

On a Lambretta pillion to Rome*

Sandor Vaci's reminiscences of an epic journey in the summer of 1959 with his friend Adrian Cave

riding a Lambretta scooter from London to Rome. They travelled at a maximum speed of 42 miles per hour, on a round trip of 2,000 miles.

*This account quotes from what I have written in *Fragments* (of memory) that can be found on my website (www.sandorpvaci.com)

This was very much an architectural expedition by us, two keen students of architecture, eager to see the real buildings that otherwise we could only study in photographs. The late fifties was an era when Bannister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture on the comparative method* was still mandatory but we were already familiar with Pevsner's *History of European Architecture*. At last modernism was beginning to break through the stranglehold of the stern Edwardian, the Senate House and Portland stone clad edifices in London. Our tutors were on both sides but we knew, of course we did, where the future lay.

The precursor to the Rome trip was the 1958 World Exhibition in Brussels to which we both went. Adrian always knew someone useful and sure enough 'the someone' was an official at the British Pavilion. I expect they met at *Ampleforth*. This person, whose name has disappeared into the fog, even put us up in his flat. 1958 was only two years after the Hungarian Revolution and being a refugee probably added a certain cachet to a lanky heavily accented student of architecture. But then I was with Adrian, so it was all right. The buildings at the World Exhibition competed for attention with their structural acrobatics and modernism. The Americans had built a drum where projections showed the Wild West whichever way you turned; the French had erected a daring cantilevered roof that, to the smirk of the competing British, was tilting over and had to be propped up. One of the best was the Cuban pavilion, which was pure Corbusier. The British had erected two buildings one of which was a folded roof affair harking back to Gothic. Adrian was not best pleased. We were sitting in the pavilion with our minder when this occurred:

The official asked a Russian over to arrange a 'confrontation' with me – the Hungarian refugee from Soviet oppression. But we were timidly polite to each other. We were in the West. (17).

At the end of our visit we were taken to see the place where Wellington was victorious, the significance of this after-glow for Adrian was lost on me having come from a country that habitually lost its battles and wars.

We were so fired up by what we had seen that the following summer we planned a more ambitious architectural adventure. Yes, definitely, we must go and see the *Unité d'habitation, Cité Radieuse*, in Marseilles. All the preparations were made. For transport we were going to use my motorbike with a sidecar, ample to carry two in comfort and our luggage. I bought the ferry tickets, arranged the insurance and - most importantly - obtained visas to enter France and Italy. As a stateless person I needed them whenever I crossed a border. The visas were stamped into my Travel Document, I only became the owner of a passport on becoming a British Subject several years

later. The night before our departure I went to bed excited by what lay ahead but woke to find that:

at the last minute we were forced to transfer to Adrian's rather beaten up Lambretta scooter as our intended mode of travel, my Matchless 500cc motorcycle with a sidecar, was stolen the night before departure. We rattled around London arranging the insurance as I sat on the pillion leaning over at traffic lights with a screwdriver to put the gear back to first in the opened up gearbox (75).



We had to improvise in a hurry on how to get a tent, pots and pans, sleeping bags, all our clothes, sketch books onto a two-seat scooter. The rear luggage rack was extended with a vegetable crate to accommodate all the paraphernalia and support the rucksack on my back (I cannot think what the boxy item was between Adrian and me in the picture). Fortunately the clever design of the Lambretta had a platform so the duffel bag containing the tent nestled between the legs of whoever was in the front seat. We just made it to Dover, the ferry, a retired minesweeper, sailed to Calais; we were in France, on our way.

We travelled at our leisurely pace on the still pre-auto route roads that were lined by endless rows of poplars with their shimmering leaves forming a triumphal procession for us intrepid travellers. It all seemed perfect but as we tried to round Paris we noticed that the ride was getting rather bumpy when in fact the road was smooth. We stopped to investigate, unloaded the poor machine, laid it on its side like a pig waiting for the knife, to reveal that the wheel hub no longer held the bolts. Literally the rear wheel was coming off. The scooter was of course never designed for our weight and who knows

what mistreatment it suffered before Adrian bought it second hand. We somehow managed to reach

