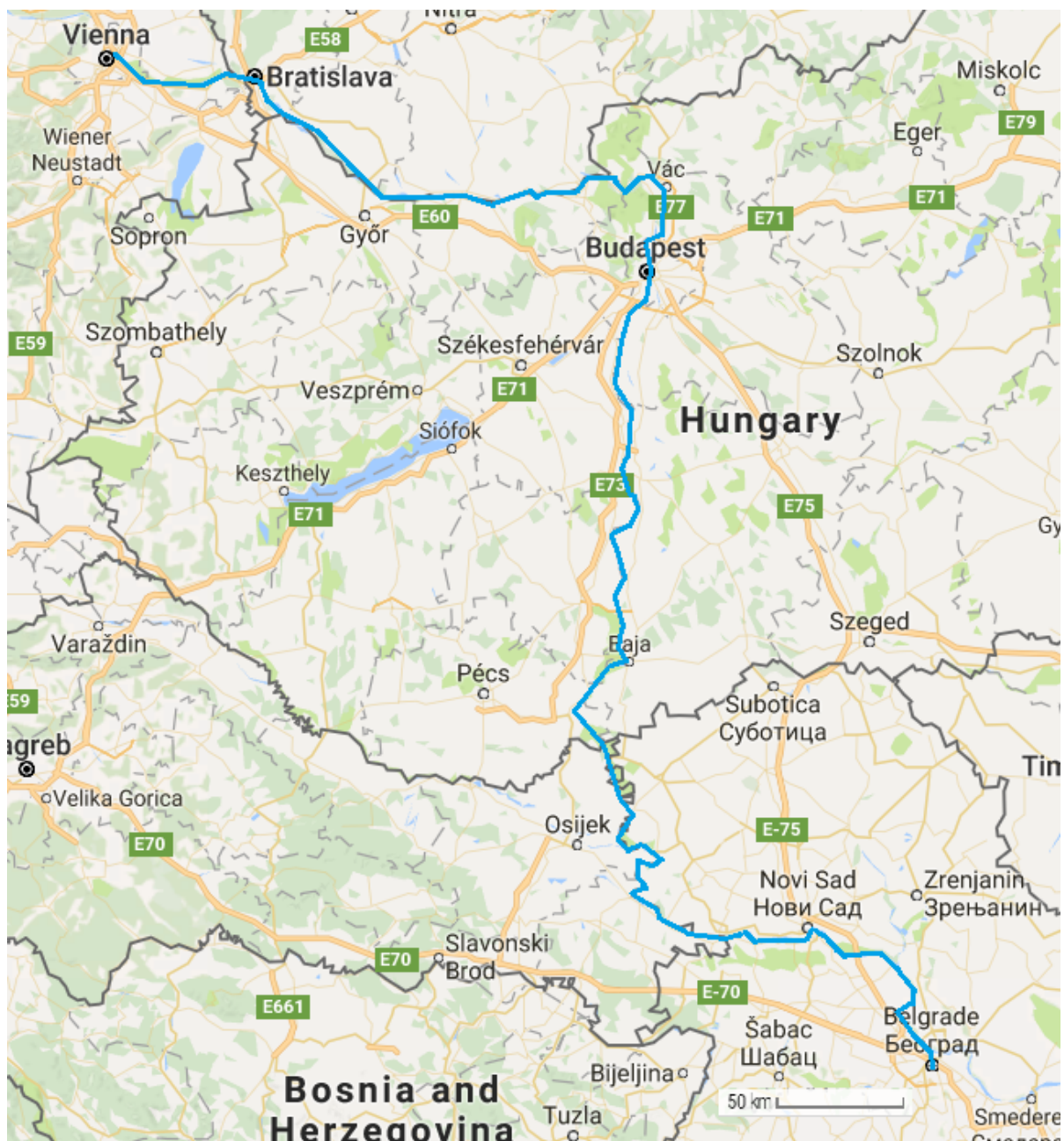


Only Mad Dogs and Englishmen

-by Tom Chivers and Thomas Bott

This report summarises our voyage from Vienna to Belgrade in August 2016 in a 16ft 1970's Wayfarer Dinghy- Egret. This trip would not have been possible without the significant financial support given by the RCC for which we are immensely grateful.

