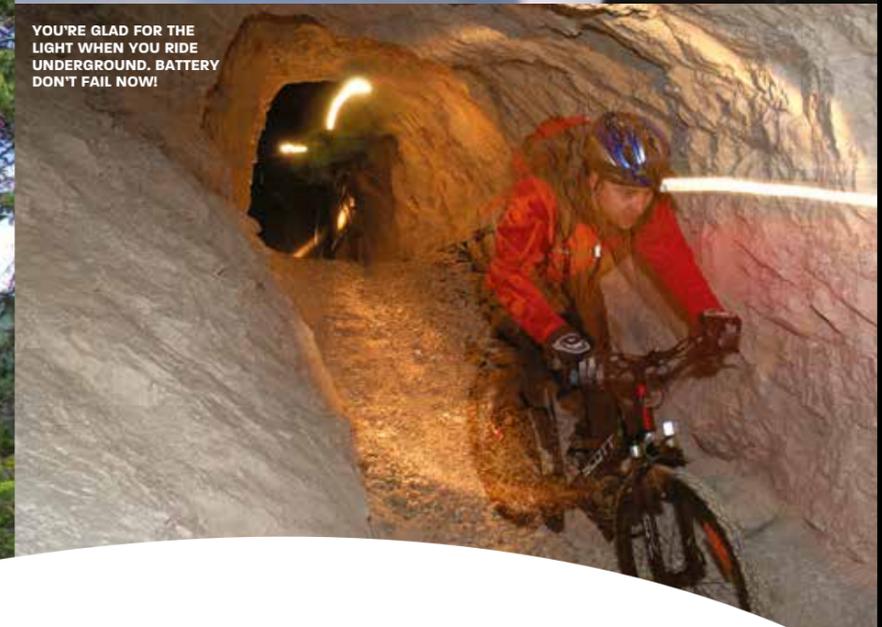




VERY PATIENT GUIDE ANEJ STRUCL SHOWS NEWTON WHERE HE CRASHED: HERE, HERE, HERE... OH AND HERE



YOU'RE GLAD FOR THE LIGHT WHEN YOU RIDE UNDERGROUND. BATTERY DON'T FAIL NOW!

SINGLETRACK IN SLOVENIA

Visit Dixi if you want to visit one of the world's original mtb parks, stay in a 500-year-old farm and ride endless natural singletrack that includes 1000km of underground adventure. It's all part of Slovenia's surprises

Sometimes it doesn't pay to get out of bed, drive to the airport, get on a plane, fly to the other side of the world, get off the plane, drive to a remote region of Slovenia and ride mountain bikes. At least, that's what I was thinking after crashing again, lying there with a corked calf and bleeding knee after misjudging a steep, rooty descent. But I am getting ahead of myself.

The story started several months ago, when it became apparent I'd make a business visit to the picturesque Wortheese region in southern Austria. Bewdy, I thought, I'll tack a couple of days riding onto the back and add another overseas experience to my small but enjoyable list.

Austria drew a blank in my research, but thanks to Google I stumbled across the very informative mtbpark.com website and the prospect of travelling across the border into the Republic of Slovenia for a ride. Promisingly, my emails were quickly

answered by Anej Strucl, who turned out to be my guide and bike repairer, as well as a very nice and patient bloke.

Between Anej, the website and the Facebook page I figured out the basics of what was on offer. Essentially, there are four things to take into account. First, there's the 10-bed Ecohotel Koros in the Koroska region, near the Austrian border, which accommodates and feeds MTB riders. Second is Mountain Bike Nomad, the guiding company that's associated with the Ecohotel and operates all across Slovenia. There's the trails, of course, and finally, underground riding.

Yes, underground riding – negotiating singletrack in an old lead mine. Closed in 1994 when it became uneconomical, it now hosts walking and riding tours that take you six kilometres from one valley to another.

The driving force behind all this is Dusan 'Dixi' Strucl, Anej's father. A mountain bike rider for 25 years, Dixi decided to try to make a living out of the sport he was

passionate about. In 1995, he traded in his job as a geographer and leased a hotel in Crna (pronounced Churna), a village in Koroska, then set up Nomad when no foreign MTB tour company showed interest in Slovenia.

He laughs when he explains it: "People say, 'Dixi, are you crazy? Who has a mountain bike hotel?' If you put 'mountain bike hotel' into the internet, there were three in Austria. Also when you put 'mountain bike park' there was maybe one in America, so there was no mountain bike parks. So from that time it was our internet site, www.mtbpark.com."

