



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

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SLOVAKIA

Date - September 2020

Duration - 5 Days

Destinations

Bratislava - Poprad - High Tatra National Park - Spis Castle

Trip Overview

Having recently managed to escape the coronavirus nightmare by hastily rearranging a cancelled tour of Italy, I decided to take another opportunity to get away and try a short bear tour that I had been attempting to organise since I was last in Poland in August 2018. At the time I was visiting the Tatra Mountains from Zakopane and had tried to get across the border into Slovakia for an authentic bear experience that did not involve watching fed animals from a hide, which is sadly the standard way to view bears across much of Europe. This tour was a far more natural affair, but unfortunately the guide was not available at short notice and since then I had not been able to work the trip into my incessantly busy schedule. The global pandemic had changed that of course and I had been forced to cancel a number of research expeditions, which, as is generally the case in life, had rather wonderfully presented a number of different opportunities. Although I would be in Slovakia for five days in all, only three were full days that did not involve travelling and my trip would therefore consist almost entirely of two fifteen kilometre bear hikes in the same valley and a far shorter trek to search for northern chamois and alpine marmot, having recently photographed both species in the Italian Alps. I also intended to visit the nearby Spis Castle to photograph a colony of European ground squirrels that I knew occurred there and had arranged to stay in the large town of Poprad, which is within easy distance of four national parks. For the record, the four parks are Pieniny, Slovak Paradise, Low Tatra and High Tatra, although the last two are actually distinct mountain ranges separated by the Poprad, a major river shared with neighbouring Poland, from which I assume the name of the town was derived. The High Tatras, or simply the Tatra Mountains internationally, form a natural border between Slovakia and Poland and are the highest range in the mighty Carpathian Mountains,



which stretch some 1,500 kilometres from the Czech Republic and Austria in the west to Romania and Ukraine in the East and Serbia to the south. All three of my tours would take place within High Tatra National Park, although in conspicuously contrasting areas. Our bear adventures would unfold within a pretty mountain valley with plenty of forest cover, while, perhaps not surprisingly given the species involved, the chamois excursion would take place amid a more traditional austere alpine environment, with superb views of the adjacent Gerlachov massif, the highest peak in Slovakia at just under 2,655 metres. Having made the pleasant drive from the capital Bratislava, through a succession of appealing rural villages and vast tracts of forest, I met my local guide the night before the first tour and he suggested a slightly later start the next day, as the bear hikes usually begin early in the morning. I would have been happy with either option and would probably more recommend the early start in future, as our day turned out to be very quiet and after several hours we had only spotted a single golden eagle. Having said that, the guide knows the area extremely well and he said that bears can be observed at any time, which did prove to be the case. However, I would still choose the early option more often than

not, if only to give myself the possibility of spending longer in the field, with perhaps an increased chance of seeing a bear at either the start or the end of the day, when of course most mammals are far more active. After a reasonably steep start, the hike itself was comfortable and by the time we reached the furthest point, where we would wait and scan for bears, as well as chamois and red deer, we were within a kilometre or so of the Polish border. In the same way that I crossed into Slovakia on my last visit to Poland, the trail does continue on into Poland, but it also takes you beyond the optimum bear watching area and was mainly used by more traditional hikers, as well as a few locals picking blueberries. We appeared to be the only visitors actively searching for wildlife, although one of the berry pickers did, somewhat portentously, mention having seen four bears all together, as he rushed down the mountain with a practically empty basket. We would have given anything to see just one and eventually had to concede defeat and follow our nervous fruit picker back down the valley, all the while scanning the hillside for activity. I have to admit that I was not overly hopeful by this stage and as I continued to survey the distant slopes, my mind was already turning to the next morning, as I had decided to bring my own vehicle, as opposed to travelling with my guide, just to allow me to stay longer if necessary. I was still looking hard, but mainly with my binoculars and I did not expect to see the tiny little dot of a bear that suddenly ambled into view. It was so far away that I almost instantly lost it and although this happened a few times, between us we were eventually able to pinpoint its exact position and enjoy a clear if extremely distant view. I would have obviously preferred a much closer encounter, but to see a bear in the wild in

