



I am Lyn Lesslie, widow of the late Vic Lesslie, former National Treasurer of Ulysses Club. Despite the passing of my true love and best ever friend, the spirit of Vic lives on with me and motorcycling is a passion.

I accepted an invitation from Rozle Verhovc of clutchmototours.com as pillion to tour the seven former countries of Yugoslavia, and much more. It was amongst my best decisions, ever. Rozle is a capable rider and a dear friend.

My tour started in Ljubljana, Slovenia, with a welcoming dinner at the 11th century Ljubljana Castle with Rozle's partner, Jasmina, where we plotted and planned our route. The ancient ghosts of the Castle listened in; clinking their chains in approval!

Our adventure was carried out aboard a brand new BMW R1200GS. "Travel light" warned Rozle. "We have just one pannier each".

A widow's lot is not an easy one!

We started with the highlights of Slovenia. I had been here before, with Vic, but my eyes are opened anew to the gems that lay beyond the city. The seat and pillion position of the new bike are so comfortable I realise I don't need my air hawk seat.

My first surprise is the Postonja Caves, one of the World's largest cave systems and one of Slovenia's leading tourist attractions. We take an underground train for two kilometres on a system that goes back to 1818, then walk another two kilometres gazing at the awe-inspiring crystal formations that,

drip by drip, formed over thousands of years.

Back on the bike we take the short ride to Predjama Castle (circa 1274), which literally hangs in the middle of a 123 metre high rocky cliff. The Castle has a very dark past. The Knight Erazam Lueger, a robber baron of the 15th century, was blown up in his own dunny. Many a villain was hung. The intrigue of the place wonderfully runs up my spine, and I shiver.

Rozle has booked for lunch at the Zemono Manor, French cuisine. Peter, the chef is a good friend. He won the Chef of the year in Slovenia, and rides a Harley Davidson. The meal was exquisite. I feel out of place in my riding gear, as most of the patrons are dressed in their finest clothes. This is the number one restaurant in all Slovenia, after all!

A photo opportunity came along when Peter signed his cook book for me, and all the other guests look at me with envy, as though I am the Queen, albeit a slightly dishevelled Queen.

The roads in this beautiful country are fabulous. We zoom on, and I notice rocks and boulders on the roofs of homes and sheds. I ask why?

We are in the Vipava Valley where the ferocious wind called the Bora blows up to 200kph, toppling buses and semi trailers. Schools and shops and roads close for up to two weeks.

My first surprise accommodation is high in the mountains on the Italian border called Nebesa (means "Heaven" in Slovenian) near Kobarid. The view is breathtaking, seeing

snow capped mountains in the distance. On a clear day you can see the Bell Tower on St Marks square in Venice.

Riding down the mountain on a good twisty road with no traffic, we stop at a WW1 War Museum in Kobarid. All the war artefacts on display have been gathered from the mountains in the area as when Archduke Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated the war came to the Soza region, as it did to the rest of the World. Big bomb craters are still to be seen.

We head for Krunska Gora, through fifty hair-pin bends over a short 1,650 metres. Rozle is a very competent rider and I feel safe with him, as we flip-flop around these tight corners at speed, managing the tricky, ancient cobblestones. At the top we could see the distant Julian Alps.

Slovenian people are into winter sports and do well in the winter Olympics, so we ride to the new ski jump being constructed in Planica, which will attract spectators from around the world. In summer, the jump is covered with artificial turf so the athletes can practice year round.

We ride to Bovec and to the famous Bled Castle for our lunch stop, another of Slovenia's favourite tourist destinations. We climb the many stairs to the Castle for the best seat in the café, overlooking the beautiful, fairy tale lake and the tiny Island of the Church of the Assumption. Legend has it if you ring the gold bell three times your wish will come true. We catch a boat to the Island and give the gold bell a ring. Perhaps my wish will come true?

We traverse the hundreds of switch-backs as we cross the border into Austria, before stopping for coffee in Logarska Dolina. Again pristine snow-capped mountains surround us as we head further up, stopping for lunch at Pri Sporm

restaurant. It's then on to the Cultural Centre of European Space Technology, in the tiny village of Vitanje, a good place for wannabe space enthusiasts.

Twisting back down the mountain, we stop at the Ptuj Castle, built in the mid 12th century, to defend the against the Hungarians hordes. There is just so much history and I feel as if I'm in another age. The spa resort in Rogaska Statina is famous for its healing mineral water called ROI, said to be carbon dated at 8,000 years old. According to legend it was created by the Greek mythological horse, Pegasus. Many Russian tourists visit this beautiful spa.

