



## EXPEDITION DIARY Slovakia 2008

By Kathy Wilden & Malika Fettak

27 July

Hello everyone and welcome to the Slovakia 2008 diary. I'm Kathy, your expedition leader, and you will be hearing from me regularly over the next few weeks. I'm getting ready for the expedition, packing up our gear and getting the Land Rover ready. I will then go for the long drive down to Bratislava, together with Malika, my assistant for the expedition. Once in Bratislava, we will give a press conference at Land Rover and collect the second vehicle, before making it to base to set things up for you all.

I plan to be at base on 31 July in the afternoon and from then on I should also be on my Slovakian mobile number +421 910 574628 (FOR EMERGENCY USE ONLY OR IF YOU ARE ABOUT TO BE LATE FOR ASSEMBLY).

I hope your preparations are going well. To give you a better idea of what's in store, please find attached a rough day-to-day plan as well as a kit list.

Anyway, I look forward to meeting slot 1 at the Chez David, all ready to leave bright and early at 08.00 next Sunday (3 August). I may write another update before then, but if not, see you in Bratislava!

So long

Kathy Wilden  
Expedition leader

2 August

Malika and I made it to Bratislava, took possession of the vehicles and had a good press conference with lots of interest from the Slovakian media. After hob-nobbing with the press, we drove to our base at Krpacovo and found it as beautiful as ever. For the last few days it was hot and sunny during the day with heavy thunderstorms in the night and this pattern is set to continue for the next few days.

We unpacked, settled in and base is now all ready and waiting for you. We also met with Slavo who is doing ok and can at least walk short distances now, after weeks in hospital and near total immobility. As planned, Slavo will be with us for the first three days for training and then set us our research task before he has to go back into hospital for three days. All the best to him and we look forward to you telling us all about how you would like us to be your eyes and ears in the mountains for the next couple of weeks.

Now another thing for slot 2. We need someone who can drive one of our Land Rovers during slot 2. Road driving mainly and perhaps a little bit of off-road, which we would train you up for. Any takers? If you are happy to do this, can you please reply to this e-mail and remember to bring your driving license.

We're off for a bit of off-road driving ourselves, checking out the study site today before heading back to Bratislava where I am hoping to send this diary to you all.

### 3 August

Everyone arrived safely on Sunday morning, most meeting in Bratislava and driving with Malika (my trusted assistant leader) and I, and one group coming to base camp with their own car. Arriving in good time we started the training after a short break to settle in and after lunch we heard a talk from our scientist, Slavo, about the work that he has led here with Biosphere Expeditions over the last 5 years, the results of that work and the areas that he would like this year's teams to concentrate on. We will be focusing more this year on work on the main ridge of the mountain range in our study area, and spending time studying the behaviour of the chamois that live there. My favourite snippet of information from the results from previous years was what has been found in the bear scat (that's the poo that we collect). It has been found that around 48% of a bear's diet is made up of wild plants, with a large amount being blueberries and raspberries, and pretty much the rest is wasps and ants – with 1% being domestic dog!! We all found it hard to see how a bear of around 150 kg can be sustained on such a diet, and we have become somewhat protective of the annoyingly yappy little dog that hangs out near base, especially when we see him wandering the road after dark.

### 4 August

Monday came bright and sunny. Most of the team had slept well, especially our North American participant, Jim, who had only flown in on Saturday and had been standing during the talks the day before to prevent falling asleep on the job (we do say that it's not a holiday :). After a short introduction to the day, we packed up our expedition equipment and set off for the hills for a full day of instruction and practice. Slavo accompanied the lead Land Rover in our little convoy and took us off-road and onto the forestry tracks. We managed to work our way through a herd of sheep and up into the mountains where we stopped in a small meadow in the forest to learn about the datasheets that we will need to fill in and to have a go at using the equipment. The team experimented with rangemetres (which give us the distance to an object), spotting scopes (hi-powered viewing scopes for watching chamois on the ridge), GPS, radios and good old maps and compasses. Everyone quickly got the hang of things, so we set off further up the hill in the Land Rovers for a practice walk from higher up. We only had one stop on the way up to clear a fallen tree, and once we had left the vehicles we had a great walk up out of the forest, through the dwarf pine (okay, so this bit wasn't that great as these prickly little trees are up to face height and very dense) and out into the alpine meadows further up (lots of wolf scat to collect, a viper and wonderful wild flowers). The team ended a day of sunshine in the pouring rain of a thunderstorm – so they got to test their wet gear as well.

### 5 August

Today the team has split into groups of twos and threes to start gathering data, and have been dropped at different locations in the wood to search for signs of wolves and bears. The groups are all following set routes given to them by our scientist, Slavo, and we are hoping to be the first Slovakia team not to get lost! Each year it seems that most people have become lost in the forest at some time, but we think we're going to be different! Everyone is dropped off at different locations and there are set times and locations for each group to be picked up. Everyone leaves confidently and as the hour of the first group walking back to base comes round, I am very pleased to see our Spanish team (Alvoro and Pau) saunter back in the door, followed by a call on the radio to say that two other teams have been collected as planned. Unfortunately all thoughts of a breakthrough year are dashed when we find that one group (no names, but lets just say that when a honeymoon couple say that they have got lost you don't ask them any more) turn up at the end of an unexpected trail, and another group seem to have made up their own route (on purpose, you understand). Oh, well, the data collected were very exciting, with one particular area with lots of signs of a bear having wandered down to a farmer's field for a muesli breakfast and leaving loads of prints and some hair on a tree that he had scratched on.