...a village by the Forêt de Fontainebleau not far from Paris. The local mechanic could not get a hub-replacement any time soon so, I have been admiring French ingenuity ever since, he placed the aluminium hub in his lathe and drilled new bolts into it. This though meant a stop in the forest overnight and a meal beforehand in the town where, luckily, there were agreeable English girls to flirt with. After eating the most basic nosh and drinking the cheapest wine we somehow made our way to the forest to kip down under the swaying trees. Centuries of fallen leaves made the ground beautifully soft. Against the black sky the branches with their gently whooshing leaves became visiting ghosts but the scented air, and the plonk, put us to sleep in the primeval, natal calmness of the forest. Next day we were all ready to go but that night has stayed with me longing, always, to get back to nature's cradling in the soothing darkness. (75)

Adrian sportingly paid for the repair. We must have carried pound notes, which we exchanged. In 1959 sterling was still king and England was absolute top dog, being the only victorious country amongst the west European nations (yes, the French were generously later included). After our night in the forest we carried on south. We must have been quite a sight with me perching awkwardly behind Adrian, some of our kit dangling in the rear, wearing only caps and seemingly in no hurry as our speed was limited to what a 125cc two stroke engine could manage. Having said that, the engine never gave up on us during the whole journey. Occasionally we had to clean the spark plug of oil but that was it. Every time a British registered car passed the driver waved to us, whether that was to acknowledge a fellow countryman or register a hilarious sight did not bother us. We waved back with condescending smiles, we knew who the real heroes of the roads were!

The trip to Marseille at about 500 miles included a few stops, 200 miles a day was pretty good going. At last we arrived, weaving through the noise and bustle of the Mediterranean city towards the icon that we so admired from afar, now it was there for real. The megalith towered over us. The building had only been completed seven years before and was very much as Corbusier designed it. The structure was raised off the ground on massive but well shaped concrete columns ostensibly to allow air circulation underneath but one suspects to emphasize the volume, Corbusier had already lifted a building off the ground at Villa Savoye. When I visited it again some years later odd bits started to fill up the space spoiling the powerful effect. One of the great innovations was the two-story apartment lay-out, in effect a house within a block, that was widely copied ever after (in London the closest is the estate at Roehampton). Somehow we had access to the building and made our way to the roof. The view of Marseille under the azure sky was stunning. The roof itself was a garden of concrete sculptures in the form of ventilation shafts, lift motor rooms and anything else that Corbusier wanted to shape. Architecture and art fused. The exposed concrete here in the clean air and southern brightness came into its element (but later never comfortably transferred to London's soot-laden atmosphere and grey light). The whole experience was immediately hugely exciting.

Then we made our way down to the shopping street midway up the building. The theory was that this building within itself would cater for all the

inhabitants' needs. But we found that half the shops were empty with hardly anyone around. What Corbusier did not appreciate that shopping was more than just buying things, For the Marseillais it was the busy invigorating experience of walking down Marseille's streets, meeting friends, coming across the unexpected. How could a rather dingy poorly lit internal corridor compete with that? We were critical admirers. *Unité d'habitation* made all discomforts on the scooter worth while, we had an architectural experience of the visual and intellectual at its most fulfilling.

On we travelled for more but the next stop could not have been more different, St Tropez, aka Brigitte Bardot. Our lack of material comforts and meagre finances could not stand in the way of our sense of adventure. My over-riding memory of the whole trip was that we were always hungry. Of course we ate but never enough for young strained bodies. Outside town we found a camping site where we set up our tent. There was no particular plan to it - you just set down where there was spare space. The facilities amounted to a few loos and sinks. One afternoon there was an almighty row between a Frenchman and a German. The German was returning from the coast to his patch finding that a Frenchman taken his space. Adrian who had good French understood that the Frenchman shouted, this is France and a German only fourteen years after the war should know his place. Whereupon the German, boiling with indignation hooked up his caravan and stormed out of the camp. Wartime sentiments lingered on. Something that puzzled us was why the Dutch women in the middle of the day on their holiday would vigorously do their laundry. Was this the Dutch mania for cleanliness gone mad?