We ride through the beautiful abundant wine country and stop overnight in Jerusalem, on the Croatian border. After a fun filled evening with wine tastings and food, we're again in the twisties, crossing the border into Croatia. We go to the museum at the birthplace of the Yugoslavian dictator, Josip Broz Tito. It is a living museum, and particularly as we visited was his birth date. Many tributes were left at his monument. The village has all been left in its original state; very interesting given Tito's notoriety?

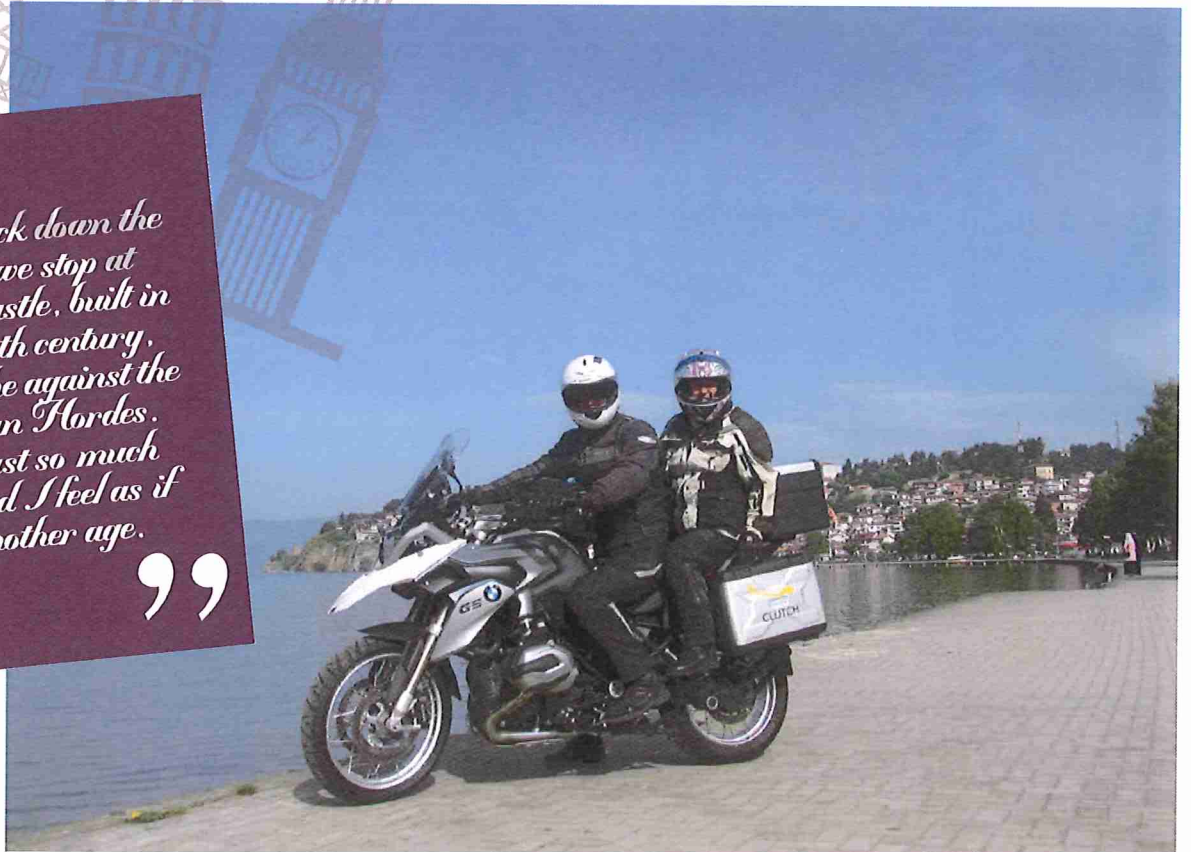
Crossing the border back to Slovenia the roads are just fantastic - fast and smooth. Rožle dons his Go Pro and I know it is going to be fast and furious. Terrific!

