pride myself on reading between the lines. But apparently I'm not as good at reading direct statements. I'm not sure how else to explain that when a tour advertises itself as a "wine and bike tour" instead of a "bike and wine tour," I should have realized that the emphasis was going to be a bit different than your average European cycling trip.

Even so, it was easy to believe that though this trip would take us to Hungary, which is a little off the usual cycling tour radar, it would still be like many other European cycling sojourns, with plenty of miles, long days in the saddle, and hills. Besides, we booked it through the U.S.-based Bike Tours Direct, and the company's owner, Jim Johnson, would be on the tour too.

Other clues led me astray. After arriving in Budapest, I met 28-year-old guide Gábor Závodi, the owner of Vinociped and an uber-fit young guy with a master's degree in economics. His 27-year-old sweetheart,

Zsophia Fodor, the other guide for our group of 20 North American travelers, was also trim and strong. No academic slouch either, she was close to completing her doctorate degree in physics. Even so, my assumptions about what kind of trip this would be turned out to be misdirected.

What I discovered is that if you want to go to Europe to rack up the miles, push yourself to the limit, and drink nothing but water, you should pick a different trip. If, however, you think you've done enough of those miles-for-the-sake-of-miles trips, maybe you're ready for something a little mellower. That is exactly what this trip turned out to be. No, that's wrong. Mellow isn't quite the word. Let's say intensely laid back but with whatever the equivalent Hungarian expression of *joie de vivre* might



Hung(a)ry in Style

of Lake Balaton, there was no emphasis on speed. No centuries to knock off. No crack-of-dawn starts. No fill-you-up-on-carrot-sticks-and-apples mentality. In fact, one of our fellow travelers, a 73-year old Californian named John Ryan (who swore he hadn't ridden a bike in over 15 years), said, "Now, if you would just skip the cycling, you'd have a pretty good trip." His view got a lot of laughs

and was certainly

not representative of the group. Most of us were serious recreational cyclists. Nor would we have been content — like John was — to spend so much time riding in the van. But it was the kind of trip that anyone, at pretty much any level, could take on.

There are a few more things to consider, because for a trip like this you need to think in different terms. Let's start with the two staples of a decent day in Hungary — pork and pálinka. Pálinka is a way to fortify yourself before breakfast. Pálinka is lovely for lunch. Pálinka is

by Colleen Friesen

ble-duty as a nightcap. Pálinka, at 40 to 50 percent alcohol, is a uniquely Hungarian brandy, usually distilled from plums or apricots.

To be fair, we weren't served pálinka at breakfast on this trip. However, we met a number of Hungarians who swore it was the only way to start the day. I can attest that there is definitely a different focus on one's cycling after a hefty shot or two of this brandy in the midday August heat — especially





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plate piled high with pork complemented by as much wine as you like.

Which brings us to the other Hungarian specialty — pork, or pig, as in, I felt like one. As we'd already discovered by spending a few days in Budapest, Hungary is a carnivore's dream — or an arterial nightmare. There's nothing like a big plate of sausages served up with a side of ham to fill your belly. You can worry about your heart health when you get home. While you're here, your name is Porkahontas.

I will skip the preamble of how the trip began. Let's start with the fourth day, as it's one of the hillier days and indicative of the spirit of this tour. We left behind the easy paved cycling paths along the northern shoreline of Europe's largest lake, along with our usual distances of 40 or 50 kilometers. Instead, we headed for the hills of the Balaton Uplands.

This particular day started without bicycles. Instead, we left our courtyard breakfast area at the Hotel Borbaratok in Badacsonytomaj to walk a couple kilometers up a steep hill. It was sweaty work to arrive at the Róza Szegedy House for some morning tastings, including Urmos, a vermouth made from boiled wine flavored with basil, cinnamon, wormwood and other herbs — a distinctive and pleasant aperitif.

Those of you familiar with wine tastings know that the usual protocol is to swirl, sniff, taste, and spit; although some claim this process is akin to wine abuse. My husband, Kevin Redl, is a wine swirler extraordinaire. As a recently retired manager of a Vancouver, British Columbia, wine store, and with his level-three certificate from the Wine Spirits and Education Trust, he knows this grape thing pretty well.

One of the conditions of his prior employment was signing a contract swearing that he would always spit. Considering that he sometimes tasted as many as 200 wines in a day, that was probably a good thing, especially when operating heavy machinery like a cash register. Apparently, Kevin was feeling the relief from that contractual obligation. I guess very few in our group had ever heard of such a silly requirement, because that spit bucket didn't see a lot of action that morning. I'm not sure if it's because it was downhill or due to the wine swishing in our loosened veins, but the trip back to our bikes was much chattier than the jaunt up.