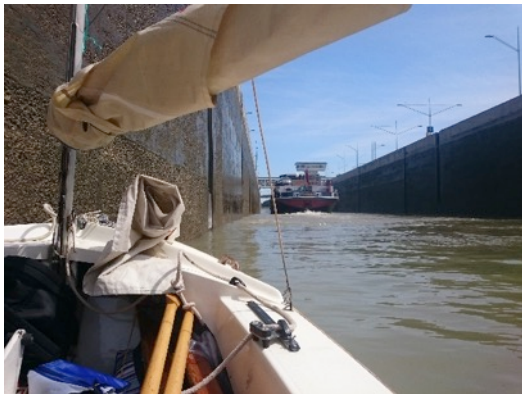
Our first challenge of the trip was to get Egret from leafy Tunbridge Wells to our start point in Vienna. Fortunately, the help of parents was enlisted and after crossing the channel the highways of the continent opened up before us, and after a few stops in picturesque German towns we arrived in Vienna on the 30th of July. With Egret safely ensconced in a marina until the morning we embarked on an exploration of the city under the guidance of some of Tom's Viennese relatives. Over a traditional meal that evening we went over our plan of attack. Our aim was to get to Belgrade by the 31st of August and our path would be that of the Danube which winds its way through the hills and forests of Central Europe on its way to the Black Sea. We would have to travel at least 25 km's every day.



As both of the authors were only 18 years old at the time and neither of us had attempted any comparable cruise it was with a due sense of trepidation that we set off the next morning. There was a stiff breeze blowing up the river and it was sufficiently wide for us to be able to beat up into it. At this point the current was negligible but that was because we had set off just above a large lock (one of only two we had to go through). We were dwarfed by the steep sided walls and by our companions (two 40m+ barges) but after a brief drama involving a jammed rope, we were quickly spat out into the increasingly fast

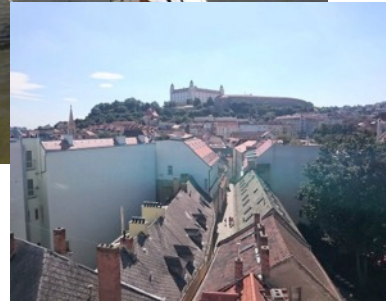


current of the Danube proper. To our dismay the wind had died and we were totally becalmed. However, we were not disheartened and rowed for a few hours until we came to a suitable beach to have lunch. When we left, the wind had picked up a bit so we made the decision to hoist the jib and try to sail under it alone. This plan nearly proved disastrous as it transpired that the jib did not give us enough steerage way (with the current carrying us along) to complete a tack. And as we fell off each incomplete tack we got closer and closer to the rocky shore. This continued until we were mere feet away from the rocks when a ferry steamed past throwing up a large wake. Egret rolled a terrifying 50° as we used the oars to desperately fend off from the rocks. Fortunately, we managed to escape with only a couple of knocks on the rocks and a slightly splintered oar.



Shaken we dropped the jib and motored for a bit (we had a temperamental 2 stroke outboard). Around 1800 the

wind picked up, this time behind us so we raced along downwind on the jib. Unhappily the wind brought rain and we had to make a dash onto a nearby sandy beach to camp. Egret needed a bailing (we think faulty self-bailers were to blame) and this operation in a wayfarer is not the most straightforward. First you have to move everything onto one side of the boat, and then you have to take the benches and the floorboards up so you can get at the water, but with the weight on the other side you have to hang over the side to get the water towards you. Not an easy job! We set up our 2-man tent and cooked a basic supper over a portable gas stove. We did so just in time as the rain returned with a vengeance along with thunder and lightning!



This pattern broadly repeated itself as we drifted, rowed and when wind allowed, sailed out of Austria into Slovakia, passing castles high on rocky crags (some of which we walked up to). We realised that our estimations of the Danube's speed and navigability were naïve, but after working out which side to pass channel markers (not before bouncing off a few!) and how to effectively steer Egret in the terrifyingly fast current, we became much more comfortable on the river. It only took us two days to arrive in our first city- Bratislava. After a scary encounter with some large dogs in the morning we arrived in the suburbs to the West of Bratislava and moored up on a pontoon belonging to a local kayaking club. After a lot of sign language, we managed to communicate our intentions to the manager and he let us moor up and said we could camp in the club's garden. Bratislava is a beautiful city, small enough

to explore on foot but full of interesting sights. We walked up to Maria Theresa's palace and visited the cathedral and arms museum. The latter two reflected the character of the city, small and quirky but full of interesting things. We got the tram back and moved Egret from the pontoon onto the side of an authentic Mississippi paddle steamer! Called (somewhat predictably) "The Mark Twain" which had been converted into a bar. We did some washing under a tap and hung it up to dry before turning in.

