

Epoxified Passport Stamps

A Semi-Perilous Journey to Croatia

For those not up-to-date, I've been living with a 26 year-old Austrian blacksmith by the name of Ulrich (Uli for short) for about the last month. Things here have been pretty relaxed and easy going. The forge is currently under construction due to the expected arrival of a new 185 kg power hammer (to replace the previous 25 kg one), so I haven't been able to get any experience with actual blacksmithing, yet. We've just been working on improving various things around the house and the property (which it is in serious need of. No one had lived here for about 20 years before Uli moved in).

When I first arrived I was actually picked up at the train station by a 41 year-old American ex-marine named Terric who is also helpx-ing at Uli's place. Uli was in Croatia working on his father's boat at the time I arrived, so it was just me and Terric for the first few days. When Uli came back it was explained to me how the boat's drive shaft was broken and his father, instead of hiring the idjits at the marina to fix his boat, had hired his professional blacksmith son (who brought along his engineer friend) to do it for about 1/10th the price. Uli then showed me the boat part they had designed and made that made the previous part look like a tinker toy. However, because they weren't able to find proper bearings, they had to order them and the plan was to go back down to Croatia to install the part later.



Slight difference, huh?

Expecting to once again have to find myself useful around the house while Uli was gone to Croatia, I was overjoyed when he invited me to come down with him to help fix the boat. I have some ancestry in Croatia, and I was eager to add to my countries-I've-been-to list. The only problem I could think of was that I was currently an illegal immigrant in the European Union—not only was I past my 90 day visitor's visa, I had recently doubled it (did that make me double illegal?). Getting out of the EU didn't seem that hard, but I was worried about getting back in. I brought up my concerns to Uli

and he assured me that most likely the guards wouldn't even look at our passports, and if they did, they wouldn't check them too thoroughly. As a person who likes to proceed into unknown territory as carefully as possible, this response didn't assure me so much. However, I hadn't gotten this far by avoiding things that made me scared or nervous, so I shrugged it off and decided to go to Croatia.

Uli, Terric, and I began piling things into Uli's Golf (yeah, that's the model of car) on a Tuesday morning to take with us on the trip (Terric wasn't actually going all the way to Croatia, but he was riding with us until Vienna to catch a rideshare to Graz—a city in southern Austria). Boat parts, circular saw, angle grinder, cordless drill and drill bits, screws, passports, boat papers, wallets and coin purses

(the coins here are actually worth enough to warrant coin purses), an 11 year-old golden retriever who still has a stereotypical dog-brain 90% filled-up with fetch, a 9 month-old half-wolf half-German shepherd who still hasn't quite figured out that 90% of his brain exists, papers for the half-wolf puppy, bags of carelessly chosen clothes, cameras, 10mm threaded steel bars, hats, raincoats (thankfully not needed), and sunglasses were stacked into the car, disheveled and teetering.

Oh, and one steelstring Gibson Ephiphone guitar. Strung up with medium-lights, usually found in drop D exuding celtic-like sounds, and carried in a soft case filled with thin picks, a metal capo (generally finding itself on the 2nd fret), and a cheap plastic tuner that has been faithfully tromping along with the same battery for the last 11 years. Its ass had made it all the way to from Washington to Vermont to Austria and I'd be damned if it wasn't going to make it to Croatia, too.

We crammed into the Golf with Uly driving, Terric riding shotgun, me in the back seat, and the two dogs riding trunk and began our journey to our first destination: a small village about 40 minutes outside of Vienna by the name of Atzenbrugg. Within minutes of our departure I learned that Lanuk, the half-wolf that spent most of its waking hours bouncing off the walls and whining like Gir from Invader Zim, had a distinct problem when riding in cars. This involved drooling like a broken faucet while simultaneously trying to climb his way out of the trunk into the back seat—i.e. on my lap.

We arrived in Atzenbrugg with me slightly more soggy and a bit more well-versed in German dog commands (*Lanuk! Nein! Nein! Lan—nein! Aus! Da bleiben! Lanuk! AUS! DA BLEIBEN! NEIN! Platz! LANUK! PLATZ! DA BLEIBEN!*). This was our first stop was because the family of Toni, Uli's engineering friend who originally went with him to Croatia, lived there. However, this time the plan wasn't to bring Toni with us, it was to bring his older brother Maxi, who despite being a kindergarten teacher, was just as engineering-minded as his brother. This was apparently due to the father Wolfgang being an engineer/scientist himself, as I was soon to find out.

We pulled into the driveway from the small village street to find something I would describe as the European version of your classic American car garden you find out in the boondocks at your dad's friend's house. But instead of old '57 Chevys, '68 Mustangs, various Pontiacs, and strange old trucks with glass Indian-head hood ornaments, you found old WWII era German vehicles, strange Volkswagen creatures that never saw the light of day on US soil, and every other sort of odd European cars of which I had never heard. We parked and piled out of the car. Before going into the house I took a quick stroll through the pathways in the yard lined with old air conditioners, the afore-mentioned vehicles, vehicles half-gutted for their parts, fruit trees, nut trees, various flowers, and every other sort of assorted mismatched pieces of whatever that were sure be useful in the future for... for... well, for something.





I might as well have been in Darrington.

Inside the house I took my shoes off in the entryway and followed Uli into the kitchen and sat down at the table where I met Annalise, the mother of the family and wife to Wolfgang. Before I knew what was happening, tea, coffee, cookies, and other snack-like things began piling up in front of me. While I was happily slurping and munching, Wolfgang arrived in the kitchen and greeted me. Once again, before I knew what happened he was already talking to me about Sterling engines*, of which he happened to have two small ones sitting next to kitchen table that ran on ethanol. In between telling me about energy efficiencies, pressure ratios, Carnot engines, solar power potentials, and heat differentials, he ran off to get a plastic bottle sloppily marked with C_2H_6O and filled up the little Sterling engines to show me how they worked. He was so nice and eager to give out information that it was bit hard to slow him down. The only thing that stopped his flow of technical information was he didn't seem to be able to go more than 7 minutes without making some wisecrack at the Pope or the Roman Catholic Church.

*Something I highly recommend looking into, by the way.