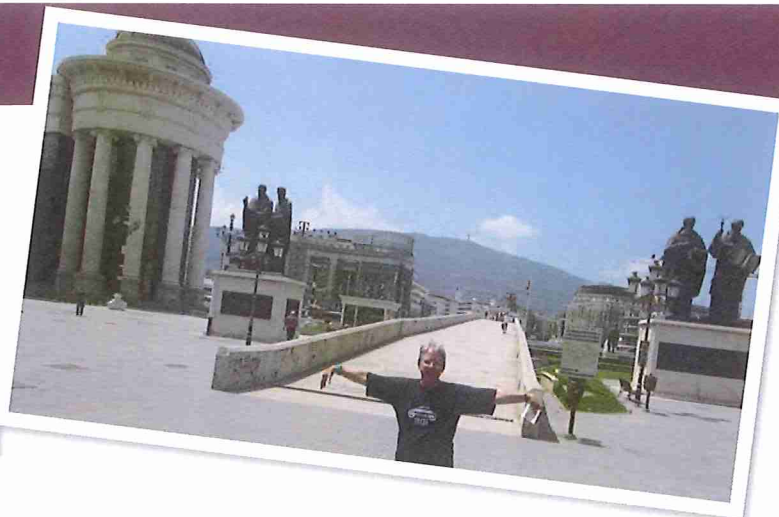
We take a couple of rest days back in beautiful Ljubljana, just walking the ancient streets, catching a boat down the Ljubljana River and learning the history. We had a private guide, a historian, and he told me that during WW2 Ljubljana had a barbed wire barricade erected around it for 35 km to protect the city from invasion. Each year on the 10th May pilgrims walk the fence line.

“

Twisting back down the mountain, we stop at the Ptuj Castle, built in the mid 12th century, to defend the against the Hungariun Hordes. There is just so much history and I feel as if I'm in another age.

”





We ride on to the Adriatic Sea to beautiful Piran, the snow-capped Dolomites in the distance. Energised, we climb the many steps to the Church of St George, built in the 7th century and we stop for coffee in the square of violin virtuoso Giuseppe Tertini. His priceless violin is in the memorial museum. The City is said to have been built from salt. We go to the mines, and see the "white gold" which they are still producing through medieval method and tradition.

Suddenly, we are in Trieste, Italy for the day. There was no border, no signs or no passport stamps. I'm just in Italy. May is the month for great celebrations in Europe and I see a large mass of people gathering, men in uniforms and carrying flags. Is this a protest or a rally?

It's a rally from Sardinia, celebrating again the war. There are so many wars to celebrate. We have coffee and listen to a local band play in the square, then waddle off to the castle Di Miramere, perched on rocks overlooking the Adriatic, and gaze out to sea.

Feeling equestrian, we head for the Lipica Stud farm, back in Slovenia and the birthplace of the famous Lipizzaner horse. The breeding programme has been going on since 1580. They seem to have it right now, and the horses are beautiful.

On to Zagreb, the capital of Croatia including a wonderful private guide to this city, strolling the main street called Stroumsmayer Promenade. It has 16 sets of traffic lights, and at each set the name changes; 16 names on one street. We walk the steep incline to the Zagreb Cathedral where the walls have stood since the 15th century and to St Marks with its beautiful coloured tiles always featured on the post cards. Zagreb is a

vibrant and interesting city.

Our mood changes as we ride through Malaigrad, which still has the remnants of the past war. Bombed out homes and bullet holes everywhere makes for a very depressing town.

Past the Bosnian border passport control, the Wow! factor comes in, with 100 kilometres of twisties. This is unbelievable and you have to watch out for other drivers as many may not have licences. Rožle is a skilled, experienced rider and I have no fear as we dodge and weave through the chaos. There is no road rage; just a few Slovenian "boy" words. We climb high into the Vlasic mountains, 1260 metres above sea level to the ski resort of Blancia, nestled amongst the snow capped peaks. Wow! I feel like one lucky Wandering Widow. I could be home knitting?

Leaving the mountains, we ride the ever-present twisties through lush green pastures to Sarajevo, and contemplate the start of WWI and some of the most savage episodes of the Balkans war. We park the bike and walk the now peaceful little cobblestone streets and the fulsome fruit and veggie markets. What was then, and what is now!

Leaving Sarajevo, we took a magical mountain road off the beaten track which weaved its way up and down through a wonderful hidden valley. The views were again spectacular and you could see the snow capped mountains, this time of Montenegro.