We left Bratislava bright and early and headed down towards our final lock of the trip (we were quite nervous as we had been told in Bratislava that it was only for industrial shipping). Just before we got into the huge lake before the dam we found an inlet full of houseboats and had lunch on a floating café, there must have been over 100 ranging from little more than sheds to converted barges. The lake just before the lock is the widest point of the river and the banks disappeared to each side of the horizon. This was our first night sleeping on Egret and so we rigged our homemade boom tent fairly successfully. It

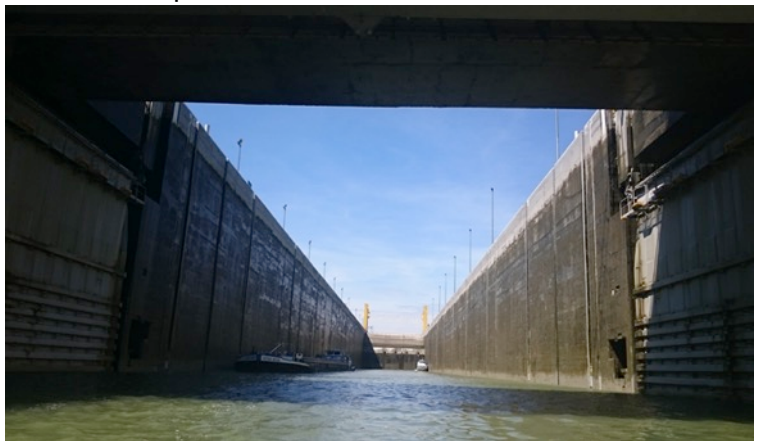
was very basic, consisting of a large tarpaulin held in place with several bungees. We didn't find out if it was

waterproof (probably for the best) but it kept the dew out and most of the light. Our sleeping arrangements on Egret developed as the trip went on. Our first night was our least comfortable with Thomas getting a wet pillow and Tom being pressed against the thwart by his air bed; however we learnt that we had to thoroughly bail Egret and deflate our airbeds a bit and by the end sleeping on Egret was as comfortable as dry land.

We had a hard row to the lock which was 17km up a narrow concrete channel, the wind was dead on the nose but the channel was far too narrow to tack in so we had no choice but to row (and motor towards the end). We could see the lock from miles away and it was with a sense of foreboding that we approached. The entrance to the lock was lined with telephones that connected to the control tower. However, none of them worked and we were puzzling over how to contact the tower when a uniformed man arrived on a bicycle. He did not speak a

word of English so we had to rely on hand gestures, which is challenging when discussing insurance and the boat documents! Eventually we parted with €50 and he said we could go through with the next barge (providing we dropped the mast). We went in behind the relatively small barge (only 50ft or so) and tied on and began our descent. The drop was around 20 meters and we were

amazed by the sheer size of the lock (larger than the ones used on the Panama Canal). We had to leave first and so raced out with our little engine going flat out. At this point disaster struck (there seemed to be a theme developing) and the engine cut out right in front of the emerging barges. Thomas leapt to the oars and we managed to scramble out of the way just in time. We managed to sail 30km to a nearby village and spent the evening moored up to a friendly Slovakian's pontoon which we shared with an equally friendly German couple. All the telegraph poles had stork's nests on the tops which seemed quite the balancing act to us. They had some very good German maps which they helped us look over. They also gave us some anti-mosquito coils which proved invaluable in the weeks to come.



At this point we should explain that our primary navigational map was the Vienna to Budapest Danube Cycle trail. This flip map was invaluable as the cycle trail followed the river and it had a lot of detail on settlements along the way. However it was unsurprisingly of little use when it came to moorings, pontoons and anchorages. Our best guide on these was a book written when Yugoslavia still existed. This meant we were never quite sure what we'd find when we went to a town or village. In hindsight we would have got the very good German cruising guide and tried to find a friendly German to translate it.