As I was getting my fill of coffee and a history lesson of cars in post-WWII central Europe that ran on carbon monoxide generated from burning wood (he even busted out an old book that not only told you the history, but it showed you how to make the damn things), I got to meet Toni, Maxi, and Maxi's girlfriend Manu as they filtered into the kitchen. I found myself in another Austrian household where everyone spoke English and the idea that I wanted to learn German fluttered out of my head as per usual. Uli went to take Terric to Vienna while Wolfgang gave me a tour around the property. He showed me some more of the junk—I mean useful-in-the-future stuff decorating the yard, the chem lab, the workshop, one of those pressure tanks used for divers in the workshop that he was planning on turning into a vacuum chamber, and the car repair garage while told me the history of some of the strange cars. Lastly was his current project: a light steel frame with wheels and a small diesel engine designed to move down railroad tracks. Some friend of his was doing business in a mine and needed to haul things in and out while still having said hauling-device be light enough to be moved the hell off of the tracks in the event of an incoming train. With nothing better to do, I helped him measure and cut some steel in between him getting distracted with showing me miscellaneous tools scattered about the benches until Uli returned.

Upon said return we went back into the kitchen for dinner, which involved a flat electric grill in the middle of the kitchen table covered with fish, pork, and sliced pumpkin, which everyone would

poke and cook with their own forks and take off what they wanted when they felt it was ready. After dinner everyone found some place to disappear to and I was left alone to speak with Annalise. I had heard her laugh when I joked around in English during dinner, but I hadn't actually heard her say anything in English. This meant that her English level was somewhere around my German level. It didn't take long before I started my most grueling German discussion to date, regarding medieval and modern rye-sowing methods, history of the Austrian Empire, and specific descriptions of Roman temples in Austria and southern Europe. Toni finally showed up and for a moment I thought I was saved, but he was too distracted with the cat to give me any sort of linguistic assistance and I was left to battle it out on my own.

As the night marched on, Maxi and Manu eventually returned to the kitchen and I switched back to English. They were curious about my background so I told them old refinery stories, about being a Shinto shrine apprentice, and mentioned something about teaching math and chemistry to high school girls who played hockey while simultaneously delivering pizzas in Vermont. We discussed the differences between Austrian and American politics until Uli came in around 3 in the morning and mentioned that we should get to bed. There wasn't so much extra sleeping area so we had to crash in the same bed, where the discussion continued to comparisons between Austrian and American law systems and finally degenerated into Uli's girl problems. The latter consisted of me giving him advice that he agreed with, but vehemently refused to act on—a great example of the futility of approaching emotional problems with logical solutions. In the middle of a rant Uli reminded me that it was buttfuck o'clock in the morning and we should get some sleep. We had some serious driving to do the next day.

That was fine with me. I was exhausted.

I woke up around 10 or something and stumbled down the stairs into the kitchen where I found Annalise already working in the kitchen. Since I arrived in Austria, I haven't really known what time it is. My cell phone broke as soon as I left the states, I had yet to get around to getting a watch, and the people here don't seem to stick clocks in every single room in the house like we do. The fun thing about this is I only have a vague idea at best as to how much sleep I got the night before. Four hours? Five hours? Hell if I know. I plopped down at the table where coffee, home-made bread, honey, and home-made jam started to appear before my eyes faster than I could keep track of where they were coming from. I wasn't in a state to be asking questions so I just ate. The rest of the family and Uli filtered into the kitchen and experienced a similar effect. The conversation drifted to the differences between features that were included in similar cars in Europe and the US and the general audacity of the Pope, doing whatever the hell it is popes do.

I jumped in the shower to do the warmest misogi I have ever experienced (you couldn't actually make the water cold. The thing must have started at 85 degrees and just gone up). Afterward, Uli and I headed for the car and to my surprise, Manu was coming as well. This meant one less seat in the car to store stuff and plus an extra person's stuff to haul with us. Of course, Bonzo (the fetch-brained golden retriever) was staying at the house in Atzenbrugg because he was too old to make the journey, but I still had to go all the way to Croatia with my guitar in my lap.

The trip had officially begun! We made a quick stop at a grocery store to get some supplies and we were off. The drive through the rest of Austria was uneventful, especially when we hit the Austrian-Slovenian border. I knew that one of the things that the EU had pushed through was much more open borders, I was surprised to see the border station completely empty. Seriously, it was like a ghost-town. As we continued into Slovenia, things looked more or less like we were in Austria except that a little bit more of the land seemed left alone. Back in Austria I feel that every single square inch of land is designated and used for a specific purpose.



I'm guessing that the crooked rear-view mirror has some relevance to helping with blacksmithing.

Things were going as boring as any cross-country trip goes when Uli and Manu decided that they were going to switch positions so Manu could drive. We stopped at the next exit to stretch ourselves out and let Lanuk empty himself before piling back into the car and getting back on the freeway. When Manu got back onto the freeway, Uli, Maxi, and I were in a heated discussion over something or other and we weren't paying attention to which direction Manu entered the freeway. We were distracted so much that no one noticed we were going in the wrong direction for at least 30 minutes until Manu saw a sign for Vienna. We pulled off on the next exit and turned around to backtrack.

As we neared the exit where we had changed drivers, the heated discussion had moved to the methods of police actions in Austria and US and the ethical considerations to be taken into account, when Manu (who had been leaving herself out of the discussions) suddenly announced that the police were telling us to pull over. The three of us blinked and looked around outside the car and sure enough there was a police van in front of us with its lights on and a reader board on the back that read "Follow This Car" in English on the back. I don't know about the other two guys, but it took me a few moments before reality set in enough for me to accept that our conversation had just manifested itself physically in front of us. Slovenian police cars driving in front of you to tell you to pull over instead of from behind was a bit confusing to me, as well.



We were a bit busy being searched when the police were there, but this was the spot we were pulled over at. Also, I don't seem to be believing whatever Manu was telling me.

Of course, to top it off the exit we pulled over on was the very same fucking exit where we had switched drivers. We had gone in a big circle just to be pulled over by the police, possibly via a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Manu parked the car and got out to talk to the three police that came out of the van (another thing that was strange for me. We all know you sure as hell don't get out of the car when you get pulled over in the US) and give them her driver's license and the car's insurance information. The police asked us all to get out of the car, which we complied with and then handed them our passports. I was a little worried that they would check the arrival stamp on my passport but it soon became clear they were much more interested in what was in the car than who we were. They were tapping the doors and the ceiling, rummaging through our stuff, and asking Uli to move seats around so they could get a better look. It didn't hit me until about half way through the procedure that we had just been profiled and they were looking for drugs. We were three young guys and a girl driving around in car that looked like the one you owned in college, piled high with miscellaneous crap. Hell, I even had a guitar on my lap (which I was asked to open and show to the police officer).

The search came to a close and the police told us we were okay to go. Throughout it all they had been very professional and incredibly polite, especially with Uli going over the top to provide assistance for searching the car (again something I'm not used to after coming out of the US). As we were reorganizing and putting stuff back into the car, something weird(er) happened.

"Hello, friends!" a booming voice with a slight accent came from behind us before the police had even gotten back into their van. We turned around to see a guy in a black T-shirt with a big belly carrying what looked like some worn out CD cases.

