

ŠUMAVA 2009

Southern Bohemia is home to one of the last, true, wilderness in Europe.

The Bears and wolves have moved further east but lynx, wild boar and herds of deer still roam freely over vast areas.

Dark forests of soaring pines clad the rolling mountains and walkers exercise caution when exploring those sunless depths.

For 300yrs three bears have lived in a moat surrounding the palace of Chesky Krumlov and Goldilocks can be seen on many corners selling Trvdlicky – warm crunchy biscuits resembling a snake bracelet - dipped in sugar, ground almonds and walnuts.

The castle at Kaspersky Hory has square twin towers that soar over the tree tops. Visible for miles around they declare foreboding strength to intruders with a mind to stealing the silver or gold mined in these mountains by the ruling aristocracy.

The Swartzenburg family wealth even stretched to building a water canal to float their 100' long tree trunks to lucrative markets in present day Austria and Germany. Those forests still provide boundless timber wealth.

For centuries society remained a harsh feudal one until the First World War.

'Greetings bread-father' was chanted by workers to any passing superiors.

The pretty town of Kaspersky Hory is being spectacularly renovated. Buildings that recently had trees growing through the floorboards are now Boutique Hotels.

Even old cobbled pavements and streets are relaid in original designs after the new sewage and services have been installed.

The central church clock is chiming in a new era. Enough confidence now exists from church authorities to demand back the stolen art works from convents and monasteries.

Silver and gold are no longer extracted but tourism is being courted. The unique character of this incredible forested region, plus expanding facilities for cyclist, bikers, walkers, golfers, tennis enthusiasts and true cross country skiing is in early days. It is a gamble for the investors and times are hard.

More than anything else the complete lack of any border, that once was impenetrable, can now be touched and believed.

My cousins tell me how a four metre high electrified fence once ran the length of Europe

from north to south.

Low wires within the adjoining ground triggered alarms and floodlights.

A ten meter wide sand corridor was patrolled several times a day by armed soldiers with dogs. Footprints were easily spotted.

Another high barbed wire fence with regular look-out towers, and then again another razor wire fence made for an effective deterrent.

Within this zone were countless deep concrete silos housing Russian missiles pointing to the West.

No-man's land varied from a basic 5 kilometer belt to even wider areas.

Houses were confiscated and villages emptied.

For half a century it remained free from any other human development.

Twenty years ago I had driven into no-man's land with my cousin Wenseslaus.

Huge rolls of assorted barbed wire rested alongside the roads. Like cobweb cottages they were waiting to be collected for metal recycling.

He even drove me to a concrete silo, recently emptied of its lethal resident.

Perched on a hill and large enough to land a helicopter the adjacent soldier's sheds had doors, windows and roof tiles removed.

Almost everything usable was taken back to Russia in convoys of long vehicles.

Now Mykal, Mishel and myself were off to see if we could find that old border.

We easily located the border now on a busy road. Huge vehicles thundered along the carriageway from former Soviet block countries: Poland; Hungary; Romania, the new European expanded states were trading 24/7.

Former customs houses, passport control and banks for currency exchange were now closed and dilapidated. Replaced with Casinos, Men's clubs and Motels the demarcation line clearly visible where wholesome German green pastures were not permitted for such developments.

Roadside bill boards 'Get rich quick and without any risk'... guess there must be one born every minute... !!!!!

Mykal chose the spot in the forest where we would depart from the tarmac road and start our search for the border.... countless lives were lost over these border regions both in bitter wars and individual escape attempts.

Last walk round Klatovy sq and the below to the catacombes ... even a young nun with a foetus was uncovered between the wars when the wooden coffin were crumbling. The desicated corpses were regarded as almost miracles. My aunt saw the exposed boodies as a youngster on her way to school.

She and her firdns climbed down to see what all the fuss as all about.

The over coiffeured red-haired, be-jewelled ticket seller had been a despised member of

the former regime. My aunt was angered at seeing her now holding such a prestigious job... ! she had been one of the most disliked girls even from school days. Her long highly painted nails clawed at the coins I lay out on the counter. She struggled to pick them up so resorted to pushing them into her draw.

Catacombes stretch out far beneath the town's square. With a good supply of water and sophisticated ventilation system local residents could safely hold out in time of invasion. a Black tower with tunnels leading from the catacombes was a vital early warning system of its day.

Recently the corpses have been protected and displayed