The next day we rowed in the morning and sailed upwind in the afternoon; as we approached Komarno we looked behind us and saw a storm looming up over us. We motored up to the marina as fast as we could. Having moored Egret to a large metal pontoon and managed to secure the tent down with the help of our water tanks. That evening we were treated to some folk music outside a pub before scuttling back as the storm returned, with lots of thunder and lightning.

We shopped at Lidl for some provisions in the morning then set off downwind with full sails to try and use the self-bailers to shift some of the water sloshing around above the floorboards. A damp morning topped off with Tom cutting his foot on a rusty wire meant that sprits weren't the highest as we prepared for a long row up an inlet to a campsite. Luckily it was at this point that we got our only tow of the trip as a kind Dutch family quickly took us up to the campsite, it was very nice to have a shower for once!



When we awoke, we discovered that the river had risen by 5ft overnight! Had we camped on a beach as usual we would almost certainly have been flooded and Egret may have drifted off. As we sailed down river we saw that all the beaches had been covered so we couldn't stop for lunch. It was not the end of the world as we were stopping in the marina of the stunning town of Esztergom, and we covered the 30km in good time. After exploring the imposing Basilica and stumbling across a local music festival we spent another night camping on a pontoon (which was barely wider than the tent).

The next day we passed between rolling wooded hills and the river became narrower as it entered the beautiful Visegrad Gorge. There was little wind so we drifted along, sheltering from the sun under our umbrellas.



That night we found a place to camp in a large lake-like inlet. We were not alone however as there was a Hungarian family already there. They had been doing a similar trip (Vienna to Budapest) in two canoes and were much better prepared (they did the trip every year). That evening we shared their traditional Hungarian travelling stew and stayed up late into the night around their campfire.



For a sailing adventure, the next day required a lot of walking. We misjudged the height of Visegrad castle and spent a couple of arduous hours climbing (in the midday sun) to the keep which gave impressive views of the river. Not before, spending the morning looking around the Palace by the river, it was a veritable treasure trove and had been painstakingly reconstructed using excavated material. From Visegrad we entered the Knee of the Danube (often described as the most beautiful stretch of the river) and it certainly lived up to its reputation. We spent a lot of time dodging speedboats and we were passed by a seemingly endless stream of kayakers (participating in the Tour

Internationale Danube), some of whom struck up conversations with us.