Taking advantage of us being stunned, both from just being searched by the police and him coming out of left field, he continued on, "I have some music here that is out of this world. It will blow you away!" He walked over to the car and put the CDs down on the roof. I'm pretty sure that everyone was having the same thoughts as I was: some guy trying to sell us crap, so we tried to blow him off. He was prepared for that.

"We're not interested in buying any music." One of us said.

"Ah, but the CDs are for free!" This set red alerts going off in my head. Strangers don't come out of their way to give you something for free. We were dealing with a thief. Whether he was actually attempting to purloin something or just try to scam us I hadn't yet determined, but he definitely wasn't just a persistent salesman. Manu moved to stand in front of the passengers seat where all of our important documents were sitting.

We continued putting stuff back into the car and organizing it (which took more time than normal because we had to squish in like sardines) and we decided to get Lanuk in the trunk before something more weird began to happen. The last thing we needed was a crazy dog mixed with a crazy stranger at this point. On top of not really listening very well, Lanuk doesn't like to get in the trunk of the car (might have something to do with his incessant drooling issue) so we had to do quite a bit of whistling and calling to get him to come over to the trunk. The strange guy started whistling and calling to get the dog to come to him. I didn't say anything because I was waiting for Uli to tell the guy off (it's his dog). Then to insure his own creepiness, the guy walked over to what I assume was his car, opened the trunk and said, "Let's see if he jumps into my trunk!"

Uly gave a bit of a sardonic chuckle and said, "I don't think so." and finally got Lanuk back into the car.

At some point in the "conversation" with this guy (conversation consisted of him not leaving any room for silence and us saying whatever was needed to get him to back off—which clearly wasn't working) one of us had said the word shit (probably me) and this seemed to get him even more excited.

"Are you guys religious?" he asked, having come back from his "car". Maxi made some sort of noise resembling "pffsbst!". Seeing as he was the son of a constantly self-proclaiming atheist that got a kick out of showing his guests that he was God to some guppies in his fish tank in the kitchen,

explaining that the guppies were worshipping and praying to him when he came close to the tank and they would all swim up to the tank wall, this wasn't really an unexpected response.

“Because I have some seriously holy *shit* in the back of my car,” he continued walking back to the car which still had its trunk open, “You guys should come and check it out.” It sounded like he was selling religious paraphernalia, but none of us were interested in finding out.

“Nope, not interested.” We said as we were finishing up organizing the car and starting to get in. He came back over and kept trying to convince us to come check out his car. When it finally became clear to him that our only intention was to LEAVE, he quit trying but still wouldn't shut up. He came over close to our car and tried to close the door for me on the passenger's side, but I took it from him and closed it myself. He sat on the concrete railing still talking and waving at us as we pulled away and drove back toward the freeway away from him.

A heated discussion immediately arose as to just who the hell that guy was, what exactly he was trying to do, and how come he didn't even wait for the police to leave before he approached us. In the midst of this, Manu, who again wasn't taking part in the discussion, said, “Alright guys. This time pay attention to the road signs so we can make sure we're going in the right direction.” The three of us gave her some sort of half-acknowledgement and went back to talking about whether the guy was trying to literally steal something from us or just trick us into buying something. I explained that even if he wasn't trying to directly steal something from us, because he offered something to us for “free”, he wanted to distract us in order to take something from us without our full awareness or our full consent. This immediately classified him as *thief* to me.

“Hey guys, really. Pay attention to the signs so we go in the right direction.” Manu reminded us. The funny thing about growing up in western Washington, constantly driving up and down I-5, is there is never any confusion as to which direction you are going. You just look at the mountains: if they are on the right, you're going north. If they are on the left, you're going south. No further confusion is necessary. Thus I had been imprinted from an early age that there was no real reason to be concerned about which direction you were going on the freeway, and Manu's comment went through one ear and out the other.

The three of us kept talking, and we decided that the guy for whatever reason was trying to get us *away* from our car, which after being searched by the police was in a bit of disarray and possibly easy to snatch something from. Plus, because he approached us even before the police had gotten back into their van, we even postulated that he waited at that place for police to pull profiled foreigners over (we had Austrian plates) like a spider and tried to get them in his net after they were done (which made me suspect that the police themselves may be in on it. However, they were so polite and professional that I dismissed this as too low probability for concern). We went over the scenario again to see if they matched up with our theory.

“GUYS! Seriously! Which way am I supposed to take!?” We snapped out of our discussion-trance and realized we were on the round-about to choose which way to get on the freeway (yes they have roundabouts to get on the freeway). There was a jumbled mix of: “That one?—yes!—you sure?—I think so—but it's in the opposite direction!—it turns around at the bottom, take it!” and we were back on course to Croatia and, despite our best efforts, relatively intact.

The rest of the trip through Slovenia was smooth. Everyone decided it was time for me to work on my German and I managed to have a fairly successful conversation before we arrived at the border. Croatia is outside of Schengen, so there is a real border between Slovenia and Croatia, which was the border I was worried about. Now, US citizens are allowed to stay within Schengen for 90 days without any extra visa, which I had clearly gone past months ago. What I was unclear on (as well as the rest of us), was what it takes to get a renewal of a visitor's visa. Could I just leave Schengen then turn around and come back? Did I have to be gone for a certain amount of time? I had no idea and no one I had talked to so far had any idea, either. So just in case Uli and I had thought up a story about me being in

Croatia two months before for three weeks where no one had stamped my passport at the borders. This was just a shot in the dark though, because again we had no idea what the parameters were to regain legal status.

We pulled up to the guard and handed over the passports. He sleepily flipped through everyone else's passport, but when he got to mine he spent a little more time with the flipping. My hands got a little cold when he started to go through the pages for stamps.

He looked back up from my passport into the car and asked, "Who is Dylan?" I acknowledged and he asked, "How long have you been in the EU?"

Fuck. Apparently they did care. We starting trying the 3-weeks in Croatia story, but he made it clear to us that that wasn't sufficient to regain my legality. "You've been here too long." he said.

Shit. I had been caught.

I'm not one for making up stories on the fly. I prefer just owning up at the beginning rather than suffer through the humiliation of getting called on my bullshit later. I looked right at him and asked, "Sooo.... what are my options?"

He sighed and told us to park over by the side of the road and that he would come talk to us. We complied and everyone got out of the car and discussed what story we should stick to and what consequences I was looking at facing before he came over carrying our passports.

