

THE BALKANS – LIVE LIFE AND PROSPER

The Tara canyon is the deepest canyon in Europe at 1300 metres deep and the second largest in the world, to the Grand Canyon. It flows through Montenegro, ventures a little in Serbia to then go through into Bosnia. It is set in a Unesco park and is named “the tear of Europe” due to its purity, with a reputation of being one of the most beautiful places in the world. I could not think of a place more apt to conclude the last two weeks of the D4DR intensive instructor training course.

For the previous six weeks Deborah Thorpe, Rob Lineham and Martin Mills (the candidates) had been gaining experience and training in Slovenia and Austria preparing for the last big finale and a career in the outdoor industry. Under the wing of Deb Pinnegar, Geraint Rowlands and early on myself and Simon Westgarth, they had been fine tuning their skills and developing into alpine river guides, both rafting and kayaking. They had been on road trips paddling pretty much every day touring the rivers of Austria, then intermittently returning to our base in Slovenia to do their washing and answer emails, and paddle the Soca.

They had all achieved the levels of UKCC 4 star (with Rob gaining his 5 star), level 1 raft guide, WRT, and REC for paddlers and had been organising the Tara expedition for two of their friends and family during the past 6 weeks has part of their training within the D4DR program.

We set out from Slovenia after one last paddle on the Soca, myself Rob and Simon paddled the infamous “siphon canyon” and Deborah, her partner Doug who arrived the day before for the Tara expedition, And Deb Pinnegar paddled the classic section of the Soca from serpnica down to the slalom site. This was also an excuse to create a bit of time to get the mini bus registered with Slovenian plates.

Siphon canyon has a pretty ominous reputation, just its name is enough to put off the faint hearted, but as we found at the right levels it is some of the best continuous grade 4 / 5 paddling to be found anywhere. Most of the British paddlers we saw come and go during the course tended to leave it alone, oh how they missed out. Smooth clean lines, through fantastic limestone gaps and drops, what's more the sun was out. What a great way to set ourselves up for the 2 weeks in the Balkans, spirits were high. If you take your time and the plenty of opportunities there is to scout, siphon canyon is not has bad has its reputation. If you are a grade 4 plus paddler then don't go to the Soca and miss this little gem.

The next morning we got an early start. The route took us right through Slovenia, then down the length of Croatia. All very nice but VERY hot !!, we stopped for our tea in Split, a venetian style town, which is a tourist honey pot, again very nice to then continue past Dubrovnik to a couple of park benches with their own porta cabin loos and a sea view to die for. I slept in the bus waking up half a stone lighter in a pool of sweat, whilst the others took advantage of the amenities.

The next day we crossed the Montenegrin border – no problems. With Slovenian plates and Slovenian insurance we were practically locals!. With British plates and insurance you have to purchase additional insurance to cover you in Montenegro at the Border, and again in Bosnia, which can prove troublesome.

Our arrival in Podgorica that afternoon seemed to take forever, but we knew the River Moraca was only 30 mins away. The plan was to spend a day on the Moraca, another classic grade 3 river, before continuing onto the Tara. We quickly assessed that it would be best for Rob's parents to fly into Dubrovnik as planned but then to catch a bus to Podgorica has opposed to us making the 16 hour return trip to pick them up. For Rob, his parents spending their holidays on a trip he'd organised, in a raft he was guiding was a big deal, you could sense his anxiety to do a good job and show them he could do it well. He had told me his dad was keen on him continuing his career as a mechanical engineer, and saw his kayaking as a hobby. At the start of the course Rob wasn't sure but as the 6 weeks went on he was now certain to make the change, it was just convincing his folks.

The Moraca is like the Tara, a deep gorge with high-sided limestone cliffs on both sides. Looking from the road 300ft up it was hard to get a grip of how serious the rapids were, but one thing was for sure, there were a couple of places in the gorge which looked walled out. So portage would be debatable and walking out impossible, so when we started it felt very committing.

We left at nine in morning; the river was very shallow and in places and a bit of a scrape. Although this was the case it still made for quite technical grade 2 / 3 paddling, having to avoid pinning on rocks and broaching the gaps. There were also 4 or 5 trucks to avoid, casualties of the narrow, bendy road a few hundred feet above our head. Drive shafts making nasty strainers.