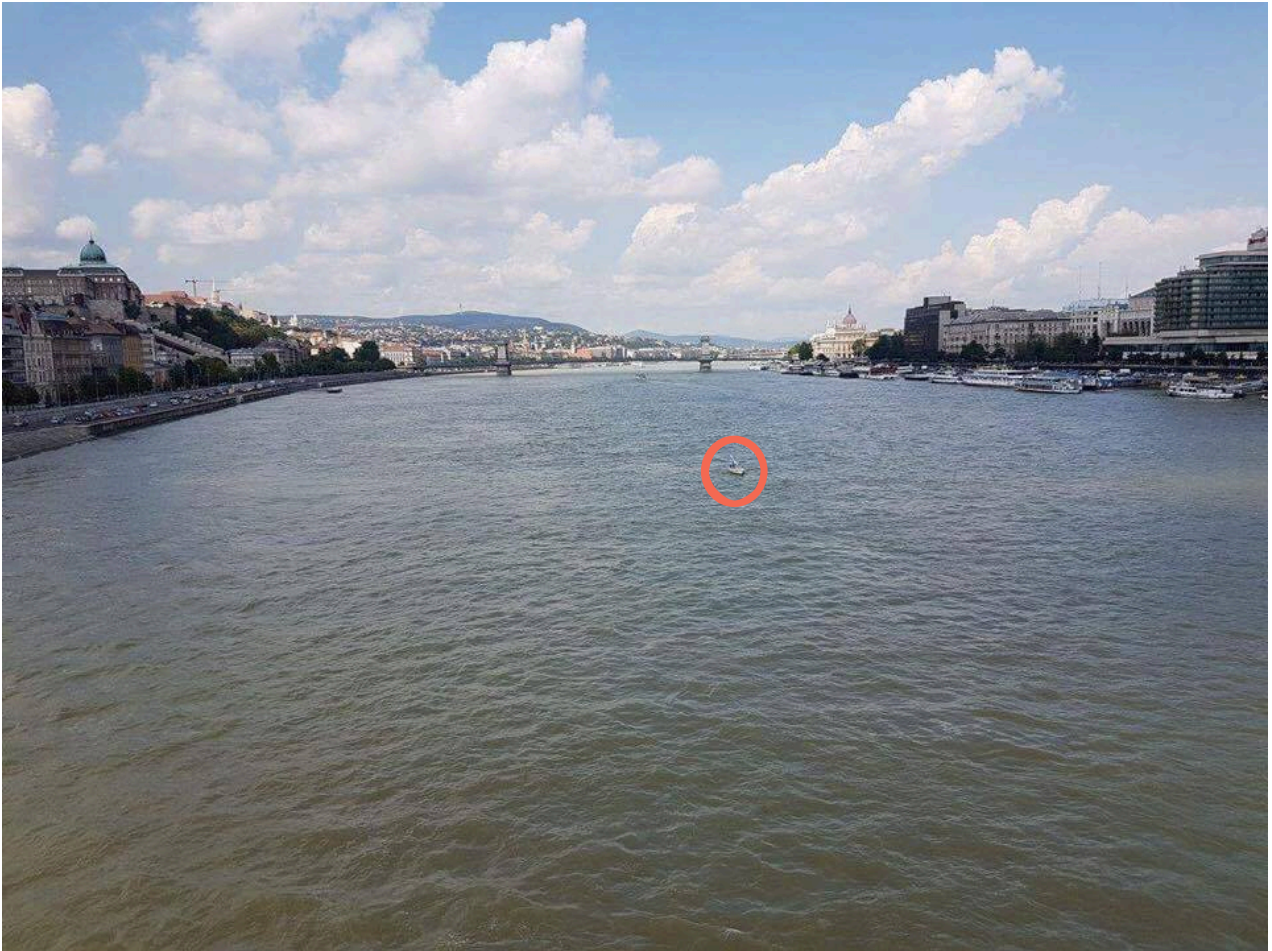
Szentendre was our last stop before Budapest and we would have spent longer in this very culturally rich town had it not been pouring with rain for most of the time. As it was we went to several galleries and even a marzipan museum which had life-size models of celebrity's constructed entirely out of marzipan! It wasn't all bad though, the wife of the manager of the hotel we were staying in the grounds of took pity on us and we were allowed to sleep in the gym, it made a nice change from the tent!



We spent four nights in Budapest, in a marina on an island to the north of the city. The first day (and night) was spent at a music festival on the island, the second recovering and the third and fourth exploring the city and meeting up with some friends who had come by a more traditional route (interailing). There was so much to see and do in the city that we scarcely scratched the surface, highlights include the Basilica, the Fisherman's Bastion, Hero's Square, the Buda Cathedral, the Hungarian National Gallery and the "House of Terror." It was not all fun and games however, as our map stopped at Budapest and we needed to find a new one for the next part of our journey. Unfortunately the one we had

posted from England had not arrived at the Post Restant, and the only one we could find was another cycle trail German. and this one in





We left Budapest, waved off from one of the bridges by our friends and set off into the heart of Hungary. Budapest was stunning from the water but the river was very busy and the wakes thrown up by the ferries and cruisers bounced off the walls and turned the water very choppy! We escaped without major incident although we were shouted at a few times by ferry drivers, and before we knew it we were in the industrial suburbs of the city and then back into the countryside. The city seemed very far away.

Up until the next day we had assumed we were the strangest sight on the river but we were proved wrong when we spotted an extremely

strange craft. We rushed off the beach where we had been having lunch to investigate further. It turned out to be a very makeshift catamaran style raft crewed by 6 Swiss students. It looked very rickety and was propelled in the traditional Swiss style- a single paddle in the middle that allowed forward propulsion and steering. They had built it from rubbish scavenged from around Budapest, with the hulls made out of industrial sized water pipes. They were very excited to see some fellow travellers and we cruised in company for the rest



of the day and had a very enjoyable evening with them (even though we had to tow them to the beach when they overshot it). That night we were taught the importance of putting the rain cover on the tent no matter what the weather is when you go to bed, as we were drenched by a large storm passing in the night. This could not dampen our spirits however as we had spent such an enjoyable night sitting around their campfire exchanging stories.