Next day we made our way to the sandy beach where we stripped down to our swimming trunks, two freckled pale skins in the blazing sunshine. One thing was certain: we did not add an ounce of chic to the place. The sea was inviting, the breeze propelled the sailing boats in the distance. We, no it must have been Adrian who never had any inhibition talking to strangers, struck up a conversation with an American woman who was holidaying with her daughter. He noted, this must have been a clever ploy, that there were sailing boats for hire and he knew how to handle them. This was the first I ever heard of this skill but what an initiative. Sure enough the American lady offered to pay for the hire and so the four of us went to sea. Adrian handled the sail, steered the boat, we did not capsize, we admired the views, what better afternoon. At the end two roasted architects disembarked and thanked the ladies who in turn thanked us for taking them out, a fair deal. I would have remembered the daughter if she had been other than plain. The sunburn hurt for days. We drove back to the camp site after dark but to keep the front light going one had to keep a hand on it and drive with the other. That night I was driving, we came to a roundabout where I needed both hands to change gear, in an instant all was black, I could not see and went straight landing in a ditch. Adrian shouted '*Are you all right?*' This was the only time I heard him truly worried. Yes, we were a little bruised but hardy. We put the Lambretta back on its wheels and were on our way again.

Next morning not too early, that was not our style, we packed up the groaning Lambretta to set off again. Soon we were motoring along the *Promenade des Anglais* in Nice, just to remind everyone that the English really made the Riviera the destination for a sun filled vacation in the nineteenth century (there is a statue of Lord Broughton in Cannes). We

stopped though in the much less grand town of Menton where my mother and stepfather went every summer. Met them to be fed, amply fed. The food is my only memory of our stay of just a few hours. Next we crossed into Italy and within a day reached Florence, which was as far as we planned to go.

My first memory of Florence is riding up to *San Miniato* sitting on the steps below the Basilica to look from this elevated position over the town, the focal point of the Dome, the Ponte Vecchio, the gently flowing Arno river, church towers rising amongst the myriad terracotta covered roofs. Travelling in the late fifties was before mass tourism, there were people but not in throngs. Then it was still the visits by connoisseurs and that of course included us! Virtually everything was accessible and for not that much. Next we went in search of Michael Angelo finding his twisted figures in their uncomfortable postures under the imperious, brooding Lorenzo di Medici, the muscular female with stuck-on unappealing breasts and the male peering with suspicion from behind his own back. We stared up at David, then of course still the original, struck by his balance but ready to explode. The rusticated bases of palazzos in huge rough stone blocks were already familiar for me from Budapest except that these were the originals! These palazzos were fortresses within the city. It was all also so elevating and humbling, renaissance genius wherever one looked.

At this point I struggle digging further into my memory trying to find where we camped, did we visit the Uffizzi, what other places were explored, indeed how long did we stay. But sadly, painfully, my friend Adrian is no longer here to help out with my lapses. We did not keep a diary, did not have a camera, though I mentioned a sketchbook in the luggage no sketches have survived because we were too busy just travelling. The photo of us on the scooter was taken by someone else, but I will come to that later. With Adrian's passing a whole swathe of my life cannot be brought back as the person who could recall it is gone. The loss of shared memories is a loss of oneself.

We may have gone to Sienna but the image of the town perhaps comes back from a later visit. Whether in Florence or Sienna we made the insane decision to go further, much further than planned, to Rome! By that time we travelled about eight hundred miles and although the top speed of the Lambretta was 42 miles our average was about 14 so we had sat on the pillions for almost three entire 24 hour days! My girlfriend at the time, Kati K, passed me a note before we left saying she was going to be in Rome just when we were also in Italy and would stay at such and such an address. I wanted to see her dark flirty eyes and Adrian game as ever said 'Yes, *lets go*'. This is where the 14.5 miles per hour average speed could be calculated as on that day we sat on the Lambretta for twelve solid hours, that length of time has remained in some cavity within my mind.

Of course it was hugely worth it though not in fulfilling my initial aim. Exhausted in the summer heat we arrived in Rome late at night, the looming mass of the Coliseum came into view against the black sky, part dismantled for its stone but hugely monumental. Sir Bannister Fletcher would have applauded our efforts, what was discomfort and sweat when you could see this. We stopped outside a trattoria and unwound our limbs getting off the scooter with stiff legs, arms and aching bottoms. The engine was turned off. We had made it! From the trattoria terrace we could take in the architecture while eating the cheapest pasta and drinking the cheapest plonk, only

interrupted by having to swat a few mosquitoes. But all that did not matter, we were in Rome where all roads led! After the meal the scooter would not start, like an exhausted horse it just laid down, I have had enough. I pushed the Lambretta with Adrian on it, he would let the clutch out but no joy the pistons gurgled. Out came the oil-sodden spark plug, which we cleaned with sand paper and eventually we got the thing going, found a crummy hotel to recover. Next evening went to Kati's address. The landlady was very sorry – the girl had gone out on a date. We missed each other, a pity but not huge. Once we explored Rome my missed date became an irrelevance.

