

↳ Gesäuse National Park, Austria



# RANGE ROVERS

Trek & Mountain hits the road in an Opus camper to hike in lesser-visited mountain ranges in Slovenia, Austria, Germany and France...

WORDS & PICTURES: AMANDA TRAVIS, CHRIS KEMPSTER



**W**e're lucky enough to live in the beautiful French Alps. Being based near Chamonix not only lets us head into the mountains whenever we want, be it the Fiz mountains in our backyard or the Mont Blanc massif only minutes away, but it also gives us easy access to the rest of Europe. While it's hard to leave our beloved mountains during the short few months of summer, the mountaineering season seems to last longer these days with the cooler autumn weather making for better conditions than the scorching hot mid-summer days that seem to bring more and more rockfall, gaping crevasses, and all-around less than ideal conditions. So, when we were offered the chance to use an Opus camper, we decided to spend July travelling around Europe, combining a bit of work, cultural exploration, and some day hikes.

Unsure of how our two new rescue dogs would cope with travel, the camper provided a source of consistency, and also gave us a lot of flexibility to move around without booking ahead of time, cook meals 'at home,' and giving us a base to work out of while on the road that a regular camping set-up just couldn't provide. We packed up and headed off to Bolzano in the Dolomites with a loose plan to head down Italy and over to mainland Greece but, after one short hike, we decided that the heat would be too extreme and changed our route. The night before we left, a severe thunderstorm rolled through. The sky was lit up in continuous bursts, and there was a constant rumble of thunder – we didn't know then that this would set the tone for the remainder of our trip...

### THREE-HEADED PEAK

We arrived to Triglav National Park in Slovenia with the summit of Triglav, Slovenia's highest peak at 2,864m, hiding mysteriously behind the clouds. We set up

the Opus at Camp Zlatorog Bohinj, a lovely campground nestled among the trees of the village of Ukanc and on the shores of Lake Bohinj, Slovenia's largest natural lake. There was no reservation system and we were invited to set up wherever suited us best, with a variety of electric/non-electric zones to choose from. We were lucky enough to find a spot right along the shore of the lake, just as the previous campers were leaving... and with that, we had our base sorted for the remainder of our time in the Julian Alps. It proved to be an ideal location as we didn't have to drive anywhere. A ferry/tourist boat ran regularly between the campground and Ribčev Laz, a nearby town that had a shop with all the supplies that we needed for our stay, and some nice cafés that we enjoyed while we waited to return. The boat even welcomed our two dogs onboard. Our campsite was also located only steps away from the Vogel cable car which takes you directly into the mountains, cutting out almost 1,000m of ascent. Our first day was a variable mix of cloud, sun, and rain. It became apparent

that we'd be best to take advantage of the sun whenever it made an appearance, and so, before doing any hiking, we decided to spend one relaxing day on the lake. We rented a rowboat from the on-site kiosk and familiarised ourselves with Lake Bohinj and the surrounding peaks. With no motorised vehicles permitted on the lake (the ferry is electric), it was a great way to really absorb the calming energy that being in nature provides.

As a multi-week road trip, we still had to continue working, so we decided to use the forecasted rainy days to do so. But with no true good weather days in sight, we eventually felt that we needed to head into the mountains, regardless of the weather. We took the cable car to the top at over 1,500m. The area, which boasts a stunning ski resort in winter, had transformed into a summer paradise, with green pastures full of grazing cattle (you can buy the cheese that has been made at the pasture), herds of sheep, and (once away from the main ski resort) a variety of wild animals including chamois and even the odd brown bear who call the area home. We walked up one of the pistes to the viewpoint at Orlove Glave, marked by a cross and containing a bell that is said to make all of your dreams come true if you ring it – time will tell. There is the

possibility to take a chairlift to Orlove Glave and, while it only cuts out about 30 minutes of walking, I might be tempted to take it next time as it gets you away from the resort quicker.

After taking in the views, we made our way back down the short rocky path from the viewpoint and carried on up the piste towards Šija, a 1,880m peak and our first real objective of the day. It was raining heavily at this point, with no suggestion of a break in sight. The next section of the hike began to feel slightly wilder, though you could still see glimpses of a lift that we were loosely following. We soon turned off the piste, and were now following a nice rocky mountain trail that weaved through the dwarf conifers. Eventually, we came out onto the piste again and, careful of our footing over the loose rock that covered the last steep section of the piste, we made our way to the top. This was the last that we saw of the ski lifts and from this point, we had the mountains to ourselves, aside from a couple of local hikers. It was here that the rain stopped and the clouds began to break.