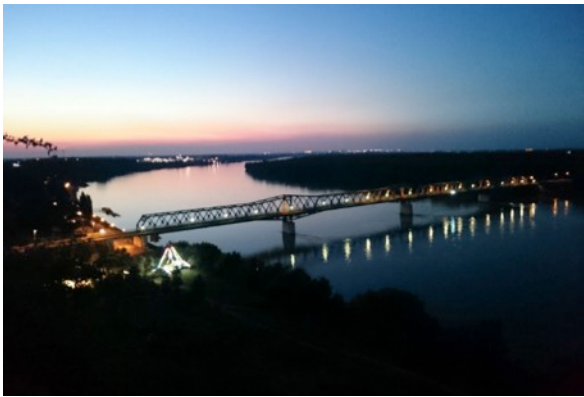
It was during this night that we experienced one of our most serious kit failures- Thomas' air bed popped and despite his best efforts to patch it up it was never the same again. The next day we didn't travel very far as we needed Wi-Fi to get our A level results the following day. So we spent a lazy day writing postcards and exploring the village, we raced up a hill to see the sunset but just missed it. The view from the top was stunning regardless.

When we awoke in the morning we were surprised to see an incredibly dense fog settled along the river and town. Visibility was down to a few meters and there was no chance of us setting off until it cleared. We got our A level results and did a bit of grocery shopping before setting sail on a now clear river. We encountered another kayaker who spoke at length about his previous journeys on the river. We ended up on a large sandy beach opposite Paks and had a celebratory bottle of wine which had been given to us by a neighbour in Budapest. Thomas couldn't resist a dip in the fast current and after supper we attempted to engage some locals in conversation but failed to overcome

the language barrier.

We were rudely awoken by strimming outside the tent and made a hurried exit. We carried on hurriedly past Hungary's only nuclear power station and had a huge takeaway pizza for lunch. We mistakenly wandered into a house in the search for water but the occupants were very friendly and we left with full tanks (over 35 litres). The wind picked up in the evening and distracted by the beauty of the nature reserve we were passing through we forgot to find a suitable beach. Eventually we found a swampy spit infested with mosquitoes so we threw the tent up and covered inside.

In the morning nursing our bites we fished (with no success) and then sailed down to the town of Baja. After rowing up a long channel into the heart of the town we found a beach below a campsite. To our delight it turned out to be a national holiday and there was a fair during the day. With impressive acrobatic displays on horseback and an open air concert followed by fireworks in the evening. We had found out during the day that we had moored Egret directly below the fireworks! We had interesting suppers of catfish and pickled cabbage and watched apprehensively as the embers from the fireworks fell very close to Egret.



We did all our washing and set off with it hanging from the rigging looking quite the motley crew. It was very hot so it dried quickly and we managed to raise sails as we approached the Hungarian border town. As we approached we made out a river police boat speeding towards us lights flashing. We nervously carried on as it came to a stop a little way off. They announced over loudspeaker that we had to take the sails down as it was against the law to sail in Hungary. This was news to us and thankfully we were approaching the Serbian border. This whole experience would have been more



intimidating if they weren't in fits of laughter for the whole encounter. They also helpfully pointed out the border post. The border itself passed without too much difficulty, with the humorous addition of a very laid-back customs officer. As we left we found a large police boat was waiting impatiently for the berth we had moored at, we scuttled off quickly. A strong following wind sprang up and we threw caution to the wind and decided to raise the sails, before long we were flying along at 15km/h over ground. We were out of Hungary but not yet in Serbia or Croatia, it is one of the only bits of legal no man's land in the world. We camped on a beach

which we hoped was landmine free having covered almost 50km over the course of the day.

The following morning was the most miserable of the trip. A huge thunderstorm passed overhead in the night and we woke up to cold rain. There was decent wind so we sailed down to Apatin but we were bedraggled and miserable. In Apatin we were told that the man we needed to sign our papers "The Captain" was away for the day so we would have to stay overnight. We jumped at the opportunity to sleep in a warm dry bed and after checking into the country at the police station assembled the ingredients for a feast. The beds felt incredibly luxurious and it was very strange having running water and a shower. The Captain arrived back early the next morning and after being driven around to the post office, Captain's office and police station we left Apatin in high spirits. In our endeavours enormously by a very kind Serbian man who drove us arranged everything for us. Moreover despite our best tip of any kind. We were nearly out of the nature