Sighing again he asked for a clarification of just when and where I had been in the last six months. I managed to keep a straight face while my head was racing for what to say, when Uli thankfully took over. He was clearly a better bullshitter than I was. Whether or not the guard believed our story (I don't think he did), he acted as if he did and explained to us just how the visitor visa works. A US citizen, in the span of six months, is allowed to stay a TOTAL of 90 days within Schengen, regardless of how many times he has gone in and out of it. There is no re-stamp-at-the-border-get-away-free. He looked back at me and said, "You know, if a citizen of the European Union were to do this in the United States, he would be deported." I gave a half-smile that you usually give when admitting to fucking something up and suppressed the urge bubbling up my throat to vehemently apologize over the current police state situation of the United States. This resulted in me not saying anything so he continued on.

"I can punish you for 400 euros, and even though I can't deport you because you're trying to leave, when you try to come back to the EU that is what will happen."

A quick bank calculation told me I could take a 400 euro hit, but the idea of deportation upon trying to get back to Austria didn't sound that great to me.

"Plus, your passport would be checked if you try to leave from Vienna and the same thing would happen." I hadn't taken that into account and I was appreciative for the piece of information.

"So..." I said, "now what?" No use beating around the bush.

"Well, I'm not going to charge you the 400 euros."

Woohoo! Most appreciated, sir.

"And I'm not going to stamp your passport," This sent my left eyebrow a little higher. He went on, "so when you come back into the EU, tell the border guard that you have been in Croatia for four months and that you need a new stamp." What the? I wasn't sure if I was hearing things correctly. He kept talking, "when you get the new stamp, because it has been six months since you first arrived, you can start a new visitor's visa and be legal for another 90 days. Just make sure you get your paperwork in order if you plan on staying longer."

WOA! Yes, you read (and I heard) that right. Not only did the border guard not charge me anything, not get me in any other trouble that I'm sure he could have (like marking me into the computer), and not stamp my passport, but he was even telling me how to lie to the next border guard when coming back in so I could get my visa renewed. Again: WOA!

When we realized the implications of what he was saying (it took us a bit), all of our eyes shot wide open. We thanked him, trying not to sound so grateful (and thus whiny) that we would somehow

irritate him and have him change his mind. He gave us back our passports and we got into the car and drove off to the Croatian border guards.

Just to clarify just what exactly had happened here, let me go over some of the facts:

- ◆ A US citizen is allowed to stay in Schengen without a visa up to 90 days within six months, starting at the date they arrive in Schengen.
- ◆ I had been in Schengen *just over* six months.
 - Arrival date: 3/16/2011
 - Current date: 9/20/2011
- ◆ I had been caught red-handed at the border as an illegal immigrant facing a 400 euro fine, deportation, and I believe a several year ban from returning to the EU.
- ◆ The border guard not only did *none* of these things, he didn't even stamp my passport so I could tell the border guard when I tried to re-enter Schengen that I had been in Croatia for four months. Thus I wouldn't be admitting to having been in Schengen past my visa.
- ◆ Because I had arrived in Schengen slightly over six months prior, that meant that I would be on a new six-month cycle, *making me legal for 90 more days*. Had I gone to Croatia two weeks earlier, the whole thing would have fallen apart because the six-month cycle wouldn't have reset, yet!
- ◆ The border guard realized all of this before any of us did. So not only did he not penalize me, he went out of his way to ensure that I could legally come back to Austria.

Adding one more mark to my I-Should-Be-Dead/In-Serious-Trouble list, we pulled into the next round of border guards, the Croatians. Still wiping the sweat from my brow, Manu handed over our passports to the guard. This one looked about as bored as the the one who had just let me go scot-free. Speaking in broken German, he asked about Lanuk in the back and what we were planning on doing in Croatia. We told him about the boat and Uli handed some papers up to the front to prove we weren't making shit up. He flipped through the papers and started asking us questions like what port the boat was in, how much the boat cost, *etc*. It soon became clear that the guy wasn't trying to catch us on our story, but was more interested in the boat. When he couldn't come up with any more questions without being too obviously interested in the boat, he waved us through and my Countries-I've-Been-To List went up by one. We were in Croatia!

The drive wasn't much longer before we arrived in Pula, and shorter yet until we got to the marina. The security guard let us in, showed us where to park, and we got out of the car groaning and bones creaking. We took only immediately relevant and potentially valuable items and brought them to the end of the floating concrete dock to our destination: the ANT^N*

*The German word for duck is *ente*. However, no one in Austrian really speaks German, just a long list of various dialects. The word *antn* is just *ente* after being processed through some regional Austrian dialectic machine.



Notice the Roman arena in the back?



Nice view, huh?

The first thing visible from the marina was a huge Roman theater, still intact and glowing yellow in the city lights of the night. The second thing I noticed was the incredible amount of fish in beautiful turquoise water. Everywhere you looked there were schools of fish swimming at every depth of water you could see. I verbalized my surprise to

everyone before Uli then explained to me that the city emptied their sewage plant next to the marina, and that the fish were gathering here to chow down. On closer inspection I saw that the fish appeared to be gulping down the water like it was something worth eating. For the rest of the trip I only referred to them as the shitfish.



Hope you guys are having a nice dinner.

We were all starving and sick of snack food that we had bought from the grocery store, so Uli took us down the cobblestone alleys of Pula to find a restaurant, Lanuk trailing behind us. He was disappointed that his favorite one was closed (to which we happened to go to *every single damn night* afterward), but I was happy with my roasted calamari and big glass of Croatian beer (even though it was a bit light for my tastes). The conversations drifted between English and German and I mostly sat there breathing the warm air and appreciating the architecture. It was rainy and cold when we left Austria and I knew that this was probably going to be the last taste of summer I was going to get until whenever the hell winter is over in Austria.

We finished with dinner and Uli covered the bill (or Uli's dad did. Technically he was funding our trip) and we went back to the ANTN, chatted for a bit, then found a place for each person to sleep and crashed for the night.

We woke up one at a time in the morning, jumping out of the boat to stretch and use the bathroom at the marina. Uli left for groceries and to buy hardware that was going to be needed for the boat and I headed off to do misogi in the marina showers. While it wasn't as warm as Wolfgang's water back in Atzenbrugg, I definitely wouldn't call it cold, either.

After breakfast and discussion about the work to be done that day, the floor boards were removed in the cockpit to gain access to the engine and work began. Basically, what had to be done was get Uli's new part epoxied into the hull and have the drive-shaft reattached. This was to be done by screwing on 10mm threaded steel bars through the small holes in the side of the part, bend them appropriately such that they followed the curve of the hull, and epoxy them into place so that it couldn't dream of ever moving again. Easy, right?

The initial problem with this was getting the bars bent correctly. As we weren't working with proper tools, this process took the entire day. As there wasn't really enough room for four of us to fit in the cockpit and the entirety of the discussion was being carried out in German, this left me out of the

working fold for the most part and I instead had to work on my zen skills: waiting without saying anything because I knew everyone else was busy working.