Our first task was to find affordable accommodation. Adrian's Ampleforth background came in handy again. He found a place where pilgrims stayed. This was the refectory of a monastery converted into minute cubicles without tops, a bed that just about fitted pilgrims who had shrunk a little after their long tracks on foot; tiny table and chair, some hooks. It was so tight that I could not lay down straight on the bed with my six foot one and half inch. And of course you could hear everything. In every other way it was perfect for us and at last we did not have to share a room. After rudimentary washing and eating we made our way to St Peter's with its square guiding one on with its elegant monumentality; Mussolini never took the hint that multiplying columns needs architectural finesse; then on entering the Basilica we were immediately struck by the *Piéta*, I, a mere mortal, cannot add anything to what it conveyed. The structure of the canopy over the altar by contrast seemed an overbearing statement.

Next day it was the turn of what remained of classical Rome, lots, the bronze statue of *Romulus and Remus*, aqueducts, flat Roman bricks and concrete. The serious imperia relieved only by the bonhomie of the baroque elsewhere. In between we ate, drank, sat on steps, exchanged self-important opinions. I appreciated what this capital of Catholicism meant for Adrian. At every step I admired, even envied, his absolute faith, which never ever came between us.

It was time to travel back up north.

On our way back we stopped in Milan to visit the Lambretta factory to tell them what great machines they produced, 'Look this beaten-up sample took us all the way from London to Rome! They nodded but then said Lambrettas have been to the North Pole, well almost, so our trip was nothing out of the ordinary. Us, two self-important students of architecture, rather belittled the Italian attempt at the Gothic of Milan cathedral. We visited the Last Supper, then still in its unrestored state and with hardly any queues or security. Next we tackled the climb up the Alps. In first gear we made our way up the steeply sloping road passing expensive cars whose engines boiled over. We, two scruffy architects, just carried on to the top with no little satisfaction. (76)

I almost forgot that I also obtained a Swiss visa so we could make our way through to the French Alps. Having shamed the cars with our two stroke it was time to settle down for the night in the corner of a clove field. By this time we had been together, literally on top of each other, for weeks, and we started arguing about something that was probably of little importance but one of us had to be right. We simply irritated each other or more probably it was me who irritated Adrian, who had a much sweeter nature. Adrian challenged, 'OK, let's have a wrestling match to decide who is right!' We stripped off our tops tested our muscles against each other, rolling about. But it was a rather

unequal contest in the end, I was bigger and wrestled at school. I pinned Adrian down onto the clover and that was it. We got up shook hands and having let off steam felt a lot better for it. Just as we were getting our breath back the farmer turned up yelling. We ruined about two square metres of a carefully tended Swiss clove field, '*Off with you.*' Well whatever he said in Switzy Deutch we got the meaning. There was nothing to it but pack and kip down elsewhere.

There was of course a very serious reason for going up the Alps, that is to the French Alps, Marie. On our way back from the Brussels World Fair the year before, we embarked in Ostend onto the minesweeper to take us over the Channel back to England. The weather was good, people were milling around. There was nothing much to do so Adrian ever in a good mood said, '*Let us see who can chat up a girl first!*' It was no contest, within minutes he was engaging a rather serious-looking French girl in conversation. I did not even try. She was an au pair returning from a break in France. Marie became a regular item at Adrian's numerous parties in Pimlico so it was only to be expected that he would visit her the following year.

Eventually we arrived at Marie's house, her parents were welcoming and hey, she had a young pretty sister called Therese. In the evening we went out, Marie drove and it seemed luckily I was on the backseat with Thérèse sitting next to me in the dark. I tried to hold her hand but she pulled it away and that was the instant end of a hoped for romance. At least a photo of us standing rather awkwardly in front of their chalet has survived. The parents must have taken it and us on the scooter.



We made our way back to England without anything of interest to report.

Our total spend on the whole trip was: Adrian £ 42, Alex £ 38. The difference was getting the hub repaired at Fontainebleau. But what memories, we came back more complete, definitely thinner and a lot wiser.

This is a rough plot of our journey in the summer of 1959.