white tailed eagles and stopping at Aljmas for much wanted to see a very reconstructed church. The tacked fast downriver and of sailing Egret we left it too and had to anchor in an precarious balancing we Egret, cook supper and get ready for a night afloat. The dew had already fallen so we slept under the stars (another long day of 54km). Our peaceful morning was shattered by a near crash landing as we reached Vukovar. We sailed fast into an inlet downwind, before the rudder hit a submerged rock and popped up, leaving Tom at the helm with no control. We gybed violently in front of



we were helped hither and thither and efforts he refused a reserve and saw bee-eaters before lunch as Tom very modern rest of the day we in all the excitement late to find a beach inlet. With some managed to bail



a line of smart speedboats, and only some sharp oar work and a conveniently placed mud flat prevented us from doing any damage. Vukovar is dominated by a large water tower that was shelled over 600 times in the '91 war and as a monument to the people of the city it has been left without repair. We spent an enjoyable afternoon walking to the tower and looking round the town's museum which was full of prehistoric artefacts found on the river bed. We sailed on past men skilfully net fishing in the middle of the river, till we reached a large swampy inlet full of birdlife and frogs where we stayed the night.



We sailed from the inlet, leaving behind a misty scene of stork, heron, egret and kingfishers swooping over the water. With the last of the nature reserve behind us we landed at Sarengrad (the last Croatian stop of the trip) for lunch. We spoke to two Croatians who were planning a similar trip and had a good look around the picturesque village. We sailed on and were passed by a Croat on a SUP (there was little wind that day) he was very interested in our adventure. We found a large lagoon just outside of Baka Palanka to stay at for the night, which was being used for a national kayaking competition. It was idyllic, with houseboats and large beaches full of relaxing Serbians. We decided to go swimming but within 10 seconds Tom had badly cut his toe on the only piece of glass in the entire lagoon. That night we camped with three Israeli kayakers who had been travelling in inflatable canoes.

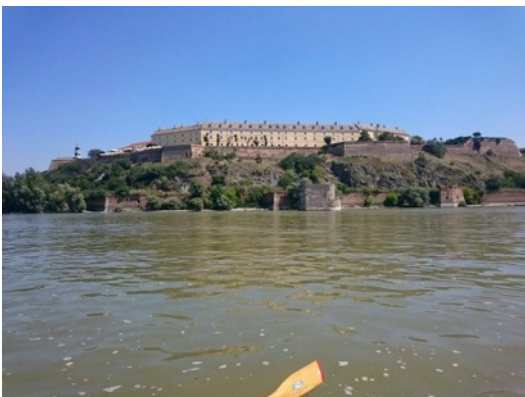


In the morning we swapped craft and the Israeli man rowed Egret whilst Thomas paddled about in the much more comfortable inflatable canoe. We began drifting in the searing heat but not before Tom had caught a snake

which caused considerable excitement at the beach. For lunch we stopped at a beach and ate a boil in the bag curry whilst a crowd of Serbians used Egret as a clothesline as they swam in the river. The river at this point was very wide and meandered gently around rolling hills and the occasional forested island. There was little wind so we drifted mid-current whilst Thomas fixed the motor which had not been working for a few days. We landed at Futog for the night and camped in a field on the outskirts of the town.



We woke up to discover that a strong wind was blowing up the



river. Soon we were both hiking out and people were waving at us from the bank as we zoomed by. As we neared Novi Sad we had to land at a beach to drop the mast as one of the bridges ahead was famously low. We rowed past the frontage of the imposing Petrovaradin Fortress, past the remains of a bridge bombed by NATO in '91 and under the second lowest bridge on the Danube. We landed at a beach and were greeted by a huge Serbian man, called Peter, who agreed to look after Egret while we looked around the city. Confident she was in safe hands we looked around the huge fortress (it took 99 years to build) and the museum. Of particular note was the 59m