A step-change came when Dixi decided to buy a 24-hectare farm in the hills above Crna in an area known as Jamnica. Here he established the Ecohotel – so named because about half of the produce served is grown organically on the property or in the surrounding district. Dixi has arrangements with the five surrounding farms for unfettered access to their properties and the flowing singletrack that abounds in the adjacent



DIORAMA SHOWS THE MOUNTAINOUS TERRAIN. WE RODE SOMEWHERE UNDER THERE

SLOVENIA

If you think Slovenia is one of those turbulent Mid-Asian states that the Russians regularly invade and usually have names ending in 'stan', then fear not. It has been part of the Roman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian empire and was incorporated into Yugoslavia after the Second World War. It gained its independence from the crumbling communist state after a 10-day war in 1991. On a map it looks like a chicken, the feet representing

the 45km of coastline along the Adriatic Sea. The rest is green and lumpy. Forested mountains abound. It borders Austria, Hungary, Italy and Croatia. You can drive across Slovenia in four hours and little more than two million people live there. They have their own language, Slovene, which dissolves into a bunch of different dialects that can be impenetrable to people from other regions, let alone those from other countries.



JAMNICA FOREST IS LACED WITH NATURAL SINGLETRACK, SOME FAST, SOME SLOW, SOME PUKINGLY STEEP



SOMEWHERE BEHIND THERE IS A LEAD MINE AND 1000KM OF TUNNELS



ANEJ AND RIDICULOUSLY FIT NORWEGIANS POSE IN FOREGROUND, MOUNTAIN TOWERS IN THE BACKGROUND. SMALL BY SLOVENIAN STANDARDS



INTO DEATH VALLEY RODE NEWTON, FEELING LIKE DEATH



forests. But that is only an entrée. There are many more kilometres of trails in the region. Recently, he, Anej and helpers have started constructing purpose-built trails on the farm.

"We have much natural singletrack in our region," Dixi says. "These are usually walking tracks that connect villages through the forest, or were for the miners to make their way from their villages to the mine entrances. There is enough here to keep riders entertained for a week or 10 days."

We arrive at Ecohotel Koros after a beautiful drive up from the valley through coniferous forest and farmland. The 500-year-old farm is 780m above sea level. Outside, it looks a little aged, but inside, where Dixi's wife Susanna and Anej's partner Clara are in charge, everything is spotless. Anej is like his dad - thin, wiry and armed with a ready smile. He quickly runs through the plan; a warm-up ride today of maybe 30-40km exploring the Jamnica forests and singletrack. Tomorrow we will shuttle ridge-top trails further away and ride through the mine.

As Anej and I set up my Specialized Camber dual-sus hire bike, he asks me to rate my MTB riding ability out of 10: "Six-point-five to seven," I reply, and then think, "on a good day." The bike fits the bill except the TekTro Draco hydraulic brakes are reversed and cannot be flipped around. The first part of the ride is a 3.5km ascent on forest roads and two Norwegian couples with us set a blistering pace, chatting amiably all the way. Uh-oh, this could be hard. I am sweating heavily in the

mid-20s temperature by the time we reach the turn-off into the forest and a 300m technical climb to the start of the singletrack.

I follow Anej into the cool and hang on his wheel for about 100m through a couple of mud puddles and rocky sections. Then it steepens and my heart rate rips unexpectedly upwards. The Norwegians ride on by as I pant slowly upwards. This was not a hard climb and yet I feel like a Mack truck has tried to drive out of the top of my head. I can't be ill, surely?

Thankfully, the singletrack is a worthy reward for my pain. It's relatively smooth, fast and quite narrow, the loamy surface often covered in pine needles. Neither the downs nor ups are dramatic and Anej leads us along briskly. Grins tell the story at each stop.

Back at the Ecohotel I lie on the grass out the front, enjoying the sun and spectacular view across the valley, and recovering. Luna, the Strucl's one-year-old Leonberger 'puppy' (or mini-horse!) comes over, has a good sniff and then tries to ferret an energy bar from my pocket. Clever.

The Norwegians head off down the hill to explore the farm's new singletrack, but my energy is gone. It's worrying to have only ridden 20km and feel so exhausted. I retreat to my room for a snooze before dinner and hope I feel better in the morning.

Sadly, it's not to be. I spend a restless, sweaty night with a banging headache and a bad tummy. I finally snatch a few hours sleep in the wee hours, but to be honest, I have rarely felt less like riding.

We drove into the Karavanke mountain range and began our ride near a church in Plkovo. The singletrack starts almost instantly, jaggging and zagging gradually downwards. Within a minute or two I am on the ground after accidentally clamping the front brake when actually trying to add just a little trailing rear brake through a tight corner. Then comes the big one. On a steep and snotty but eminently rideable technical section I grab front, I mean rear, no front, no, shit! Fatigue, unfamiliarity and uncertainty combine to send me spearing off course.