We're going to Serbia but first we stop at the Drina River Bridge, built by the Ottomans in 1577. It and is now UNESCO protected, with its 11 arches along its 180 meters length. We also stop at Andrićgrad, a new stone village which opened in 2014 especially built

for the film "The Bridge over the River Drina" by Ivo Andric. It's all very impressive and houses a university, shopping, bars, restaurants and accommodation.

Again high into the mountains, flip flopping around the twisties we arrive at a fairy-tale village called Mecavnik Kustendorf, a timber town built in the traditional Serbian style for the film "Life is a Miracle" by Emir Kusturica. The town is quaint and comfortable, and reminds us there is much more than Hollywood out there!

Belgrade is the capital of Serbia, and on arrival we had lunch in the Novak Djokovic restaurant, and proceeded to our Hotel. It really was a palace, within walking distance to all the sights of Belgrade. Many remnants of the bombings by NATO in 1999 are still present, and act as a reminder of the atrocities from the Kosovo conflict. Sights include the House of Flowers, which was Marshall Tito's palace and now his resting place, the grand St Savas Temple which has been under construction for 15 years and still a shell on the inside, and the Fortress Kalemegdan, which overlooks this huge city. Belgrade was once the capital of Yugoslavia. We've had another wonderful sightseeing day.

We're still in Serbia, and back on the bike to ride more great twisties including through a little village called Cuča that has an annual brass band festival, which about 600,000 visitors attend from Serbia and overseas. Moving up the mountains and the glorious scenery we stop for a unique photo opportunity of the kilns which

still burn charcoal as they did in ancient times.

More twists and bends, until we come across an Orthodox monastery called Studenich, with its frescos undergoing restoration after the Ottoman invasion. "Valentino Rožle", complete with Go Pro, pilots us with pace up this picturesque mountain. The temperature dips to a chilly 11 degrees as we arrive at the Hotel Kopaonik Ski Resort for the night.

Heading to Kosovo, Rožle's friends tell him of a "great road", so we set off, Go Pro in readiness. It's fantastic; sweepers, no traffic - we passed two dogs and one tractor in 44 kilometres. Suddenly, though, it's a motocross track. We feel lucky we are on a GS. The road was to be flooded in 1970 for a hydroelectric system, but as yet nothing has happened, other than 45 years of deteriorating road.

Shaken and stirred, we arrive at our next destination called Devil's Town, a geomorphology phenomenon with rock formations like the ones in Cappadocia in Turkey, and yet more photo opportunities. Lunch is a sandwich of half a loaf of bread filled with ham and goat's cheese. Rustic country this!

Through the border to Kosovo, Rožle buys compulsory un-claimable insurance for the bike for €15.00. The countryside is now flat and bustling with trucks, and the homes have noticeably different architecture. Our destination is the historic city of Prizren. Our hotel is right in the middle of this bustling city, and it is easy walking along the cobblestone streets and watching the passing parade, whilst having a few beers from our prime position overlooking the fast flowing Bistrica River.