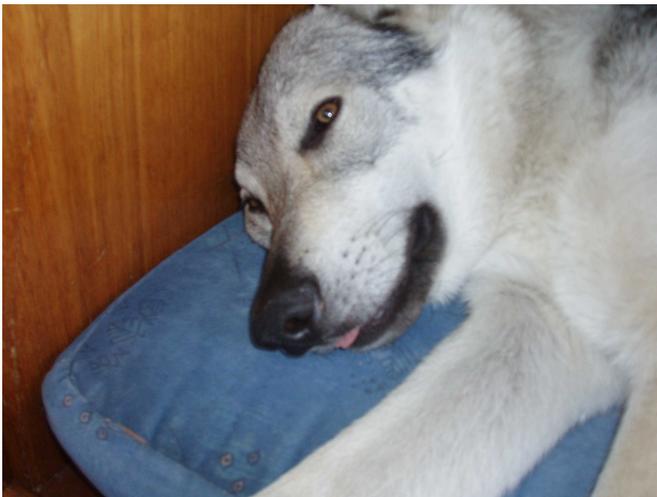


Now how in the hell are we supposed to bend these?



Productive and symmetrical at last!

The sun lazily made its way across the sky while I lounged around the boat, occasionally checking on the others to get a translation in English about what was going on and to offer my two cents on the solution. Manu and I installed a solar panel on the roof of the boat, but other than that I found myself mostly useless, staring at the shitfish. Lanuk was in a similar situation but had a harder time holding in his boredom. He spent his time jumping on and off the boat, bugging other people moored at the marina for attention, getting in our way, and sleeping in the cabin. Night began to fall again and Uli took us out down the same alleyway where his favorite restaurant was still open this time. We all ordered pizza and argued over what pizza is “supposed” to be (uncultured American slop vs. rigid orthodox Italian traditionalism) while I drank more Croatian beer. We got back to the boat and crashed sometime before midnight to wake up again to another day of boat-work.



Get a damn job...



...and keep your ass in the boat!

After crawling out of bed, brushing my teeth, finding something to eat, and doing misogi (notice changing clothes is not listed here), we sat down in the cabin to discuss what was going to happen today. The steel bars still had to be bent into place correctly and secured into the new part before epoxy-work could start. This took about half the day and involved gluing nuts onto the bars to force them into place, and I was finally able to make myself useful in doing this. The new part finally

fit in snugly, so we broke for lunch and discussed how the epoxy work was going to happen.



It's like we knew what we were doing or something!

The epoxy hardens quickly so we needed efficient work organization to make sure that the epoxy wouldn't harden before we had a chance to apply it. It was decided that Manu would be applying the epoxy, Maxi would cut the fiberglass (which is a necessary part of the epoxy work), Uli would hold the cup of epoxy for Manu because she needed two hands and there was nowhere to set it, and I would be mixing the epoxy outside on the dock.

Everyone got ready to start while Maxi came over to show me how to pour the liquids and use the balance. He began to explain to me how the balance worked and techniques for pouring the two liquids without making a huge mess, but I had already tared the balance, popped open the cans, and was getting ready to pour. "Ah yes," he said, "you're a chemist. Right." then he jumped back into the boat to take his position. Manu had put on her German airforce workers coveralls, Maxi started cutting the sheets of fiberglass, Lanuk was kicked out of the boat onto the dock, and Uli gave me the signal to start mixing.

Now, in the history of tests of patience, this had to be up there with one of the most difficult I had ever gone through. For each batch of epoxy I mixed up, it took them approximately 30 minutes to go through it. This meant I had to wait for 30 minutes in between doing anything, while at the same time being ready the moment they needed more epoxy. There wasn't enough room in the cockpit for me to watch what was going on, I couldn't talk to any of them because they were so focused on the work, and I had to guard the epoxy-mixing area from Lanuk being his idiot self and knocking it all over (*La-NUK! Nein! Aus jetzt! Da bleiben!*). Facing extreme boredom, I folded myself up into a half-lotus and did my best Buddha-imitation I could manage. But instead of meditating under a tree in India, I got to meditate amidst the marina, the tourists zooming by on the road, walking by the sidewalk, and putting past on tour boats (all probably staring at me wondering what the hell I was doing), the shitfish, a chemical balance and epoxy reagents, and Lanuk constantly trying to lick my face and jump back on the boat. Enlightenment must have been somewhere in that mix, I just had to find it.

I don't know how much time went by (despite being outside of Austria I still had no idea what

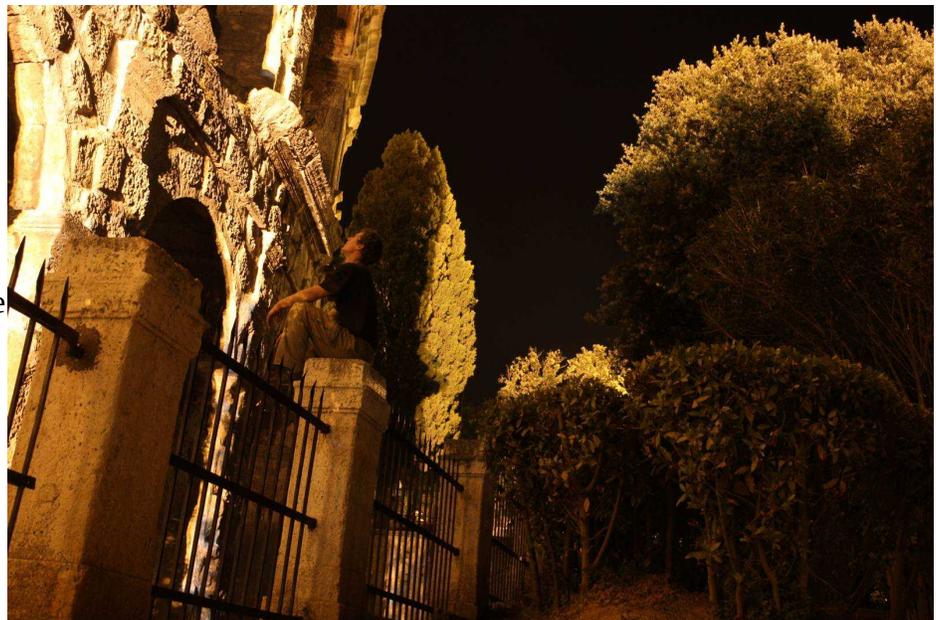
time it was), but I'm guessing it was somewhere between 3 and 4 hours. Eventually Lanuk gave up on trying to lick me and just flopped himself on the dock, giving me a pitiful puppy-stare and whining at me. I think a rough translation would come out like, "*Pleeeeeeease please please PLEASE can we do something? Please? C'mon. I'm soooo bored. Please?*" No pity available here, dog. Try somewhere else.

