled, dirty, wearing clothes covered in pitch, dirt, food, and wine stains, over an hour late, and a hundred euros richer than when I left.

Dylan Lawrence Moore
May, 2012
Vienna, Austria