The nose of the seat breaks as it smacks into my calf and the rear wheel flies out as the Camber tumbles down the slope. I lie there, pondering what I have done to deserve this.

Poor old Anej reassembles the broken bits and I push back up the hill and ride the descent successfully this time. Then we press on down the ridgeline into Crna without any more major incidents. The trail is entertaining but I am now extremely tentative.

Collected by Anej's mate Pauly, we head straight back up into the mountains to a place ominously called Death Valley. It earned this title in the days when a steel plant spewed various poisons into the air, killing off the vegetation. But the plant is long closed and the trees, plants and grasses are back, so much so that the early part of the trail is hard to spot. The views are spectacular, but I am fixated on the course. As the trail opens up we can see for kilometres in all directions. Mountains and valleys stretch to the horizon.



UNDERGROUND RIDING ISN'T TECHNICALLY CHALLENGING, BUT HAS ITS OWN ISSUES

"FIRST OPERATED IN 1665, THE MINE HAS 300 ENTRANCES, 20 LEVELS AND 1000KM OF TUNNELS."



PLENTY OF ROOM IN THIS TUNNEL, BUT HELMET SCRAPING IS NOT UNUSUAL IN SOME



ANEJ, CLARA, SUSANNA AND DIXI ON THE STEPS OF THE ECOHOTEL

“PEOPLE SAY, DIXI, ARE YOU CRAZY? WHO HAS A MOUNTAIN BIKE HOTEL?”



ECOHOTEL

The 500-year-old Koros Ecohotel is everything a mountain biker might want: a place to sleep, eat and rest. My room had a comfortable single bed, a toilet and shower and plenty of room to spread out my riding gear. The only downer was the lack of air-conditioning, although opening the window fixed that! Downstairs there are dining and recreation rooms, with free wireless internet. A large veranda looks out over the bike storage area and barn to a stunning valley view. Each year around 1000 riders stay at the Ecohotel, in a season that spans April to October. Beyond that, get ready for the snow!

THE COSTS

Apart from the cost of actually getting to Slovenia from Australia, spending a few days with the Strucls is a very affordable experience. In my case, accommodation was quoted at €40 for bed and breakfast per night, with another €10 for the generous dinner. Drinks are pay-as-you-go on an honour system. The Specialized Camber hire bike is €25 per day (but you can take your own bike), underground biking is €22 and the cost of a guide per day is €30 per person (minimum of three people) per day. I recommend hiring a guide because the singletrack is almost impossible to find without one!

The flow is awesome and, like yesterday, the going is pretty smooth. You could comfortably survive on a hardtail here. The sky looks threatening as we duck back into the trees and plunge downwards through a series of hairpins. In the end they get so tight and steep that even Anej elects to hike-a-bike. Given my earlier dramas, I'd taken that option much earlier...

A brief lunch stop in Crna and then it's back on the bike for the road climb up to the mine entrance. From there we will ride to Mezica in the next valley. Anej hands me a head torch like you'd use for camping and opens the heavy metal door. Cold air rushes out and wraps around my bare legs. Summer or winter, it stays a steady 10 degrees inside, with constant 80 per cent humidity. First operated in 1665, the mine has 300 entrances, 20 levels and 1000km of tunnels. We were on the fourth level at 645m above sea level.

“Outside, I must watch over everyone as the guide, but here in the mine everyone must watch over me because I am the only one who knows the way out,” Anej laughs.

Initially, the tunnel is wide and high, but soon we duck off into a more compact

research tunnel used for exploring. My helmet scrapes the roof. At one point we park the bikes and go clambering into a giant cavern and collect crystals from the floor. Later we stop and switch off our lights. Inky blackness envelopes us. I can only imagine how terrifying it must have been for miners who got lost in the labyrinth.

It takes about an hour to make the journey, the last few hundred metres completed in an ethereal fog. Appropriately, we've ridden 500m underneath where the day had started at Pikovo. Rain is pouring down when we emerge, the thunder crashing and the lightning flashing. It seems an appropriate way to finish an incident-packed day. One full of ups and downs.

As we wait for Pauly to arrive, I ponder my experience. Obviously, I'd like to have felt better and stronger, so I could have enjoyed these exciting trails much more. But I can assure you Slovenia is tremendously beautiful and the Strucls are wonderful people promoting the sport they are passionate about in a place they love.

Go and visit them if you can. I plan to make that long journey back, but healthy and with my own bike. **AMB**