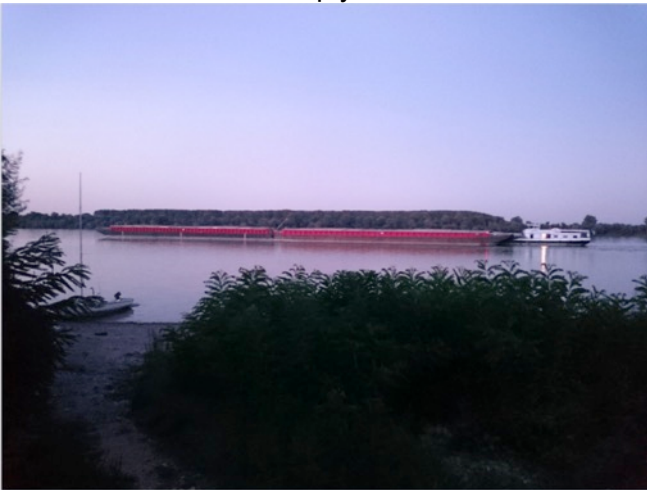
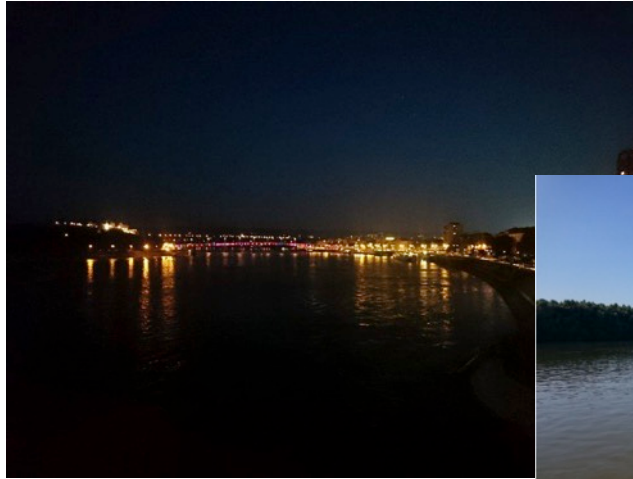
deep well that was accessed through the intricate tunnel network inside the fortress, and an immense dugout canoe made 2000 years ago from one oak trunk. We spent the rest of the day with Peter and his wife Alexandra on the beach, eating fried carp and drinking their homemade cherry brandy. We learnt many things about Serbia and their lives, which for the both of us was a real eye opener. That night the beach transformed into a party and in true Serbian style it went on until 7:30 in the morning.

The next morning we said goodbye to everyone at the beach, who were in the process of killing a huge carp (over 40kg!)

and eagerly raised the sails as the wind was very strong. We tacked very fast downriver, on more than one occasion Egret heeled over so steeply that an oar would fall overboard and we would have to leap after it. Soon we

had covered 30km and so stopped at a beach for lunch. For the first time we forgot to put the anchor out and Egret began drifting downriver, luckily we caught her before she went too far! We sailed on in the afternoon, covering lots of ground, before camping on a beach and falling asleep to the sound of wolves howling on the opposite bank. The wind had died by morning so we sailed slowly down river alongside the muddy cliffs that lined the river. By the late morning the wind steadily increased until we were flying along. Suddenly, there was a loud hissing noise and we discovered that Tom's lifejacket had inflated in the bilges, when we had heeled over in a particularly strong gust. We eventually managed to extract it and replaced the

gas canister. During lunch two heavily armed Serbian gunboats cruised past, creating a huge wake that swamped Egret and almost washed away our stove. That night we camped at the base of the cliffs with Belgrade twinkling in sight across the water.



We shared breakfast that morning with the Israeli kayaker (he had left the other two further up river), before goose-winging into Belgrade on the strong following breeze. We were the only sailing boat in sight and we felt very proud of Egret for surviving the journey there. We landed on an island and began walking around Belgrade in the hope of finding a slipway to get Egret out of the water. Unfortunately, all of the slipways either had no access or we were told they were for private use only. We split up to cover more ground and ended up walking for five or six hours before reconvening at the island. During our walks, Tom lost his book. Thomas ended up on a motorway, made friends with a moped gang, was offered drinks (at 4 in the afternoon) by men in an industrial shipyard and had a run in with two large dogs. We eventually gave up and spent a nice final night of the trip at a floating bar on the Danube.

The next morning we decided to travel up the Sava (a large tributary of the Danube) in the hope of finding a slipway. It was strange to see a kilometre marker of "0" as this was the point the Sava ended in the Danube. We motored against the current for 5km past the Belgrade Fortress until we found a suitable slipway. The owner at first said we couldn't use it but after he had heard our story, he very said we could and offered us a berth at his marina while we waited for Tom's parents; who had very kindly driven across Europe to collect Egret. We unpacked, took the mast down and before long had Egret out of the water on a trailer. Two days later we were back on dry land in England, having just finished the greatest adventure of our lives.