We cycled for about 10 kilometers. It

touring.

was hillier and starting to become hot. Gábor led us to Szentbékkálla — the Stone Sea — a park area strewn with odd boulders. These bizarre rock formations evolved during the Miocene Era when thermal springs erupted, hardening and

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cementing the former Pannonian Sea bed's white sand into stone mass. Eons of wind erosion left behind a compilation of outcroppings. The one named Ingo-Ko, or Swaying Rock, looks like one of those Looney Tunes desert formations. the kind that are balanced on top of

each other in precarious ways and result in flattened cartoon characters.

Gábor grinned and asked for volunteers to climb up and help sway the rock. David Flower, 58, a red-and-salt-haired engineer, stepped forward. Morgan Fraley, 66, one of the seven riders from Tennessee's Chattanooga Bicycle Club, was next. Steve Friedman, 59, a lawyer from Chicago and his cycling buddy, 66-year-old retiree Ron Schwarz, along with my 52-year-old wino husband, were ready, too. They started up the sharp hill to reach the top of the rock.

The guys stood on the garage-sized flat boulder that sits atop a much-too-small



Soups on. No thanks, I'll have the goulash.

base and teeter-tottered to great acclaim from the rest of us. More fools rushed up where angels fear to tread before we got back on our bikes to start our assault on a few more hills before lunch.

At the Eszterházy Wine Cellar, we

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sampled a half-dozen area wines, including pino gris, elder blossom cuvée, and muscatel. The echoes of our increasingly loud laughter are probably still reverberating in that cellar as we practiced our bastardized Hungarian word for cheers, "Egeszegedre!" Unfortunately, our version sounded more like, "Agha Shaggy

Dog!" but our intentions were good. We headed up to a hall with tables filled with immense platters of liverwurst, ham, pork chunks, bread, sausages, peppers and cheeses, and, of course, pitchers of wine.

But the piece de resistance was a casserole dish filled with chilled, creamy bacon fat replete with suspended little lardons of fried bacon chunks. Slim little Sophie slathered thick cuts of white bread with this delightful spread. I swear I saw her swoon with happiness while the five-piece band serenaded us with festive gypsy soul. I barely watched the band. I was mesmerized by Sophie's bread. Seriously, you couldn't have cut that fat with Drano. It was extreme.

The fifth day was my favorite. We were leaving Köveskál to pedal 55 kilometers en route to Tótvázsony. It sounded like something we could just knock off in a hurry. But there were 20 of us, and although Jim Johnson and the six other keeners from the aforementioned Chattanooga Bicycle Club were always ready to roll, it still took a while to corral a group that size.

It was actually one of the things I started to enjoy. Once I suspended the inclination to zoom and push, it was nice to idle along and chat. I hung out with everyone eventually, including the Jarays. Ken, 55, was a lawyer, and his wife Sandy, 54, counsels children near their home in Manitou Springs, Colorado. By end of the trip, the four of us shared a lovely dinner together in Budapest where they watched in amazement as I polished off a huge dish of goose livers cooked in hot fat.

It also was fun to ride beside Carol

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Shankel from Seattle, especially when I discovered this tireless rider was 74 years old. When I told her she was an inspiration, she was clear in her reply: "I don't want to be an inspiration. I want to be a player." She didn't need to worry. She's



Rolling along. Hungary's quiet roadways.

We cruised through villages made up of families with tractors in their driveways, past fields of golden corn, and treefilled gardens stuffed with fat pears and pudgy figs. Women still wore aprons here. One could only wish they could convince their Speedo-wearing, ditch-shoveling husbands to don the odd one, too. And frankly, older gentlemen wearing only a Speedo whilst cycling is a memory I'd like to delete. No. I take that back. It makes me smile to even write it.

When you're not head-down and going for it, there are more chances to hear the birds and distant dogs as you ride on

quiet roads lined with poplars. The end of August felt like the perfect time for this ride. We enjoyed the last blast of summer's heat, with temperatures between 85 and 95 degrees, while also enjoying the first turning of the leaves. We had time to stop to take photos of the endless fields of corn, the yards ringed with hollyhocks, oleander, roses and black-eyed susans, and ubiquitous pots of geraniums. Not to mention that the cycling path was dedicated to — wait for it — cyclists. Considering it had been only 20 years since the end of the az átkos 40 év (the accursed 40 years) of the communist regime, things have progressed very quickly.

At the end of the day, I wrote in my journal, "Today was nearly perfect." I couldn't find anything to indicate why I didn't pronounce it complete perfection. Perhaps it was only my fear of tempting fate with such a declaration.

There was no doubt that we had officially left the easy days of rolling countryside behind us. These were not extreme hills by any stretch, but for this West Coast Canadian, the heat added a new dimension. I amused myself up the last grind by trying to count the salty tidelines on my gloves, legs, and arms. Soon enough, the road changed to a dusty track. We entered Gergeley Wine Cellar, run by yet another young entrepreneur. We were starting to see a trend.

