

Baja's Forest Man



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There are times when travel becomes even more memorable because of someone you meet instead of the destination itself. This was true for one of my most thrilling field trips deep into the forest in south Hungary, 150km from the capital, Budapest.

To this day, I still don't know the name of the forest but I can remember vividly the day itself. The closest town was Baja, known to be a delightful place for those who love the sun and water.

As I was coming from a tropical country to study its water resources, I was really looking forward to the trip. The purpose was to demonstrate the application of Acoustic Doppler Current Profiler (ADCP) on the River Danube, Europe's second longest river which passes through Hungary, Austria, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Ukraine, Croatia, Serbia and Moldova.

The ADCP was mounted on a motorboat to measure the river depth and velocity based on the Doppler Effect. It works by transmitting high-frequency pulses of sound which are reflected by moving particles in the water. The speed of the water current can subsequently be estimated as, carried by the water, the particles move at the same speed.

Although it was exciting to get on the motorboat and to see the action, the best part of the trip was yet to come. Because they live by the river, the people of Baja have developed a love for eating fish.

So, when we took a detour to visit a fisherman who was a friend of the professor's, we knew we were in for a treat. Better known as Forest Man, the fisherman lived with his family in the forest. To get there, we were ferried there by the Forest Man in his motorboat.

His was probably the only house in the forest which depended on moonlight and fire for light and energy, and the river for water. They not only built their home on their own, but fished and made their own food as far as possible.

I had seen it on National Geographic a few times but to actually watch Forest Man and his 7-year-old son catching pike and carp using their bare hands, was eye-opening.

His daughter, who was just a bit older than her brother, then chopped the fish heads off as if she had been doing it all her life (and she probably had).

His wife then cooked us the best traditional Hungarian fish stew over a wood fire. Also known as fisherman's soup with pasta, this was made from scratch. Everything was homemade, even the drinks. She made wild cherry syrup from fruit that she picked behind their hut. It could not be any more rustic than this.

The family did not speak much English but, as we sat by the fire to keep warm, Forest Man managed to share with us some of his adventures. These were so interesting that we forgot about the Internet or the fact that we were in a forest somewhere in the Eastern Europe.

It was only when it became pitch dark that we realised it was time to leave. We held hands and walked as Forest Man and his son guided us back to the motorboat with only headlamps. The son also took us on the motorboat back to the shore.

Nobody in our group said a word but I guessed we were all praying we'd get to the shore safely. Unlike a visit to a destination which can be repeated, the evening spent with Forest Man and his family is priceless. ■