most parts of Europe is usually a matter of chance and yet we had achieved it by design at our very first attempt. It certainly gave me renewed confidence for our next try and when we began the same hike the following morning, it was still dark. We did not have to wait anywhere near as long on this occasion and although I again briefly lost the bear that I spotted on the opposite side of the valley this time, my guide quickly picked it up, as well as three juvenile bears that were foraging not far from their mother. These were the four bears that the blueberry picker had stumbled across the previous day and they were thankfully close enough to just about see with your naked eye and pretty well with binoculars. That said, I was obviously keen to get closer, but you are not allowed to just approach bears and disturb



them in the national park, if anyone would even want to chase a female brown bear with three lively cubs, and we therefore needed them to approach us, which for a while was exactly what occurred, before all four disappeared entirely from view. I thought that they might have gone to ground, but given the dense vegetation it was impossible to be sure and they could certainly still have been moving beyond our vision, which prompted my guide to suggest that he continue up the trail to higher ground and hopefully a better view. Although he had very helpfully provided walkie-talkies for us to stay in touch, I did consider that I should probably have moved on with him, but then we would have had no idea if the bears changed direction and vanished back down the valley. So I maintained my position and just hoped they would emerge near me, which was sadly not the case and within a few minutes I received the news that the bears had reappeared further up the mountain and that my guide was watching all four. I rushed to join him, but just as I approached, something startled the cubs and all three dashed towards the nearest cover. It may have been the scent of another bear in the area or perhaps hikers further up the mountain that we could not see, but the young bears certainly did not linger and I arrived just in time to see their mother disappear into the same thick patch of bushes. Whilst it was incredibly frustrating to have missed the closest views of these majestic creatures, it was still a wonderful sighting and how often can anyone say they have been able to observe a family of genuinely wild brown bears in the middle of Europe? Even at hides it is extremely unusual to see cubs, principally because the food generally attracts large threatening males, and it could be that this little valley in Slovakia becomes one of the premier destinations in Europe for watching bears completely naturally. Although I was well aware that it could be a long wait, I had not given up hope of seeing them again and thought that if they did not reemerge fairly promptly, they were reasonably likely to around dusk or ideally just before for a clearer view. I therefore moved myself into a partially obscured position, where I could watch the sheltered bears without disturbing them, and settled down for what was likely to be a protracted vigil. My guide did not need to stay as well, as the bear tours have an approximate set duration and this is a national park where people can visit on their own and stay longer if they need to, which is why I had used my own vehicle that morning. That said, it still always makes sense to use a guide, as this is a massive national park and his local knowledge was essential in terms of knowing the areas where bears are likely to be observed. Without his expert assistance you could easily go months without finding a bear and unlike the awful tours in Italy the previous month, where up to twenty noisy tourists were involved, he only guides small groups. So the encounter is entirely authentic and you are watching wild animals in their natural habitat and experiencing their natural behaviour, as opposed to observing basically habituated bears in horribly artificial conditions. I had been thrilled to see so many fruiting bushes upon my arrival, which the bears would be gorging themselves at prior to hibernation, but this seasonal abundance produced its own problems and I was not helped by



