I pride myself on reading between the lines. But apparently I’m not as good at reading direct statements. I’m not sure how else to explain that when a tour advertises itself as a “wine and bike tour” instead of a “bike and wine tour,” I should have realized that the emphasis was going to be a bit different than your average European cycling trip. Even so, it was easy to believe that though this trip would take us to Hungary, which is a little off the usual cycling tour radar, it would still be like many other European cycling sojourns, with plenty of miles, long days in the saddle, and hills. Besides, we booked it through the U.S.-based Bike Tours Direct, and the company’s owner, Jim Johnson, would be on the tour too.

Other clues led me astray. After arriving in Budapest, I met 28-year-old guide Gábor Závodi, the owner of Vinociped and an uber-fit young guy with a master’s degree in economics. His 27-year-old sweetheart, Zsophia Fodor, the other guide for our group of 20 North American travelers, was also trim and strong. No academic slouch either, she was close to completing her doctorate degree in physics. Even so, my assumptions about what kind of trip this would be turned out to be misdirected.

What I discovered is that if you want to go to Europe to rack up the miles, push yourself to the limit, and drink nothing but water, you should pick a different trip. If, however, you think you’ve done enough of those miles-for-the-sake-of-miles trips, maybe you’re ready for something a little mellower. That is exactly what this trip turned out to be. No, that’s wrong. Mellow isn’t quite the word. Let’s say intensely laid back but with whatever the equivalent Hungarian expression of joie de vivre might be. This is a trip that lives large, with gusto.

On Vinociped’s nine-day Hungarian tour of the area north of Lake Balaton, there was no emphasis on speed. No centuries to knock off. No crack-of-dawn starts. No fill-you-up-on-carrot-sticks-and-apples mentality. In fact, one of our fellow travelers, a 73-year old Californian named John Ryan (who swore he hadn’t ridden a bike in over 15 years), said, “Now, if you would just skip the cycling, you’d have a pretty good trip.” His view got a lot of laughs and was certainly not representative of the group. Most of us were serious recreational cyclists. Nor would we have been content — like John was — to spend so much time riding in the van. But it was the kind of trip that anyone, at pretty much any level, could take on.

There are a few more things to consider, because for a trip like this you need to think in different terms. Let’s start with the two staples of a decent day in Hungary — pork and pálinka. Pálinka is a way to fortify yourself before breakfast. Pálinka is lovely for lunch. Pálinka is also a great start to dinner and does double-duty as a nightcap. Pálinka, at 40 to 50 percent alcohol, is a uniquely Hungarian brandy, usually distilled from plums or apricots.

To be fair, we weren’t served pálinka at breakfast on this trip. However, we met a number of Hungarians who swore it was the only way to start the day. I can attest that there is definitely a different focus on one’s cycling after a hefty shot or two of this brandy in the midday August heat — especially after eating a
We cruised through villages made up of families with tractors in their drive-ways, past fields of golden corn, and tuff- lined gardens stuffed with fat peppers and spiny figs. Women still wore aprons here. One could only wish they could convince them to wear Speedos whilst cycling. It’s hard to believe some of the azárkos 40 év (the accrued 40 years) of the communist regime, things have pro-gressed very quickly.

At the end of the day, I wrote in my journal, “Today was nearly perfect.” I couldn’t find anything to indicate why I didn’t pronounce it complete perfection. Perhaps it was only my way of tempting fate with such a declaration.

There was no doubt that we had officially left the easy days of rolling countryside behind us. These were not extreme hills by any stretch, but for this West Coast Canadian, the heat added a new dimension. I amused myself last grind by trying to count the salty tidelines on my gloves, legs, and arms. Soon enough, the road changed to a dusty track. We entered Gergely Wine Cellar, run by yet another young entrepreneur.

A few of us stepped around the old dog and saw Seabo led us into the cool cellar. The lid came off the huge trough-like roasting dish. It revealed racks of wild pig, gar- gantuan ham hocks, potatoes, red peppers, carrots, onions, and peas basting and min- ging to create a savory blend of pork: fat heaven.

When you’re not head-down and going full-out, a few winks.

Hungary’s quiet roadways.

Hungary’s quiet roadways.

Hungary’s quiet roadways.

Hungary’s quiet roadways.

Hungary’s quiet roadways.

Hungary’s quiet roadways.

Hungary’s quiet roadways.

Hungary’s quiet roadways.

Hungary’s quiet roadways.

