

By Motorcycle to Bucharest (Second Instalment)



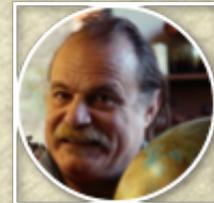
Wednesday April 16, 2008

We have read Mark Powell in *A Night In the Appennini*; now here is the second part of a short tale about a travel in Romania.

Mark Powell

By Motorcycle to Bucharest

(An ACE Reconnaissance Trip)



Mark Powell has never had a car. He moved from bicycles to motorcycles in 1982, since when he has owned 30, nearly all BMWs, and ridden about 2 million km across Europe.

Second Instalment

The street was empty but for a parked Soviet built motorcycle and sidecar. For a

motorcycling art historian, no scene could have appeared more romantic. That night we climbed the Carpathian hairpins but found no food or shelter. The few restaurants and hotels were dark and empty. To add to the sinister atmosphere, pairs of Gendarmes armed with AK47s loomed at regular intervals in the pines. No doubt a night exercise was in progress. Exhausted, we pitched a tent in a dark glade heaped with snow, lit a camping stove and ate the worst meal of the entire trip: a mess of those pot noodles scooped with our fingers as neither of us had remembered to bring a spoon. We were undoubtedly in bear country again and I recalled a hiking rule that food had to be hung in a tree. The noodle pot dangled like a Christmas decoration. The bears were not tempted.

It was on the outskirts of Bucharest that we met our bandits. We had stopped to puzzle over a plan of the city when the driver of a battered BMW saloon racing towards us on the other side of the road saw us, initiated a handbrake turn and spraying us with shards of broken tarmac slewed to a halt in front of us and his passenger told us to follow them in the shiftiest manner. We disengaged ourselves and decided to look up our contact from Reuters. Asking a taxi driver for directions to the address, he insisted on leading us there and would take no recompense.

As we stood in front of the door of a mansion next door to the Egyptian embassy, unwashed, unshaven and smelling of bear and spicy noodles, we didn't reckon our chances of admission. But Peter, the Reuters boss, was an unfussy New Zealander and former motorcyclist himself. He welcomed us to use the shower and share his dinner table and offered us beds for an indefinite stay. Our bikes were parked on the street outside, but the entertainment they provided for the bored soldiers guarding the embassy meant that they were happy to protect them. A chain and padlock deters some thieves. A pair of armed guards with AK47s takes care of the rest.

John had to continue to Turkey but I stayed to research the city. I was made to

feel at home in the Reuters office and was given invaluable help by the journalists.

To explore Bucharest on a nimble motorcycle, sharing an uneven road surface with erratically driven cars which would fail any MOT and lurching busses with blown shock absorbers was an adrenalin pumping treat. To be pursued at night by feral packs of dogs while dodging open manholes on unlit streets was an adventure of a high order.

I had an urgent task to replace the brake pads on my front wheel, which had been worn wafer thin by hot work on the Carpathian passes. Radu, a press photographer, took me deep into a drab part of town close set with blocks of flats and into a square which was an unscheduled miniature industrial zone. Carcasses of vehicles were piled up in the centre, while all around in cavernous workshops at ground floor level of the flats men were panel beating and dismantling or repairing machines in a cacophany of sharp metallic resonance. It was like an artisans' quarter in an Ottoman Balkan town. For a mere 6 dollars, a workman shaved the brake material off a car's pads and rivetted them onto my bare metal plates. Refitted onto my bike, the bodge worked well all the way back to the UK a month later.

I eventually left the city in tandem with a Reuters photographic expedition and after many more adventures arrived home deeply affected by Romania. Radu used the word "infected". It meant that for the rest of the decade I went out by bike nearly every spring for a month or so of exhilarating travel. I was not disappointed.