After lunch, the sides of the canyon closed right up, with vertical crags growing out of each side of the river, now only about 40 feet wide it began to feel like a real adventure. It was a welcomed break being away from the sun. Paddling in 42 degrees is a little uncomfortable, in the shade it was verging on chilly. What we'd scouted from the road turned out to be an awkward portage on river right, Deb's said in the spring there is no way to scout, nor to portage this rapid, which at that time of year was a tricky grade 4 run on river left. The rest of the river to the take out gave us even more spectacular, breath taking views. I kept getting myself well and truly stuck on rocks, due to looking up and not where I was going. The last 2 km, the sides opened out, which gave you more of a grasp on just how high the mountains were. By the time we got to the take out it was 5'oclock, a long tiring day which takes half the time at spring levels.

Picking Rob's parents up went faultlessly (ha! Ha!) and from Podgorica we were looking at a 6 hour drive to the start of the Tara. On route we met a goat herder who wanted us to take his goats white water kayaking, and visited the smallest national park in the world for lunch Skader Lake -

391 squared meters in size. We finally arrived at Miro rafting at about 9pm, to be awaited for by Miro himself who was expecting to see us, and a bar. Hooray on both counts. The guys had organized with Miro for him to drive our bus and trailer to the get out whilst we were on the river, and also raft hire for rob and his parents, All for around €150. Debs, Deborah, Doug and myself were to use kayaks. I was in a new dagger approach modeling for debs to take a few promo shots. (I had to get that in!) There was also another €80 per head to pay at the put in to the Drumitor National park, which has the very proud park warden took from us, I could tell the money was being put to good use protecting the Park. You could tell there would be no trucks in this river, my first glimpses of the Tara were nothing short of stunning, crystal clear emerald water cutting through steep sided banks, thick with trees colored a deep dark green. Looking back, its one of the most beautiful places I've been.

Packing boats for a multi day trip normally takes groups forever, with copious dithering and faff. But we were packed and away in less than 45 minutes. I should of expected it really, they had been at it every day close to nearly 2 months by this point, still all the same, pretty impressive. Miro told us the river was very low, but not has low has it could get. There was a lot more water in it than the Moraca, which came has a big relief I was secretly apprehensive, even though debs continually reassured me that there would be water due to the abundance of springs flowing into the Tara. It wasn't till id actually seen the size and the amount of water which was coming from these springs I could get my head around the fact it effected the rivers level, even though id seen plenty of springs in the past including hot ones on the Rio Grande in Mexico. These springs are more like small tributaries and added to the beauty; aiding wonderful composition to every ones photos, but where did they come from? Do River gods live in caves?

Again, like the Moraca in the spring the Tara is 90 km of grade 3 bliss, but in late July its quite a lot lower, but still fantastic grade two, which any open boater would call heaven, the last day of 3 being a little more pokey, at grade 2+ with the odd grade 3, again heavenly for the experienced open boater. Due to the level of the river it made the days quite long, starting at 9 and finishing at the organised national park campsites at 5pm. Realistically there were no other places to camp; the thick deciduous forest of Beech, Ash, and Oak meets the river. But who would want too? Wow wee. I have never been to such fantastic campsites. Toilets, showers, dry areas to eat, changing rooms, immaculate cut lawn and even a shop is what you got for €5 or you could do what we did and go for the log cabin, 3 course evening meal and breakfast for €20. I didn't even get my boat out of the water; I just tied it to a tree for the night 20 meters from my bed. Exactly the same sketch on day 2 just as we were getting a bit tired and peckish, we came around the corner to be met by a five star campsite, and dinner already prepped, and cooked ready for our arrival due to Deborah's prowess booking us in 2 weeks before!!

Day 3 was quite a bit more exhilarating for me – the first time in a raft for nearly 5 years. (I nearly fell out on more than one occasion) Debs cunningly sold my approach, to the very friendly Bosnian campsite owners. Because it was our last day it seemed like we had been building up over the last 2 days for the big event. The river got more technical, more bouncy and lots more fun. Robs mum sat behind me was having the time of her life! And if you think €80 is a bit steep to paddle the Tara this last section is free as it's out of the unesco park and you can run it as often as you like. Concentrating on the rapids proved to be tricky, I still, could not help myself from looking around, (up mainly) at the trees, mountains and cliff faces. The place is so pristine. Im sure that Rob took pleasure in taking lines to soak me, whilst I wasn't looking.

The trip to the Balkans was a great adventure; no one there had pointy ears like I'd previously believed. D4DR was a huge success and the Tara was everything I wanted it to be and some. But the highlight for me was on the drive back to Slovenia. After eight weeks hard work Rob got his dads approval to go for it and change his life. Well done Rob Lineham, river guide.

To see some more pictures of D4DR go to <http://www.flickr.com/photos/getafix> in the D4DR collection.

To read the blog go to [gene 17](#) or Getafix.com