Hungary’s quiet roadways.

Hungary’s quiet roadways.

Hungary’s quiet roadways.
Listed below are the bicycle tour companies that advertise in Adventure Cyclist. Besides supporting this magazine and Adventure Cycling Association with advertising dollars, they’re willing to invest money to be seen by Adventure Cyclist readers. We can’t necessarily vouch for them, but feel their support makes them worthy of highlighting here. A comprehensive listing of all bike tour operators we know of is available online at www.adventurecycling.org/cyp.

Bicycle Tour Operators / Advertisers

Adventure Cycling Association

Adventure South
www.advsouth.co.nz (866) 479-9827.

America By Bicycle
www.abbike.com (888) 797-7057.

Around Wisconsin Bicycle Tours
aroundwisbike.com (920) 427-6086.

Bike on Tours
www.bikeontours.on.ca.

Bike Tours Direct
www.biketoursdirect.com (877) 492-2423.

Blue Marble Travel
bluemarble.ca (215) 923-3788.

Bubba’s Pampered Pedalers

Carolina Tailwinds
www.carolinatailwinds.com (888) 251-3206.

Cascade Huts
www.cascadehuts.com (971) 322-3638.

Charleston Bicycle Tours
charlestonbicycletours.com (800) 408-1830.

Christian Adventures
www.christianadventures.org, (866) 796-4453.

Classic Adventures
www.classicadventures.com (800) 777-8090.

CrossRoads
www.crossroadsadventures.com (800) 245-2463.

Cycle America

Cycle Canada
www.cyclecanada.com (866) 269-3813.

Cycle Macedonia

Cycling Escapes
www.cyclingescapes.com (714) 287-4091.

Dakota Bike Tours
www.dakotaorganizers.com (605) 359-5672.

Discover Vietnam
www.discovervietnam.com (800) 613-0390.

Experience Plus!
www.experienceplus.com (800) 680-4265.

Freewheeling Adventures
www.freewheeling.ca (800) 672-0775.

Gerhard’s Bicycle Odysseys
since1974.com (800) 366-2402.

Great Explorations
www.great-explorations.com (800) 242-1825.

Historical Trails Cycling

Independent Tourist
www.independenttourist.com (888) 269-3813.

International Bike Tours
biketours.com (800) 777-8090.

International Selkirk Loop
www.selkirkloop.org/wacaind, (866) 823-2626.

Iron Donkey
www.ironredonkey.com +44 2890 813200.

Island Cycle Tours
www.islandcycletours.com +1 (800) 622-0126.

Leaf Cycle Holidays
www.leafcyclingholidays.com +44 (0)1372 383199.

Links Bike Tours

Mountainside Bike Tours
www.mdmountainside.com (800) 425-2067.

Otto Europabiking
www.europabiking.com +49 (0) 9224 923735.

PAC Tour
pactour.com (262) 736-2453.

Pedal & Sea Adventures

Pac N Pits
pacsparadise.com, (610) 317-9611.

Sicilando
www.sicilando.com (800) 881-0484.

Senior Cycling Tours
www.seniorycycling.com (540) 668-6307.

Sockeye Cycle Co.
www.sockeyecycles.com (877) 292-4154.

Timberline Adventures
www.timberlinebiketours.com (800) 417-2453.

TopBike
www.topbiketours.com +420 (519) 513 745.

Utah Mountain Biking Adventures
www.utahmountainbiketours.com, (435) 635-2169.

Vacation Bicycling
www.vacationbicycling.com (404) 909-8034.

Veloroutes des Bleuets
www.veloroutes-bleuets.qc.ca (418) 668-4541.

Womantours
www.womantours.com (800) 247-1444.

WorldVentures

Members of an Adventure Cycling TransAm group take a breather at the visitors center on Lolo Pass on the Montana/Idaho border.

The New England Classic Tour de Cure offers you your choice of a memorable weekend, or entire week of cycling, adventure, and fun in the picturesque and historical settings of New England’s scenic seacoasts, and bold mountain ranges.

You’ll be rewarded with the satisfaction of accomplishing such a feat, joining an elite club, and the knowledge that your efforts are moving us closer to victories over diabetes.

For more information, visit: main.diabetes.org/nectourdeecure or call Ryan Williams at: 1.888.DIABETES x3456

Thanks to our national sponsors:

SPLENDA®
Stop Diabetes. To learn more, visit diabetes.org or call 1-800-DIABETES