After the passing of several aeons, Uli gave the WE'RE-FUCKING-DONE! shout which sent waves of elation through my body and made Lanuk jump and bark for joy. Everyone was as sick of the work as I was, and we did a half-ass job of putting everything away. I discovered that Manu had decided to do her work barefoot and we had to spend some time rubbing acetone all over her epoxified feet before she could change back into non-work clothes.

We made our way as quickly as possible to Uly's favorite restaurant. We ate and relaxed, and after dinner we decided to finally take a walk around the damn city, especially for my case. Croatia is just a day-trip away for Austrians, but it's a totally different story for west coast Americans—I wanted to see something other than boats!

We took a walk through town, periodically shouting at Lanuk to keep up. We stopped to get some ice cream and headed for the ancient theater at the behest of my incessant nagging. We arrived at the theater and sat on the edge with a fairly good view of the inside. There was a laughable fence for my standards and no signs saying not to go in, but it was apparent from the way the locals walked around it it was expected that you didn't just jump the fence and take a stroll. My two recent run-ins with the authorities was still tingling in my nerves and I decided that I wasn't really interested in pushing the subject. The majestic yellow lights lighting up the theater on the outside somehow filtered in as a soothing violet, giving an incredible effect to anyone sitting on the edge looking in. We discussed ancient Roman architecture and its treatment in the modern age (i.e. why the Colosseum is falling apart while this place was still standing on its own) and finished off our ice cream.

Uli and Manu announced that they were tired and wanted to return to the boat, but I was able to convince Maxi to come back with me for the purpose of taking pictures. We went back to the boat, grabbed the camera, and came back. While I wasn't willing to vault the fence to go in, I didn't have any qualms about climbing and sitting on the fence itself. After climbing up and down several times trying to get the camera to take pictures we were satisfied with in the strange light, we decided to head back to the boat to crash for the night. We had more epoxy to put on the next day.



...woa.

On the walk back two guys carrying overloaded backpacks, guitars, and skateboards and looking about my age stopped us and asked us if we spoke English. We were still a bit wary after dealing with *holy shit* man back in Slovenia, but it became quickly apparent that these two guys weren't going to try to sell us anything or steal anything from us.

One of them asked, "Do you know any bars around here where... young people like to hang out?" I heard him say *young people* but I could hear him thinking *young women*.

I shrugged my shoulders at them, explaining that I knew my way around as well as they did. However, Maxi started telling them something about bars located up a certain street and I gave him a confused look because I thought he had been here as long as I had. After his explanation I asked them where they were from and they told us Switzerland. This led to them asking us where we were from because clearly Croatian wasn't our native language.

"The US." I said.

"Austria." Maxi chimed in after me. The two guys realized that Maxi spoke German and immediately a conversation broke out.

This went on for a little while before the same guy switched back to English and asked, "So are you guys traveling?"

We shook our heads. "Nah," we said, pointing towards the water, "we're here to repair a boat on the marina." This produced confused looks.

"Are you guys sailing around the Mediterranean, then?"

More head shaking. "Nah. It's our friend's father's boat. We're here with him to help him repair it."

"So... are you guys going to visit and look around Croatia while you're here?"

Heads still shaking. "Nah. We're probably driving back up to Austria tomorrow or the day after. As soon as we're finished fixing the boat."

"Oh..." They looked like they were having trouble forming a solid opinion on us. "Well then... good luck with that."

"Yup! Nice meeting you guys! Tschüss!" We headed back to the boat and crashed for the night.

I woke up sometime after the sun came up and I dragged my ass out of bed after another restless night of sleeping on the boat and commenced with standard operating morning procedure. I came out of the marina shower rooms not quite as purified as I would have preferred to find Lanuk standing right outside the door, giving me his standard hollow-headed puppy face.

"The hell are you doing here?" I asked and he gave me an even more pitiful look. I patted him on the head and said, "Well come on ya idjit, let's go back to the boat." We walked around to the front of the marina headquarters and started heading toward our dock when I was confronted by an irate security guard.

"HEY! Come here!"

I had an inkling what was about to happen and I had psychologically prepared myself as soon as I had seen Lanuk when I came out of the showers. The entire time we had been staying at the marina, Uli hadn't taken Lanuk out once, which forced him to do his business on the dock. Even when we took him with us for dinner at night, Lanuk would just piss in the street and Uli wouldn't give him a second glance. I was embarrassed as hell but I was forced to attribute it to culture shock, as Uli was acting like it was the way things were done around here. Fast forward back to me getting yelled at by a marina security guard.

"You need to keep your dog on a leash! We have had people complain about your dog walking around on the dock and using it as a toilet and blah blah blah..." I tried to act upset over the fact I was getting yelled at (he didn't realize he was shouting at Shrine Boy VII) while I waited for him to finish so I could tell him that it wasn't actually my dog. I was more impressed with his English than anything else. He kept going.

"This is Croatia! It's not the job of our janitor to clean up after your dog! And--"

Just then Lanuk decided to empty his bladder right smack-dab in the middle of the walkway around the marina headquarters. Two guys sitting at the table where the security guard normally sat immediately began pointing and busting up laughing while the security guard became even angrier. I

did my best to pay attention to my scolding and not join in on the laughter.



What? I didn't see a sign that says no dogs.

“Look! He's doing it *right now!* You have to get your dog on a leash and yak yak yak..” he went on telling me something about kicking us out of the marina and I was finally able to disengage from him and head back to the boat. I called Lanuk and right as we made it to the dock, Uli was coming out of the gate. The security guard caught sight of him and got a second wind of energy to start yelling again. I took Lanuk through the gate and closed it behind us. I called him to follow me to the boat but he was more interested in waiting at the gate for Uli. Aw, fuck it, I thought. He's on the dock inside the gate and he never listens to me, anyway. He could stay there.

The security guard's voice eventually dwindled out as I made my way back to the boat. I climbed in with a chuckle and related the recent events to Maxi and Manu. After a few minutes Uli reappeared and I found myself getting yelled at again. Apparently Lanuk had figured out how to open the gate (which explains why he came to see me at the showers in the first place) and he walked out into the marina and started wondering around while the security guard was taking out his irritation on Uli. This made Uli look even worse and yelled at me for letting Lanuk by himself at the gate. I reminded Uli that I wasn't aware that Lanuk had opened the gate and let down a heavy implication of: *hey. This isn't my dog. Get off my back.* He cooled down pretty quickly and we were able to get back to the discussion of what was going to happen for work that day. We still had to finish the epoxy work and attempt to get the wind-detector attached to the top of the mast and wired down to the cockpit. Lunch food had to be purchased (Lanuk had eaten all of our cheese) and some thing or another was needed from the hardware store, so Uli took off and left us at the boat to discuss work.