a succession of blueberry and cranberry pickers, three of whom spent a long time collecting fruit well beyond the authorised trails. At one stage they got very close to the resting bears and although they moved further away when I informed them exactly where four large predators were concealed, I think their rather loud presence, they clap and call out constantly to avoid being taken by surprise, undoubtedly cost me any chance of seeing the bears before dusk. These disturbances in public reserves are always exasperating, particularly when you have dedicated so much time and effort to a single event, and the situation got even worse as the weather began to close in towards the end of the day. This was my big fear, as rain had been forecast and although I was more than prepared to try and sit it out, the rain brought with it a dense mist and within minutes I could barely see the side of the mountain, let alone the actual bushes my eyes had been trained on for the previous seven hours. With dusk rapidly approaching and no prospect of any improvement, I had no choice but to sadly abandon my watch and head back to the car, which was still a three-hour hike away or maybe longer in these challenging conditions. While I was understandably disappointed to have to admit defeat, my long vigil had not been entirely wasted, as I spent much of it watching a few distant chamois, as well a magnificent male red deer, bellowing out during what was the beginning of the rutting season. I could have still decided to have a third try the next day of course, but I was ultimately satisfied with my efforts and it was important that I research another area for future tours. Across the border in Poland back in 2018, I had scaled the Tatra Mountains by cable car in order to photograph northern chamois and alpine marmot and in Slovakia almost exactly two years later I would make a similar ascent and for exactly the same species, but this time in a battered old van that my guide had to help start. The chamois are usually relatively straightforward to see in both areas, in fact it would be difficult to imagine easier destinations at which these striking alpine specialists can be observed, and on both occasions the marmots proved to be the more difficult of the two. The unsettled weather did not help and although the sky was largely clear while we ambled the steep but short final hike up to the plateau where both species occur, the clouds soon began to gather and within a couple of hours it was raining. That would not necessarily have been a problem, as we had encountered a small herd of chamois within a few minutes and our guide had not expected the marmots to take a great deal longer to find. Unfortunately, these rotund rodents had clearly not read the script and as the rain grew heavier, it looked as if we may have missed our opportunity, particularly as our guide had already arranged our lift down and we did not have as long on the mountain as I had initially assumed. Just as I was considering how I would descend on my own, given that I was also hoping to reach Spis Castle that afternoon, or perhaps even return the next morning before flying home, I spotted two marmots sitting in typical fashion on a rock as the sun broke through again. They were quickly joined by a third and we spent fifteen minutes or so watching and photographing the undeniably sweet triumvirate before the rain returned and we decided that it was time to move on. For the record, Eurasian lynx have also been spotted amidst these peaks and I have to admit that I spent as much of my time scanning for this rare and elusive cat, as I did for the actual marmots. European ground squirrels were a different matter and my guide did not need to accompany me to the castle, as he has visited this imposing 12th century fortification on numerous occasions and informed me that it was impossible to miss the squirrel colony that has occurred there for a number of years. He was right and after I had spent a thoroughly enjoyable couple of hours with ground squirrels running all around me, I went on to explore the castle, which is hugely impressive and sits in a formidable defensive position atop a steep hill. It was actually a highly evocative way to finish what had been an engrossing short break and I would very much like to explore far more of this beautiful and historic land when time permits. As it was, my luck had almost run out in terms of being able to travel during this catastrophic pandemic, as I returned from Slovakia at 6pm on the Friday and ten hours later it was removed from the list of countries from which you did not have to self-isolate for fourteen days upon your return. As I was due to fly to Holland with my son in less than 48 hours, that latest bizarre anomaly, as per so many of the bizarre anomalies that the government of the United Kingdom has somehow blundered upon, would have meant that I was suddenly unable to travel. The walls were again drawing in, but I had so far taken advantage of the break to roam several remote European regions unconstrained, including this idyllic new site for genuinely wild brown bear, and in less than two days time I would roll the dice once more.

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	A lone animal as I departed Bratislava.
2	Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>	A solitary animal on the first hike at distance and a mother and three juvenile bears on the second.
3	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	A female and two young on the transfer to Poprad and a single male on the second bear hike.
4	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	Three individuals on the transfers to and from Poprad.
5	Northern Chamois	<i>Rupicapra rupicapra</i>	Low numbers at both national park destinations.
6	Alpine Marmot	<i>Marmota marmota</i>	Three together at the second High Tatra destination.
7	European Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus citellus</i>	A relatively large colony at Spis Castle.



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