



Backcountry in *Slovakia*

Amy Marwick skies in the Low Tatras and High Tatras mountains in Slovakia. She doesn't see any bears, but she does find endless ski touring and fantastic ski resorts – if you get the weather for it...



I'm gazing out the window of a blue panel van, sitting behind Viktor, our driver. He's possibly not washed his hair once in the last five days and his stale cigarette smoke hangs in the air. It's bleak out there. The sky is persistently grey above fields of scrub. Banks of dirty, old snow bleed out moisture. The roads are wet and the trees are leafless. And I'm certain we're not going the right way...

We were to meet our guide, Igor Trgina, at a trailhead called Biela Voda, White Water. When asked if he knew where this was, Viktor replied with the generic answer of all drivers everywhere: "Yes." Coupled with the Slovak language barrier I was not inclined to question him further. So we now find ourselves rounding a corner and, as the mist lifts, instead of a trailhead, we are looking out across a ramshackle town that could be abandoned. But then there is a dog tied to a crumbling kennel, colourful shirts draped over washing lines under a sunless sky, graffiti, rubbish, and suddenly people.

Viktor looks nervous. "Stop! Pullover, please," Cody pleads - he's never been to Europe before and as an American ski photographer this is too far out of the ordinary to miss. Two curious teenage boys approach our van. One of them looks at me hopefully, talking in Slovak before he switches to French. "Français? Bon-bon? Please, bon-bon!"

"No, no, we go!" hurries Viktor, ushering a distracted Cody back into the van. He spins the van around and puts his foot down, leaving Cody just enough time to snap a troop of hardy looking men with bundles of wood slung over their shoulders, axes in hand. "They are gypsies," Viktor snarls. "Like Slovak Mexicans". I'm amazed he's able to draw such a parallel yet he's unable to grasp simple directions.

As we speed back to the main road to continue our searching, I'm glad that we stumbled across this place. Apart from injecting some colour into a monotone drive through the Slovak outback, it's given me a little more perspective. We are a far cry from the flashy ski resort of Jasná in Nízke Tatry, the Low Tatras. This is a country in the crux of change. With just 20 years of independence after its peaceful split from Czechoslovakia, new Slovakia

is tearing away from its Communist past and investment is pouring in, concentrated in glossy pockets like Jasná where the atmosphere is exciting and a fervent desire to transform into the new Trois Vallées, one of the French super-resorts, is rife. Now, however, we are headed for the wilderness of the Vysoké Tatry, the High Tatras. I'm assured these mountains are out there somewhere but I'm yet to see them for the fog.

Before this trip I had never considered the backcountry skiing possibilities in Slovakia. In fact I had never considered skiing there at all. I met the team at Vienna airport in early March: David, a travel writer and filmmaker from Vermont, and Cody, a photographer from Denver. After long journeys and dazed introductions, we were spirited away to the Tatra Mountains. The Tatras are part of the Carpathian mountain range stretching 1,500km across Central and Eastern Europe, the second-longest mountain range in Europe after the Scandinavian Mountains. The Tatras are split into four smaller ranges: Western, High, Belianske and Low. Unsurprisingly the High Tatras are home to the highest peaks, with Gerlachovský štít towering above them all at 2,655m. The Low Tatras are to the south and are separated from the High Tatras by the valleys of the Váh and Poprad rivers. Our tour would include three nights at Jasná resort, in the heart of the Low Tatras on Mount Chopok, followed by five nights exploring the High Tatras' backcountry.

Once off the motorways and into the countryside we passed lots of small towns, each with a proud white church under a halo of coal smoke. There were legolands of boxy, Soviet-era apartment blocks newly painted in primary colours plonked behind decorative wooden houses. Countless billboards promised winter wonderlands, aqua extravaganzas, cars, clothes, bars and restaurants. As we neared low, forested mountains the peaked A-frame rooves encouraged me, but there was still no sign of snow. Finally we steered upwards along a fir-lined track, reminiscent of the drive from Aviemore up to Cairngorm ski area in Scotland. At the end of the road a picture-perfect ski resort came into view: modern lifts, wide tree-lined motorways of skiers, hotels, ski rental

and scantily clad dancing girls in the après bars – Jasná has everything you could want from a Euro ski resort.