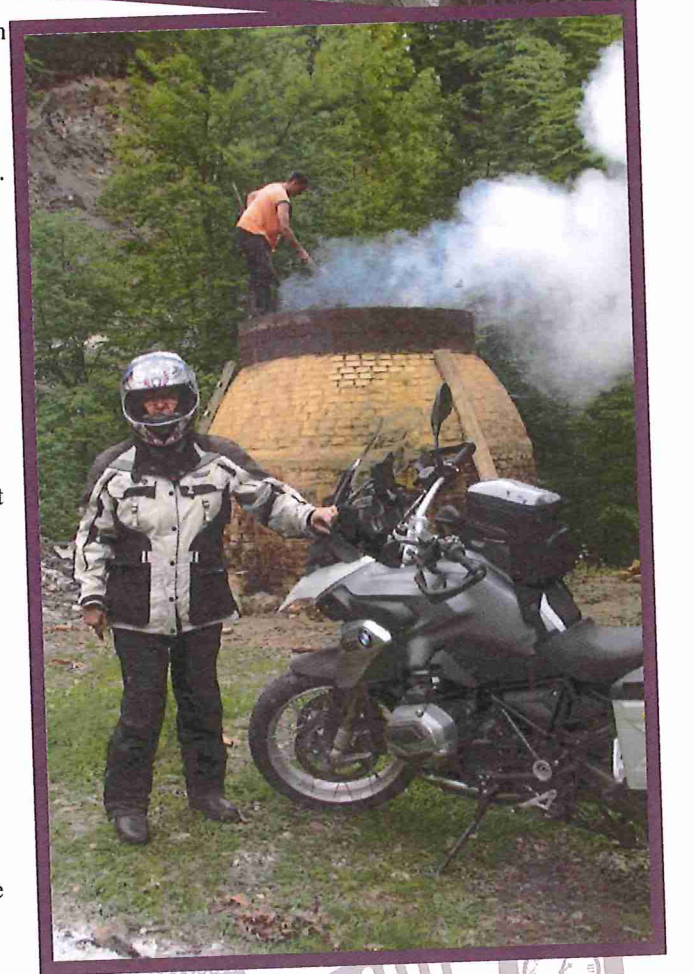
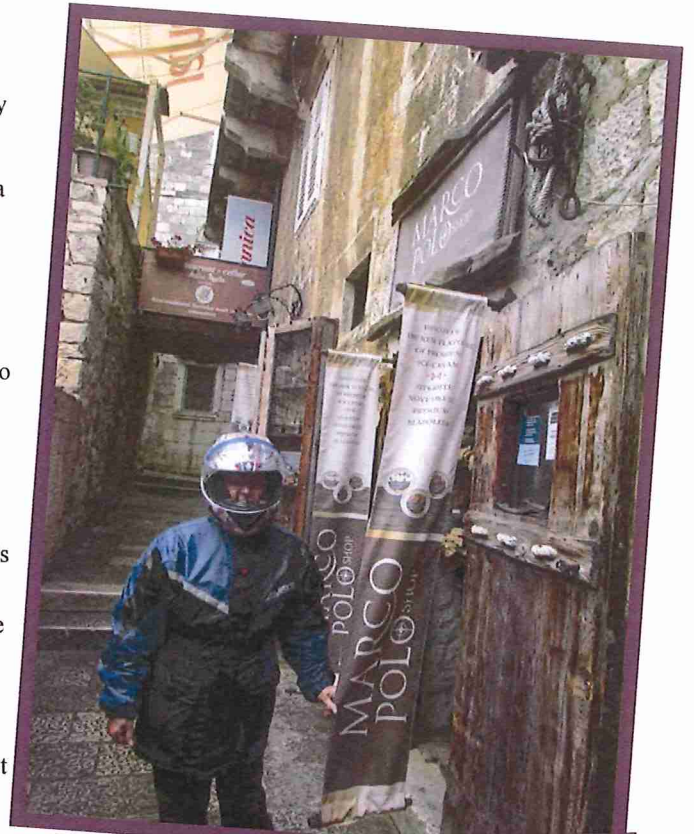
Being called to prayer in Prizren marks our time to move on, through the inevitable twisties and up the hair pin bends and over the snow-capped mountains to the border to Macedonia. The customs officer tells Rožle that there is going to be a mass rally at 2pm on the main square in the capital Skopje. The week before 22 people were shot and killed during a protest. I Spoke to Rožle. I don't want to be there. New plans and routes are made. We arrive early in the morning, but most of the streets were already closed off. Hundreds of police in their riot gear were patrolling the street. Despite this, we undertook a quick tour to the Old Bazaar Quarter from the 15th-16th century, which provided many photo opportunities as the present President has filled the square with giant monuments and statues; always an ominous sign. Mother Theresa came from Macedonia.

Leaving Skopje as it was preparing for riots, we take an old road that was the main road before the highway was built. I don't think anybody had been on this road since Marshall Tito's time. It was rugged, with blue metal stones, soft in places, and giant potholes that would swallow a bus. We pass one scooter, a push bike and a very quick turtle!

Lucky, again, we are on a GS. With the addition of skill and daring we made it through without mishap. President Tito named many towns after himself; the one we are near is Tintov Veles.

Today our ride takes us to Ohrid. With the Go Pro mounted, I am in for a thrill with 50 km of corners; it's like being on a roller coaster. The roads over the mountain are just magic; no traffic, just a smooth and enjoyable ride. Our hotel is on Lake Ohrid which was known to have had 365 churches, but alas there are only three left after the Ottoman invasion. Again we walked the cobblestone steps and alley ways, exploring this wonderful city by the lake, even taking a boat ride to get better photo opportunities. It is a UNESCO world heritage site.