A short descent brought us to the base of Šija and also to the place where the path diverged toward Vogel. The final ascent up Šija was steep and rocky and probably took about 20 minutes. We were surprised

to see sheep grazing on a steep ridge that led to Rodica (1,964m). The views from the summit were superb with views of the nearby Vogel (1,922m) and farther in the distance, the still hidden Triglav. After a drink and a snack, it was time to make a decision – head back down or carry on to Vogel? With storms forecasted, and dark clouds rolling in, we decided not to push our luck and headed down rather than hike the 1 hour 40 minutes (as per the sign) to the summit. Regrettably, as we finally reached the cable car, the sun emerged in full force and hordes of tourists and hikers alike ascended the cable car. Disappointed to have not carried on, we rode down – the only passengers heading down. Unfortunately, it was time to move on to Austria, Triglav having never revealed itself to us!

### HIDDEN GEM

The great thing about a road trip of this sort is the flexibility it provides, and with that we found ourselves stopping in places that we might otherwise not think of. One of these places was Gesäuse National Park in Austria. We chose it simply by looking at a green dot on the map, and then deciding to head in that direction, though in hindsight, I'm surprised that I hadn't heard of it prior, with river sports along

the Enns, hiking trails, and the many climbing routes that the limestone rock offers. We stopped by the Park Information centre to purchase a map, and then later drove to Admont and spoke to the chap (a climber himself) at the Tourist Information centre. With no cable cars in the park, he told us that they strive to bring in tourism while still maintaining the authenticity of the area – and I'd say they've been quite successful at this. Access to the rock faces has been well thought out from an ecological standpoint and the start of the routes marked on the map, making them easy to find. In keeping with the original nature of the climbing routes, many have only belay stations or perhaps some sensibly placed bolts, but in no way resemble a climbing gym. He showed us some routes in one of the guidebooks, some of them reaching 600m in length.

The campsite lies within the boundaries of the park and, like Triglav National Park, there is no reservation system. We turned up while the office was closed (they only open for a couple of hours a day) so we found a spot, plugged in the camper and got ourselves set up, registering later on. The campground, Campingplatz Forstgarten, was the only campground in the National Park and a great place



“We especially enjoyed this one, even sharing some schnapps with a park ranger who had stopped by to check the wood supply.”

→ to base ourselves. The lack of lifts meant that we saw a lot of outdoors lovers coming and going, rather than the flood of tourists that you get in some places, which made for a really relaxed atmosphere amongst like-minded individuals. People had come, mostly from nearby, to hike, climb and kayak. The fire pits were social and we even cooked a couple of meals over the hot coals, the real bonus being that the park supplied free firewood. Just down from the campsite, another fire pit had been built beside the Enns river, again with a stocked wood shed. We especially enjoyed this one, even sharing some schnapps with a park ranger who had stopped by to check the wood supply.

As per our usual luck throughout this trip, storms were forecasted, once again limiting us. We did manage a couple of enjoyable hikes though, if only half days, and both starting right from the campground. Our first hike was up to the Haindlkarhütte lodge situated at 1,121m. A short road walk from our campsite brought us to the beginning of the trail, and we began weaving up through the trees. Occasionally, the path would cross an open rocky area or stream, where we were teased with glimpses of peaks across the valley. Farther up, the landscape opened up and we were treated to views of the limestone walls that take climbers to the summits of Planspitze, Hochtor and the rest of the peaks in the Hochtor range. A rocky trail took us past boulders, scree slopes and eventually to the Haindlkarhütte, beautifully situated, perched on a hilltop, with the Hochtor range towering above. We sat and enjoyed a pint and a coffee while discussing the different climbing routes with a nice young man who worked for the local mountain rescue team, then discussed the rocks and formation of the area with a park ranger who was also a geologist, and gave geology based guided tours of the area. We walked a short way above the hut but, with the weather moving in, soon retreated, and returned down the same path we had ascended.

The weather was set fair for the following morning, so we decided on a quick sortie up the other side of the valley, where the peak Buchstein (2224m) dominates the skyline. A steep, two-hour walk brought us to the



→ A perfect day on Lake Bohinj, Julian Alps



→ Hiking back from the Haindlkarhütte lodge



→ Home from home: kicking back outside the Opus camper



Hiking in the Julian Alps

While the weather didn't quite work in our favour, I couldn't be happier with the places that we visited, albeit just a taster – we'll definitely return for some more hiking..”

knew that we were likely to run into an ibex (or 12 as we once counted). Sure enough, part way up, one sat, appearing to pose for us as we grabbed a photo – a magnificent creature indeed! Eventually the trail split, where we decided to take the high route which has a couple of ladders and a few areas that are protected by cables. The lake, at 1,945m, provided the same serenity that it usually does, void of any other hikers (though we'd passed a couple of runners on the way up). The way back took was a slightly more exposed ridge, again protected by the odd cable. Having been away from the area for several weeks, it felt great to be home and roaming in our vast backyard! So, with that, we headed out, packed up the camper, and drove home.