Tatry Mountain Resorts is a private company that has invested millions of euros into the development of ski areas in Slovakia's mountains, and it would appear they have done their research: apart from its 29 lifts and 45km of piste, Jasná ski resort boasts eight freeride zones, which are patrolled, un-pisted areas of terrain easily accessible by lifts, creating that sense of freedom and adventure but without the hard work. These days the ski industry has shifted its focus back towards its randonnée roots and the freeride scene has exploded. 'Sidecountry skiing' (skiing on lift-accessed, off-piste terrain) has never been more hip. From tree runs to steep, technical descents, there's a little bit of backcountry here available to all abilities.

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Our second day in Jasná was plagued by rain and warm weather, and as we put skin to ski I was feeling a little dubious. Our guide, Pavol Kuna, seemed dismayed by the weather, but his quiet determination and his confidence on fat skis spurred me on up through the wet snow. We had taken the cableway from Jasná to Brhliska, and after a two-hour skin we boot-packed the ridgeline to the top of Dereše, at 2,004m the third-highest peak in the Low Tatra range. As the ridge narrowed the sun began to shine through the fog, revealing tempting couloirs on both sides, and then suddenly miles of terrain opened up before us. Bowl after bowl of epic couloirs, technical lines and wide snowy fields were visible, with views across fir-fringed mountains peeking out of the mist. Unfortunately the snow pack was not in our favour so we skinned towards the saddle, Sedlo Polany, and then summited two more peaks, Polana

Who's writing?



Amy Marwick is a ski fanatic who spends her winters working and playing in Saas Fee, Switzerland. Not satisfied with that, this year she chased winter all the way to New Zealand, to see if their mountains are worth all the hype. If she ever gets caught in off-season she can be found working as an outdoors writer – you may recognise from a stint at AT HQ...





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and Zakluky, before descending into the forest charging through what I can only describe as sludge. Pavol assured me that on a good snow day the freeride is unbeatable and I was beginning to believe him. The snow conditions were unusually horrid for this time of year due to an uncharacteristic warm spell. The Low Tatras averages two to three metres of snow each season and powder can be expected during the second half of February and throughout March. Now that I had a taster I was ready to explore further and escape the lifts to see the real backcountry that we were promised.

But the weatherman was not on our side that week and as we headed for Vysoké Tatry, the High Tatras, we were warned of storms approaching from the Arctic and plummeting temperatures. Our first and best day though was a pleasant zero degrees. We skinned along a mellow trail, getting deeper into the Veľká Studená dolina, the Big Cold Valley. The forest was frosted and the mist was thick. I kept an eye out for wolves or even bears – these animals still roam wild in the Carpathian range – but no luck.

Igor Trgina, our second guide, lead us through the forest. Both he and Pavol work at the mountain rescue in

Starý Smokovec in the High Tatras, and Igor told me about an international competition for patrollers that takes place every year in the Veľká Studená dolina. Competitors, mainly from Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland, set off from Hrebeinok (the top of the ski lift out of Starý Smokovec, where we began our tour). The patrollers cover around 20km of terrain on skis and tackle an ice-fall, climb a rocky ridgeline and go on to complete the competition with a blood-wagon slalom race. All in about six hours. Mountaineering is not new here.

As we leave the forest behind, impressive peaks sprout up about us. “It’s just like the Tetons,” enthuses Cody the photographer, snap, snap, snapping – he does the whole tour about twice, running out in front like a Labrador, then waiting behind and catching up, grinning all the way. With a little more snow there would have been lines galore. We continued towards Zbojnická chata, a mountain hut at 1,960m where we ate lunch and drank delicious sweet tea. “Every hut has their own special secret recipe,” Igor told me. The two huge hut porters turned out to be boxers from Bratislava who had taken up their mountain

☪ The two huge hut porters turned out to be boxers from Bratislava who had taken up their mountain posts in aid of training ☺



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LET'S GO

Want to do what Amy did? Here's how you can...

Get there

We flew into Vienna in Austria (just 20 miles from Slovakia's capital Bratislava), but Krakow in Poland is closer to the Tatras. From there transfer taxis and buses are available but I recommend hiring a car so you can explore for yourself. EasyJet and Ryanair fly direct to Krakow from several places across the UK, including Edinburgh, Belfast, Manchester, Birmingham and London. Hire car companies are listed on the Krakow airport website (www.krakowairport.pl).