Now, I was going to be damned if I got stuck with mixing the epoxy again, so I volunteered to cut the fiberglass. This put Maxi on mixing duty, leaving Manu and Uli with the jobs they had the day before. I started cutting fiberglass to have some prepared before we started work, while Manu had changed into her coveralls and was getting comfortable down in the engine area. I took a look at myself and I saw that I was covered in fiberglass fibers. Fiberglass has this tendency to stick into your skin and break off, leaving you to itch at it until your skin cells fall off and replace themselves. Staring at my bare arms I announced that I needed to find something more to wear than a T-shirt before we got started. While I was getting the blanket of fiberglass off my lap Manu suggested that I could wear her coveralls.

“What?” I asked, “I’m not going to take your coveralls from you. You’re the one working with the epoxy!”

“Oh, it’s okay,” she said, “I have another one in my bag.”

Oh. Well duh. I always carry two pairs of German military aircraft workers coveralls around with me, too.

“I’ll try them on, but I don’t think they’ll fit.” I said as I went down into the cabin and dug them out of her bag. I slipped my legs into them and pulled them up with the intention of getting them over my shoulders, but I only managed to get the seam of the pant legs up to my balls—a bit more forcefully than I would have otherwise preferred, I would add.

“Definitely too small.” I said without my voice cracking. I guess it could have been worse.

“Oh, we should change then. This one is bigger.” She stood up and unzipped her coveralls, and in a flash of tits I got to see just how much she wasn’t wearing underneath. I had been getting used to seeing naked people in Europe and managed not to stare too much while we put our newly-switched coveralls on. Manu slipped on a pair of Latex gloves (I had put mine on as soon as I started handling the fiberglass) and crouched back down into the engine-space. The new coveralls still gave my balls a bit of a grab that I would have more preferred be from a girl, but more or less they seemed to fit. At least I would have complete protection from the fiberglass.

I sat back down on the top of the steps which lead down to the cabin and prepared myself to start cutting fiberglass when a familiar puppy head poked it’s way into the cockpit on my left. I suppressed my urge tell the little shit to go lie back down and quit getting me in trouble when I realized that it might be a good idea to take him out before we got started. Once we began work, we wouldn’t be able to stop until we were done, and because Lanuk was stuck inside the cabin with the floorboards of the cockpit removed, he was going to have to wait until we were done, too. I brought up my concerns to Manu and Maxi. They agreed it would be a good idea to take him out to the park so he could empty himself before we got started. We put our tools aside once again, grabbed the leash, and headed out of the marina toward the park.

I can only imagine what everyone who passed us by thought. A boy and girl dressed up in German military aircraft worker coveralls wearing Latex gloves (the girl without shoes, as well), and a normally dressed little man with a camera looking like a tourist, all walking a half-wolf puppy on a leash down to the park.

We were successful at getting Lanuk to take a piss in the park while we joked about what the hell everything who saw us was thinking about us. We finished our walk back to the marina and Uli pulled back in with the Golf and walked with us back to the boat. We got Lanuk back into the boat, told Uli the plan for work, and got started. We assumed our positions and epoxification began.



This is totally something you see every day.

The purpose of the fiberglass in the epoxy process is to provide tensile strength while the epoxy itself supplies pressure strength. Basically, it provides the same functions as re-bar in concrete. The process was to put on a sheet of fiberglass and then paint epoxy over it. This was more stressful than I had anticipated, because it was of utmost importance that Manu didn't have to wait and thus let the epoxy harden before it was applied. Manu told me approximately what size of sheet she needed in advance and I cut it out for her in a timely fashion.

We worked at least two solid hours when Manu announced that we were finished. This led to an immediate release of relieved groans from all parties involved and we shed our Latex gloves, rubbed ourselves down with acetone where needed, and did a half-ass job at cleaning up (a pile on the boat means clean, right?).

That left us with the job of mounting the wind detector at the top of the mast. The previous day Uli had pulled some rope-like ladder up the mast to check out the top and Manu and I took turns going to the top just for fun. The problem we had figured out the day before was we had to drop a wire down through the mast and somehow pull it out of the bottom and get it into the hull. We went through some trial and error attempts with Uli at the top of the ladder and us at the bottom poking through a small hole in the mast trying to get the wire out. It was clear that we were all getting tired of being on the boat and our attempts were half-hearted at best.



Clearly OSHA-approved working conditions.

Uli decided he needed something else from the hardware store, so he climbed down and drove off. Manu and I took the opportunity to collapse at the front of the boat and discuss how we needed to go swimming before we left back to Austria.



We were planning on leaving the next day early in the morning so today was our last chance to jump in the water (and the shitfish swimming around reminded us that we needed to swim *somewhere else*). Manu decided she was going to demand to Uli that we go swimming as soon as he got back. That is precisely what happened, but Uli was bound and determined to finish fixing the boat, so Manu, Maxi, and I grabbed a few towels and took the Golf to find a beach.



“I get the distinct feeling you guys are sick of being on this boat.”

“Yea? What gave it away?”

We piled into the car with Manu driving, Maxi in back, and me in the navigator's seat. Manu

handed me a map, told me to find the name of a beach Uli had recommended, and to tell her how to get there. The map looked like something out of the '70s and really wasn't what I would consider useful for driving. I verbalized my concerns and Manu informed me that it was a nautical map. Well fuck, at least we left properly prepared.

We ended up ditching the whole map thing and finding the first beach we came across which was next to a youth hostel. We hiked a little ways alongside the rocky shore (Croatia could be summed up by the word rocky) until we found a secluded area. Manu and Maxi immediately stripped off their clothes and went into the water. I didn't want to be the odd man out so I did the same and walked over to the water's edge, cringing in anticipation as swimming in Puget Sound and doing misogi in the Pilchuck River had taught me to do. I was pleasantly surprised to find the water perfect. I jumped in the rest of way, eager to have my first pleasant saltwater swimming experience. In the shallow areas the water was completely clear and in the deeper areas beautiful crystal blue-green. The best part was, due to the physical properties of salt water, I actually floated. Normally I sink like a rock.

We swam out to the end of the bay before swimming back in. Manu and I chatted about our experiences swimming on the Greek coast and in Puget Sound (very pleasant vs. incredibly unpleasant, as my Washingtonian readers will know well). We got back to shore, dried ourselves off and got our clothes back on before heading back, taking some time to skip rocks into the bay along the way. We didn't bring a camera so unfortunately I didn't get a chance to get any shots, so it will just have to be believed that it was absolutely freaking amazing.