While the weather didn't quite work in our favour, I couldn't be happier with the places that we visited, albeit just a taster – we'll definitely return for some more hiking, and perhaps the odd bit of climbing. But for now, we're back home, with a new appreciation for some of the lesser visited places in Europe, as well as for the place we call home. We may not have accomplished all the hiking we set out to do, but we certainly had a chance to reset, bond with our pups, and try our hand in caravanning (we've already started looking to purchase one!). **T&M**

➔ Buchsteinhaus hut that gave us spectacular views of the whole valley. From here you can continue to the summit of Buchstein, however some crags nearby caught our eye and we spent an enjoyable hour scrambling on steep terrain to the highest of these gendarmes.

**BOHEMIAN FOREST**

We headed off to the Bohemian Forest that straddles the German/Czech border. Thunderstorms meant that the open summits of the highest peaks (which we'd hoped to climb) were not a great option. We spent a few days doing nearby walks through the forest, hoping the forecast would change, but soon decided to head for the only area with a clear forecast within striking distance – and that just so happened to be back in the Alps. Not quite ready to return home, we set up camp at Plaine Joux just down the valley from Chamonix, and high up the

mountain near the town of Plateau d'Assy. The area is a small ski resort in winter, but allows for camping in the summer – a great base for taking advantage of the many hiking trails in the area. Eager to squeeze in one last hike, we decided to hike to Lac Pormenaz in the Passy National Nature Reserve (the dogs had to sit this one out). The trail heads past Lac Vert, a beautiful emerald lake as the name suggests. We'd done this hike many times, at different times of the year, once even arriving to the summit in time for the lunar eclipse, but it's a hike that continues to beckon to us. We headed up the track that takes you past some small clusters of chalets and eventually arrives in a beautiful valley, with waterfalls running into the river that carves through the middle. A marmot lay sunbathing on a rock as we crossed the bridge to the other side of the river. From here, a steep climb marks the entrance to the nature reserve and we



View of Buchstein (2224m) in Austria

**THE KNOWLEDGE**

ALPINE ROAD TRIP: What you need to know before you go



View of the Julian Alps, Slovenia

**WHEN TO GO:** Hiking in the Alps is possible from June through to October, with some snow possible in the high passes at the beginning and the end of the season. July and August are the busiest times and if camping/caravanning it's worth booking ahead to reserve your pitch.

**HOW TO GET THERE:** We picked up our Opus Camper from the UK and drove down through Belgium, France and Italy before arriving in our first destination, Triglav National Park in Slovenia. From here we diverted into Hungary and the Czech Republic before settling in Gasause National Park in Austria. The Bohemian Forest was next and then we headed across Switzerland back to France and the Fiz Mountains for the last leg of our journey.

**WHERE TO STAY:** We stayed exclusively in campsites that accepted campervans as well as tents, and during the time we travelled we just turned up and took our choice of available pitches. The

campsite in Slovenia was the Camp Zlatorog Bohinj on Lake Bohinj (www.bohinj-info.com). You can choose where to pitch your tent or campervan with lakeside spots in demand. There's only one campsite in the Gasause national park, and this is a small and friendly site full of outdoor enthusiasts. There's free firewood for the multiple firepits available (including one by the river), so barbecues are a regular occurrence.

More info here: www.nationalpark.co.at/en

**HOW HARD** There's a real variety of walks, scrambles and climbs in the areas we visited, from summit hikes to the top of Mt Triglav to gentler mountain walks further down the mountain. The Gasause park is well known for its vertical limestone walls that rise 600m above the valley below, and provides superb

multi-pitch climbing at a variety of grades.

**MORE INFO** To find out more about the AIR Opus camper we travelled in, go to [www.opuscamper.com](http://www.opuscamper.com). For Triglav National Park, go to [www.triglavnationalpark.com](http://www.triglavnationalpark.com) and for Gasause National Park go to [www.gasausenationalpark.com](http://www.gasausenationalpark.com). For info on the Fiz Mountains, go to [www.visitchamonix.com](http://www.visitchamonix.com)



Two furry fans of the Air Opus