Stay there

There are numerous hotels and guest-houses, called *penzions*, clustered around the base of the ski resorts and throughout the small towns dotted among the Tatras. We stayed at the Wellness Hotel Grand in Jasná, a rather soulless but extremely comfortable and clean four-star hotel, with a super spa and large range of food (www.grandjasna.sk/en). The best value option would be to base yourself at a *penzion* in one of the smaller towns. From there you can explore the mountains and possibly spend a night or two in one of the huts. In the High Tatras we stayed in the village of Ždiar to the north of the mountains, although the town of Starý Smokovec to the south is in a better location to access the ski touring. Our *penzion* was family-run business, full of Slovak character and even had its own ski lift and piste (www.penzionstrachan.sk). Check out www.slovakia.travel for help with finding the right accommodation.

When to go

March and April are best for touring but keep your eye on the weather. The latter part of February and March will see powder snow, frost and fog, so if it is sidecountry lines you are after, be sure to know how to navigate when the visibility diminishes. A good site for weather forecasts is www.shmu.sk.

Ski touring kit

Ski touring gear is available in a few rental shops – the Low Tatras was particularly limited although we did find sufficient gear in the rental shop in Jasná. For a day touring you will need skis with touring bindings, ski boots with a walking mode or touring boots, skins, poles (telescopic if possible), a 25- to 40-litre rucksack, an ice axe, crampons, ski crampons, a transceiver, a shovel and a probe. The best range of gear by far was at the Intersport in Starý Smokovec. In here we found Dynafit, Silvretta and Fritschi set-ups and the new range of High Mountain Dynastar skis avail-

able to rent. Intersport can set you up with skis, skins, boots and avalanche safety gear for just €38 per day.

It is important that you are well-versed on how to use the equipment. Even if you are travelling with a guide, I would recommend taking an avalanche safety course prior to any trip like this if it is a new adventure. There are numerous avalanche awareness courses running throughout the year in Europe and in the UK. Glenmore Lodge in Aviemore, Scotland, runs one- and two-day avalanche awareness and avoidance courses. It also has a permanent artificial transceiver training park that is available for members of the public to use for free. See www.glenmorelodge.org.uk.

Guides

If you're savvy with ski touring and have got all the gear it's relatively easy to pick up a map and navigate your way along the marked routes. Taking a guide with you, however, means that you can leave the navigating up to them and indulge in your surroundings a little more – and if the weather turns, you have a professional by your side. Pavol Kuna and Igor Trgina were brilliant guides. Find out more about them at www.mountain-guide.sk and www.mountain-proguiding.com respectively. British tour operator Mountain Tracks runs a hut-to-hut trip on the Polish side of the range – see <http://mountaintracks.co.uk>.

Food and drink

With hearty meals for less than €10 and a pint of beer for just €1.50, Slovakia's mountain resorts crush their Alpine equivalents in value for money when it comes to food and drink. Meat, potatoes and dumplings dominate most menus and if you order a hot chocolate don't be surprised if that's exactly what you get: a cup of molten chocolate and spoon – not to be missed. Borovička (Slovak gin) and Slivovica (a 52% liquor made from plums) are the national drinks that were thrust into our hands on arrival at every destination. The mountain huts are usually stocked with Kofola, which is a spicier version of Coca-Cola and a more refreshing end to the day. We also found that the coffee was particularly tasty.

Maps and guidebooks

Igor recommended the guidebook *Tatry Z Oblakov* by Ladislav Janiga. It is not essential for a trip to the Tatras, but it has information in English and describes many routes, forbidden areas and refreshment possibilities with some brilliant pictures. The VKU Harmanec 1:25,000 maps are the maps used by the guides in Slovakia. These are available online from www.bestmap.pl, but it is easy enough to pick one up in outdoor stores when you get there.

posts in aid of training. We watched them hoist 100kg backpacks of empty gas canisters on to their backs before setting out on a five-and-a-half hour round trip to pick up more gas at the end of the trail we had just climbed ourselves – I did not envy them.

Our final ascent involved a half-hour skin and a 20-minute boot-pack to the Priečne sedlo, a saddle between two rock towers with steep, icy slopes on either side. I teetered nervously on the ridge, faffing with my equipment as

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Igor casually danced between the three of us. Skins off, helmet on, skis on. Relief. I was then able to look up and appreciate my Alp-like surroundings. I was in among the highest mountains in the Tatras. Granite reared up all around us – these were the mountains I had been waiting for. They are low by Alpine standards but nevertheless impressive and home to many rock and ice climbing possibilities too.



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We set off jump-turning down the couloir just as the sun was dropping lower in the sky. As we lost elevation the snow became spring-like and the terrain was playful. I was thrilled to be descending after our long day, etching long, fast S shapes into the mountainside. We steered down the valley and through the Shooter's Fields, named for the striking Strelecka rock tower above it where poachers are said to wait for mountain goats to hunt. All the travel had been worth it and the misty mountains had truly delivered.

