

ITALY: FROM CHIC TO PEAK

PART TWO OF BROOK SABIN'S BLOG SERIES OF HIS 4 MONTH TRIP WITH CITROEN EUROPASS

Have you ever eaten dinner in the clouds? No, not in a plane - actually sitting in the middle of cloud with dew hitting your face? I wish I could tell you I was eating something sensational; something to match the magnificence of the moment. But it was a cold can of beans. More on this in a moment, but first how did we get there?

After driving through southern France for 3 weeks - we hit Italy. Our first stop was Milan, a city that we'd been through in a train, but never had the chance to fully explore. It is a melting pot of chic fashion and design; a lightening bolt to the senses after spending weeks meandering through small French villages.



After getting caught up in Milan's charm, we got back in our DS4 and headed for the countryside again. We decided to drive the Great Dolomite Road in northern Italy - a 140 kilometre journey through 18 jagged peaks which tower 3,000 metres in the sky.

Near the start of road, we stopped in a cute little village for the night. The main incentive for the pit stop: they had a market selling €3 pizzas! Here the locals gave me a great tip. I love photographing the sunset, and they told us of a spot where you can see the sun setting over Europe. I was skeptical at first, but eager to see if it was true.

So, we drove into the sky, thousands of metres high. We reached the peak just as the sun was setting over Austria and Switzerland. Yes, we were that high; we could see the Swiss Alps. It was probably the best sunset we'll ever see. Nobody was there; the freedom of having a car and being able to go wherever we want had never been so apparent.



We had planned to drive the Dolomite Road in a day or two - and then continue down towards Croatia. But as serendipity had it - I was about to experience the next best thing to a spiritual awakening: and it happened in a pub.

I urgently needed Wifi and was told to head to the local watering hole in the hope of finding a connection. As we pulled in, we noticed it was called “Mansion of Sabin”. Sabin being my surname.



My family's long known we'd come from Italy - but I never thought we'd stumble upon our long lost ancestors! Needless to say, we got a wifi connection and were invited to a free lunch with the owners! The family were concerned we were about to leave without experiencing the true Dolomites; and told us of an incredible hike up a mountain to a hut where you could sleep in the clouds.

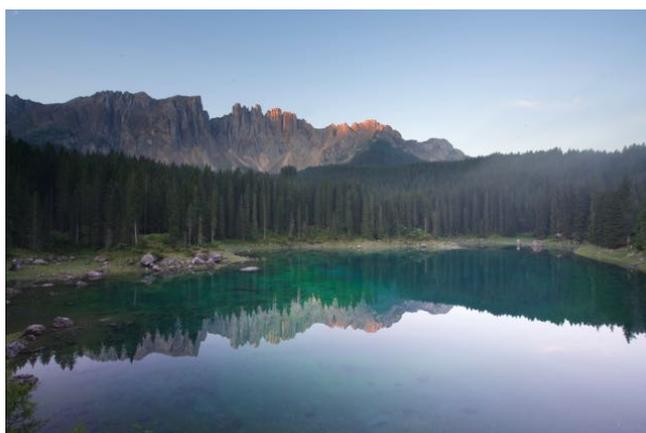
The next morning we started our ascent to the Vajolet towers. It involved a steep drive, a long walk and then an hour of rock climbing with wire ropes. If I left it there you'd think we were brave pioneering mountaineers. But the truth is: the youngest we saw scrambling up the rocks was 5, the oldest more than 80.

At the top, we were greeted with an astonishing scene - something reminiscent of a moonscape. In the middle of a crater, surrounded by soaring peaks - was a “refugio” - our hut for the night, complete with restaurant!



So returning to the beans in the clouds mentioned at the start. As night fell - so did a heavy layer of cloud. Instead of dining at the restaurant, we opted for the cheaper version: eating our stone cold legumes outside on the deck. Barely able to see each other in the thick cloud - we giggled at the surreal feeling of being wrapped in the sky, the dew so thick it felt like we were in a blanket.

Back down at ground level, we also went to see another recommendation from the “Mansion of Sabin” - the Lago di Carezza, also known as the “Rainbow Lake”. It is the clearest lake in Italy, bearing an incredible reflection of the mountain watching over it.



But we couldn't swim in it! So, we drove a couple of hours to a secluded river, named as one of the clearest waterways in the world. The "Emerald Pools" were worth the drive - it is unlike any river we've ever seen!



Next, it was off to Croatia - bustling with the last of the summer tourists. We spent three days at a National Park in Istra, on the beach, enjoying the lingering summer days and the 32c heat.

We also visited the capital Zagreb, and Saint Marks Church with its iconic patchwork roof. We ate our way around the city, on the hunt to find the best gelato!



But our best Croatian experience was yet to come. The Plitvice National Park has to be a contender for the most beautiful place on earth. Eighteen kilometres of boardwalks meander up through hundreds of waterfalls, in scenery reminiscent of the Avatar film.



Nearby, we visited the waterfall village of Rastoke. Every house in the town is built on a waterfall - 23 houses, 23 waterfalls! Given this part of the world is such a waterfall utopia, we decided to get a closer look. In a specially built kayak we paddled off the edge of dozens of waterfalls down a 5km river. The waterfall safari was easily one of the highlights of our trip so far.



Unfortunately, but for good reason, you can't swim in the waterfalls at Plitvice. However, at the Krka National Park a few hour's drive south, you can! We went early in the morning - and swam beneath the thundering waterfall before anyone else got there.



We then ventured across to the seaside city of Split. The town centre is inside a medieval palace, with its ever-busy eateries and gelato huts. We were meant to stay one night - but ended up staying five! We also caught a glimpse of the magnificent full moon as it rose over the clock tower.



Bosnia is only an hour's drive from Split, so we popped over to visit the picturesque city of Mostar; almost completely destroyed in the 1993 war. We were surprised to see many buildings still bearing the scars of the conflict.

The iconic Mostar bridge is where locals test their manhood - jumping 25 metres into the icy waters below. We also saw an Australian backpacker jump off the bridge at a cost of €25. Because he survived, he's inducted into Mostar's 'hall of fame', and can jump off the bridge free for the rest of his life!



Just south of Mostar lies the source of the Buna river, the strongest spring in Europe. It flows out from an underwater cave at forty five thousand litres per second. The spring is a highly spiritual area and alongside the spring is a Muslim Dervish (essentially like a monastery).

After Bosnia, we dotted back to the Croatian coast and ferried ourselves and the car over to the island of Korcula for a few day's of relaxation, under the very last of the summer sun. We're now plotting our course into the unknown: deep into the Balkans. Macedonia, Montenegro, Bulgaria - here we come!



BROOK SABIN IS DRIVING A 2016 DS4, ON A FOUR MONTH TRIP AROUND EUROPE