Go Pro in readiness, we head off to Albania. Through passport



control and we see bunkers. Albania was shut off during the communist dictatorship of Ever Hoxa. He built 700,000 bunkers for something to do and closed the borders to all in and all out, to make the state self sufficient. People were prisoners in their own country. When Hoxa died, the borders were opened again, but it still feels as if it is 30 years behind the rest of the world. We take the old road which weaves itself over the Albanian Alps - yet another motorcycling paradise as we flip-flop on the Elbasan Tirana Highway. Stopping at the top we see the worst pollution in Eastern Europe, nearly as bad as China.

Now Montenegro, and our passport is stamped again. We stop for lunch in a special hideaway on the Bojana River, about 500 metres from the Adriatic Sea, where we feast on fresh fish and calamari. Fishing nets from poles dot the shoreline and we ride to the island called Ada, which is a nudist colony. Alas, Wandering Widows are rejected.

Our next destination, Budva, is a medieval walled city. It is over 2,500 years old and one of the oldest settlements on the Adriatic coast. A huge thunderstorm erupts, preventing us from exploring this city. The storm knocks out electrical power, and we are in darkness.

We're back in Croatia, and the custom guy says "welcome back" and provides another stamp as we head for Vela Luka, stopping first in Dubrovnik. Seeing the old city and the wall again brought back memories of when Vic and I were here about 8 years ago. Not wanting to walk the wall this time, we just rode past. Dubrovnik was just so busy, with its tourist buses and masses of pedestrians. Two huge cruise ships were in port.

We had coffee and rode on to catch the ferry, which was only 15 minutes to this beautiful island. On the island, the roads are fast and smooth with little traffic, Rožle is in his element. It took no time at all to ride the 40 kilometres. Magical!

Heading for Split, storm clouds have broken and it is raining hard, so on goes the wet weather gear. Moving up the mountains, the rain has stopped but heavy fog is now hampering our ride. I thought Rožle was going to ask me to walk in front of the bike so he could see the road, but good manners prevailed. We missed the Split ferry due to the slow going, but took a detour to Korčula old town, where it is reputed that Marco Polo was born in 1254. Polo is a common name - it could have been anybody, but a business opportunity is a business opportunity?

Raining again, we had a quick ride around, seeing all the sights and being flogged Marco Polo souvenirs. Off to the ferry from Korčula - Orebić, the roads are very slippery and the white lines are deadly as salt residue runs off. Then a one hour ferry to the mainland, following this beautiful coast road. The rain has eased, we pick up a little speed and the road is smooth. I even get to have a little snooze!

Our gear is still soaking wet, but we have just about finished our tour. Only two more days of fine riding, we thought. The weather has now closed in as we head to the Old Town in Split and see the Palace of Diocletian, built between the 3rd and 4th centuries. It is just a magnificent structure. Split is called the Riviera of Croatia, with all its little cafés and bars.

Leaving Split we hit the highway doing 130 km (that's the speed limit). We are cold and wet, so take a detour and stop at a little restaurant and warm ourselves with fish soup.

Back on the coast road, the wind has picked up and we have 120 km headwind. White caps litter the roiling Adriatic Sea, and the wind keeps blowing us over the white line onto approaching cars. This does not constitute the joys of motorcycling. It is not pleasant. Rožle looks in the rear vision mirror and sees blue lights flashing. We are not speeding (as if, with this wind!). The cop states that this road is closed for motorcyclists, and being on this road you are fined 260 krone - about €35...more Slovenian boy words!

We then face a detour of 60km back to the highway and our destination for the evening is 198km away. It is hard to be happy; wet, cold, and shivering as the temperature dropped to 6 degrees. We're miserable.

Arriving in Opatija at 8pm after riding over 500km, Rožle was physically and mentally exhausted. I was merely exhausted, teeth chattering and cold to the bone. Rožle moaned, with reason, it was the worst riding conditions he had encountered in his years as a tour guide.

I opted out on riding back to Ljubljana as my gear was still soaking wet, and it gave Rožle the freedom of riding the last few hundred kilometres on his own, unburdened, in the rain and chill.

However, this has been the best tour imaginable. I have travelled so many roads, been around so many bends, seen so many things, met so many people, ate so much, drank so much, found pure enjoyment, faced the challenge and understood once more I am really alive!

I am in debt to Rožle, for being a gentleman and for giving me a great insight of the history, the geography, the culture and the drama of South Eastern Europe - on a motorcycle. I thoroughly enjoyed it and thoroughly recommend his firm.

clutchmototours.com....."We go all the way"

Lyn Lesslie #16174
info@clutchmotortours.com