Upon returning to the boat Uli informed us that he was successful in getting the wire through the mast and that we would be leaving for Austria first thing in the morning. There was minor rejoicing before we went to Uli's favorite restaurant *again* for dinner (can't really argue when the man's paying...). I doubled my Croatian beer intake and took in my last few breaths of Mediterranean air. Short of a traveling south again, it was nothing but the cold north from here on out.

We all woke up a bit before eight and scrambled to do our various morning routines, clean out the boat, and get the car packed up. The sewage "treatment" plant must have been taking the day off, because the marina was almost void of shitfish. In order to make up for this, Lanuk escaped and once again did his business right in front of the marina headquarters. The security guard gave me dirty looks but saved his rage for Uli, upon whom he demanded clean up after his dog as soon as Uli was in sight.

Once again we packed the car up with crap to our ears and squished in in some sort of half-ass clown car fashion. The only problem for me this time was Uli demanded the passenger's seat (Manu was driving again). This made sense seeing as he's a bit bigger than me, but I still wasn't all too happy about being crammed into the back seat barely able to fidget. My right knee immediately let me know that this wasn't going to be a good idea for even a trip down the street. Not quite pain but clearly uncomfortable, I made the entire five-hour trip just short of biting my tongue.

After about an hour or so of driving, the slowing down of traffic informed us that we were approaching the Croatian-Slovenian border. As tourist season was coming to a close, the Croatian border guards were waving cars through just to let off the pressure. Five minutes later we hit the Slovenian side. This was the moment of truth. The Slovenians weren't waving people through, and when it was our turn we pulled up to the border guard and handed over our passports, Manu specifically requesting a stamp in my passport from him. He flipped through the pages and my hands went cold, the blood threatening to drain from my face. We had prepared a pretty lame cover story for me on the drive and I wasn't looking forward to having to use it.

He looked up from the passport and asked Manu, "How long has Dylan been in Croatia?"

"Four months." She said.

He continued flipping through the pages and walked into the guard booth. The blood began its exodus from my face the guard set it down on the counter, still looking at the pages. However, this was

only in preparation for it to explode back up in extreme relief when he reached for the stamp. In one swift KA-CHUNK my illegal status evaporated to the wind.

Verily, had the Angel sayeth unto me: *Be anxious for nothing!*

The return trip through Slovenia was boring and uneventful. No interactions with the police, no getting lost, and no creepy self-appointed religious salesmen. We rolled over the Austrian-Slovenian ghost-town border and I gave an inner sigh of relief. Austria had taken its place as home for me and I was safely back.

My knee was absolutely screaming by the time we pulled back into Wolfgang's driveway in Atzenbrugg and I must have walked around the yard for 15 minutes before going inside. Knowing what to expect this time, I sat down at my now usual place at the kitchen table and food and drink began appearing before me. We had made it back just in time because Maxi's birthday was being celebrated that night, which consisted of various Austrian friends (who mostly spoke English) showing up and everyone jamming on instruments until midnight. Somewhere around 2 in the morning Wolfgang showed me the physics laboratory that I managed to miss my first time around, going through every single instrument and showing me how it worked. Very interesting stuff, but very hard to pay attention to at... 2 in the fuckin' morning. Oof.

I woke up whenever the hell it was I woke up and spent one of the laziest and relaxed Sundays I ever had chilling out with Uli, Wolfgang's family, and the people from the party who hadn't left.



So... you guys know where I can find some unsorted miscellaneous stuff?

In between fixing cars, poking around the workshop, and conversations ranging from the scoundrel-like nature of popes, uranium mining in East Germany, and fluoridation practices (my forté), I learned that Manu lived in a semi-truck that she had remodeled into decent living space.



*"So is it water-front property?"
"If you want it to be."*

She told me she drove around Europe (mainly France and Belgium) in the summer and came back to Austria for winter, the whole time being a hand-made Hungarian shoe saleswoman.

One day at a time, no matter what you experience, the world ends up being more interesting than you thought it was. What an awesome system to live in!

In the afternoon a group of us took a bike ride to a nearby lake, which sat next to Austria's only attempt at a nuclear power plant. It loomed in the distance, nothing more than a hollow concrete shell with a few red lights. I must have been getting over the last throes of my culture shock, because I was about 95% comfortable when we all jumped in naked.

It wasn't until after we got back to the house and Uli and I left for Waldviertel (the frozen-ass corner of Austria where he lives) that I realized that nothing seemed strange to me anymore. As anyone who has ever gone to any other country knows, it's almost impossible to not notice the differences between there and your home country. Everything looks weird and everything is done in a strange fashion. But now as we drove through the Austrian countryside in the dark, everything looked completely normal to me. Apparently six months is the approximate acclimation time.



*Shoes.
Any questions?*

In the final hour of our journey, an on-coming car flashed its lights at us. I turned to Uli and

asked, “Do people in Austria flash their lights at one another to warn them of cops up ahead?”

“Yup!” he said, slowing down the car, “And it appears we're getting pulled over.”

Son of a bitch. I have to start keeping my mouth shut.

We drove into a village and there were two police officers standing next to a parked police car. One had two of those orange wands used to direct airplanes around airports waving us over to the side of the road. While outwardly I joked to Uli about how I had nothing to fear now because I was legal again, inwardly I just wanted to get the fuck home. Uli pulled over and got out of the car. The police asked for his license and documents and had him do a breathalyzer test. Uli then popped his head back into the car and asked me if I knew where his insurance card was, because I had handled it when we had been pulled over back in Slovenia. I told him I had no idea and started helping him look for it in the car.

(Of course, I found it in my wallet about a week later.)

After not finding it, Uli grabbed his coin purse and started rummaging through. I asked him what was going on and he told me he was being fined 20 euros because he didn't have the card on him. He didn't have enough money so he went running for the ATM machine around the corner. I was a bit stunned at the time over the situation to tell him I had 20 euros on me. The police thought this was funny as well and asked me something in German. I apologized and told them I didn't speak German very well, hoping to stimulate a conversation, but they immediately lost interest and we waited for Uli to come back with the money. He did so and we pulled off and continued our drive home.

“So what did they get you for?” I asked a few minutes later.

“For not having my insurance card.”

“No no, I mean, why did you get pulled over in the first place?”

“Routine checkup.”

“Oh... we don't have those in the US. They're illegal.” So much for everything seeming normal.

We pulled into the driveway around nine. We let out some very eager dogs, took anything of immediate importance from the car, and went inside. I went to the fridge, grabbed myself a beer, then collapsed into a chair at the kitchen table; exhausted, burnt out, and barely legal.





*May fair wind always be at your sails,
and the epoxy far from your feet!*