But the fair weather was not to last, and as predicted the storms rolled in.



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After our brief excursion to the gypsy village we did finally locate White Water and Igor on our second day in the High Tatras. We set out on a gentle trail through the forest along the valley of Kežmarskej Bielej vody. At the end of this valley lies Chata pri Zelenom Plese, the hut beside the green lake, also known as 'Brnčalka.' "This hut is used for many avalanche, climbing and mountaineering courses," Igor told me as we sat in the common room. He pointed towards a young girl who was no more than eight years old. "She has skied all the best lines in this valley and climbed all the routes. Her parents run many of the courses here." Igor greeted her parents warmly. It turned out he knew almost everyone staying at the hut that night and even

put himself forward for potato peeling in the kitchen. The hut was teeming with climbers and skiers of all ages, buzzing from a day outdoors, chatting, eating and drinking beer from one of the hut's four beer pumps. There's a genuine mountaineering community rooted into these mountains. The hut itself sits among a fortress of toothy peaks and is a great base for days out in the mountains. It is a warm and clean warren of corridors, ladders and bunk bedrooms. Boots are stacked high along the walls and neatly coiled ropes line each corridor. There's even a rustic basement bar. "This place goes crazy at New Year," Igor says.

We managed a short skin and ski in a safe powder field that afternoon before retreating to the hut for the night as the snowstorms thickened. That was to be the last of our skiing in the High Tatras now that the weather had descended. The day we left however, bound for Bratislava, we were blessed, somewhat ironically, with a beautiful bluebird day. The storm had passed over the night before: 250km/h winds were recorded at the mid ski station at Tatranská Lomnica (the High Tatras' main ski resort). The BBC reported that the same storm had left 19,000 people in Slovakia without power, while in Hungary T-72 battle tanks had been deployed to reach snowbound motorists – we really timed our trip badly. But here in this Grimm fairytale land lies a network of hut-to-hut touring possibilities, fantastic euro ski resorts, epic sidecountry lines and mountain scenery to challenge the Alps themselves – when you can see it. **AT**

5 MORE SLOVAKIAN ADVENTURES

Weather not on your side? Here are five more truly Slovakian experiences in the Tatra Mountains to keep you busy...

1 Spa time

If you're in need of a pamper day to rest tired ski-touring legs, one of Slovakia's hot spring spas might be the answer. Many of the spas are geared towards the old or infirm but some are open to the public. If you're willing to indulge the tacky adverts and embrace your inner child head to Tatralandia Aquaparc or Gino Paradise Besenova for a day of hot springs, hot dogs and water slides (www.tatralandia.sk and www.ginoparadise.sk).

2 Cheese time

Just off the D1 motorway that runs through the Váh valley there is a relatively nondescript petrol station concealing an unlikely culinary secret. Kozí v šok, meaning goat hill, is a modern restaurant with an onsite cheese factory and farmyard. It's worth a visit for the novelty of touring a cheese factory while someone else fills up your petrol tank, and the cheese is not bad either. Check out www.kozivrsok.sk.

3 Great glass elevator time

The cable car ride up Lomnický štít, one of the highest mountains in the High Tatras, feels a bit like stepping into Willy Wonka's glass elevator. Not for those the faint hearted, this 12-man suspended cable car judders its way to the 2,634m peak that overlooks the Tatranska Lomnica ski resort. The spectacular 360-degree views make up for the hairy ride and you can even spend a night up there in one of the highest apartments in Central Europe.

4 Horse and cart time

During our time in Ždiar we innocently agreed to a horse and cart ride through the village. After a rowdy ride dodging traffic on the main road we were taken to the village museum where we witnessed traditional dance, re-enacted a wedding and then were whisked away aboard our wagon to a mysterious shed in the woods where a fire was ready for roasting sausages on stick. The Slovaks seem to be experts at cooking up these bewildering but entertaining experiences – make sure you check them out.

5 Coffee in the capital time

Slovakia's capital Bratislava is between three and four hours by car from the Tatras depending on where you are staying. The city is a curious mix of old and new, with its quaint, cobbled old town, historic buildings, churches and magnificent Devin castle overlooking sprawling 1970s construction and futuristic apartment blocks. Getting lost in the side streets and stumbling across a buzzing coffee shop is a must. We loved Presporak cafe (www.facebook.com/Presporak).

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