It looked like capitalism and its opportunities had been embraced by the generation that came of age during the change of regimes. Seabo Gergo was a friend of Gábor's, and like him, had the same cando enthusiasm and love for what he was doing. He greeted us as we staggered into his estate.

We parked our bikes at the left of the gravel driveway. The drive was on the

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crest of a long hill that fell away from our parked bicycles. Rows of grapevines plunged down from our feet toward the vista of the shimmering expanse of Lake Balaton far, far below. There was a giant outdoor oven redolent with wonderful, smoky smells. Courtyard tables, festive with royal blue umbrellas, sat next to a small sloping area in the deep shade of old apple trees. It was a little slice of paradise. I wanted to throw myself under the dappled light of the orchard. But first we had to do a wine tasting. Of course — what was I thinking?

Seabo led us into the cool cellar. The sweat chilled on my back as we sipped some of his signature organic wines surrounded by the unmistakable aroma of wine cellars everywhere — that lovely blend of fermenting grapes and the dusty



A few winks. Wine and cycling will do that.

cool smell of rock. The gold-medal winning cabernet sauvignon rosé was exceptional, a classic dry rose with young, fresh red fruit aromas of strawberry and rasp-



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Slovakia Germany berry. The chardonnay, czerszegi füszeres, furmint, blaufränkisch, and merlot were dry and crisp. The Furmint aszu, this region's version of its more famous cousin Tokaji aszu, was sweet and delicious.

Kevin helped lead the group in swirling and snorting with aplomb. We were becoming polished tasters, although the spit buckets were yet again remarkably empty given the rather heavy-handed pouring.

It was dazzling back in the sunshine where the tables were now set with fizzing seltzer bottles and Olaszrizling, the perfect complement to the forthcoming feast. We gathered around the outdoor oven as the lid came off the huge trough-like roasting dish. It revealed whacks of wild pig, gargantuan ham hocks, potatoes, red peppers, carrots, onions, and peas basting and mingling to create a savory blend of pork- fat heaven.

Logos and designs on all our cycling jerseys stretched and morphed into twisted new shapes as our bellies expanded. Chunks of glistening ham and all those decadent juices were mopped up with thick bread. Groaning abounded.

A few of us stepped around the old dog snoozing between the tables and rolled our porky butts onto the grass under the trees. Blankets were handed out. I couldn't quite believe it — a bike trip with a nap time. The breeze rustled through the apple leaves. The air was bouquet with suggestions of apple, a hint of porky smoke, and a redolent bottom note of earth — like a wine the gods would make of their finest August day.

Eventually, we were roused to cycle again. The last few hills before our home at the Hotel Bakony felt like proper penance after such an indulgence. Our rooms were huge and the grounds a veritable Eden

AND, BY THE WAY

- For more information on bicycle touring in Hungary, contact Jim Johnson at biketours direct.com.
- I'd highly recommend arriving in Budapest a couple days early and staying as long as possible after the cycling is done. Budapest is home to more than 100 hot springs. Spa culture flourished during the 150 years of Turkish occupation and is now a way of life. Check out Gellért Baths, which opened in 1918, at gellertbath.com.
- Vinociped (vinociped.hu) books the Hotel

filled with figs, yellow and blue plums, raspberries, apples, and pears. Therein lies the intrinsic joy of cycling – I'm nearly always hungry and ready to eat. In spite of all these amazing meals, near the end of the trip I wrote in my journal that I felt trimmer and stronger each day. How in the world did that work?

Our trip started and ended in Budapest, though the actual cycling part of the tour began and finished in Veszprém, a gorgeous old town about an hour and a half west of that city. Our last dinner together was like coming home. Our trip began at this same hotel, the ancient and beautiful Oliva Pension, but even that seemed long ago. So much had happened. Friendships had formed. Pork and pálinka were consumed. Pedals were pushed, castles explored, and so many meals were shared.

There were speeches. Jim Johnson started with some laughs, then lifted his glass to toast Gábor and Zsophia with our now-polished version of "Agha Shaggy Dog." Heads nodded when he explained that his business relationship of promot-

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ing European tours such as Gábor's has become much more than that. "I've gained a friend," he said.

Gábor, too, stood to thank us all for making the trip fun, hamming it up into an Oscar-worthy acceptance speech thanking his parents, friends, and family. The lovely and ever-tolerant Zsophia laughed and rolled her eyes as he waxed eloquent.

But then Zsophia stood up. What is it about imperfectly spoken English that makes it feel more truthful? She didn't speak as loudly as the men, and the room fell quiet as everyone listened to her richly accented words.

"I feel from the heart, this love ... And I hope you hold with you a small piece of Hungary in your hearts and memories from this time we spent together," she said.

Colleen Friesen wears black ... a nod to her Mennonite roots and how well the colour travels. She hates leaving home and loves to go on a trip. When she's not writing, you'll find her on the way to Somewhere Else, eager to begin her next adventure of self-propelled activities like cycling, walking, or kayaking.

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