### 6 August

The forecast for the next couple of days is good, so we pack up equipment and personal stuff so that we can stay for two nights in the walking huts up on the main mountain ridge. The team is split into two groups, with one group going up to the hut at the western end of our study area, called Durkova, and the other group going to the eastern hut, called Chopok. The Durkova group go up in the Land Rover Defender, winding their way all the way to the top of the ridge via an hour long off-road trail. The Chopok group take the road to the bottom of a chair-lift, and from the top of that they have an hour long hike up to their hut. There have been discussions about the merits of both huts - Durkova is smaller, it has a spring nearby for washing in, but the beds are just mattresses on the floor in a large room under the roof, and there is not much in the way of food, whereas Chopok has excellent food, good beds, but is busier and has no running water. It is generally agreed that all will be okay, however, because they both have a good supply of beer.

These next couple of diary entries were split between Malika and I. I went to the Durkova hut and Malika to the Chopok hut, so you have entries from us both.

#### Durkova

On arrival at Durkova the team decide to deploy the tents, and there is particular interest in the roof tent on top of the Land Rover. We put out the four normal 2-person tents with ease, but the roof tent proves to have one technical difficulty – the ladder from the roof tent doesn't reach the ground. After about an hour and many interesting ideas based on the creative balancing of different pieces of wood we finally realise that if we move the vehicle over about a foot the whole thing miraculously works – think it must be the mountain air! After this adventure, the group sets about the survey work for the afternoon. We split and several routes are followed to observe chamois and look for signs of wolves. One interesting result is the finding of some bones on one trail, which, as I write, are still unidentified. There were few signs of other animal activity, but this was expected and helps to support the findings of previous years. One team took an interesting shortcut home through our favourite terrain – dwarf pines – and another team had to redraw the map as a marked trail came to an abrupt end causing them to nearly miss supper, but all the training had paid off and everyone found it back to the base in time. The food, as predicted, left a bit to be desired, but was served by the hut manager in such good humour that it was enjoyed by nearly all (a slight cheese crisis caused some problems for the youngest of our group, aged 10, but he coped well considering, and took the offers of cheese that were made for the rest of the week in very good spirits!).

#### Chopok

The chair-lift brought us up half the way to Chopok hut in 20 minutes, then we had to carry our backpacks stuffed with sleeping bags, research equipment and food for the next two days to “Kamena Chata” (which is the official name). Moving straight uphill covering 500 metres of altitude was quite a job. We arrived around noon and everybody was happy to have a well-earned lunch break. Whilst the team was picnicking outside I found out that our reservation had been lost and that the hut was completely overbooked - what a start for a two and a half day survey plan! In the end we could stay, but no beds could be found for some of us who just went to sleep on mats on the floor. No problem for expeditioners!

We then separated into three groups for our first surveys. Everybody was back in the late afternoon, excited about the first sightings of our study animal. We discussed datasheets on the terrace of the hut, enjoying the evening sun and then “moved in”. Dinner was pretty good – at least a hot meal and some choice as well. And of course a cool beer after a hard day's work. Aurelien brought Tarot cards and we had great fun. At ten it was lights out (hut rule) and soon everybody went to sleep.

#### 7 August

##### Durkova

At Durkova, our long day in the hills started early for some with a walk up the short distance to the ridge to watch the sunrise. Beautiful, I am told. After a good breakfast we set off in three different groups to survey the ridge for chamois, with one pair ending the day at the Chopok hut. The weather was amazing, with clear views for over 10 km, and we were all rewarded with some amazing sightings of chamois, with one particularly large group staying very close to the main path for most of the day, allowing some important observations to be made in near perfect conditions. We all did a lot of walking and were happy to relax in the early evening outside the hut and only one set of binoculars trained on the woods opposite in case a stray bear should appear to entertain us. The day ended with a decidedly eccentric meal, the singing of 'happy birthday' to Malika down a phone as she was having her birthday in the other hut, and everyone sleeping in the tents as the hut was so full that the hut manager had pretty much given us his bed (the 5 sleeping mats that he normally sleeps on) to ensure that we vacated to give others enough room. A very good night's sleep was had by all.

##### Chopok

The night was short for most of us. Apart from Anne and Aurelien we were all sleeping in the corridor. Some people got up at 5 in the morning to see the sunrise... impossible to catch some more sleep as everybody passed us by. After a great breakfast and lots of coffee we headed off into the field – three teams, three different directions. Our day was a mixture of walking, and surveying, and - of course - filling in datasheets. Anne and Aurelien made their way to Durkova as Jim and Thilo came over to join us at Chopok. All back from their long day trip we sat once more outside the hut to share everybody's sightings and experiences.

What a nice surprise when my phone rang and a “Happy Birthday to you, happy birthday...” came through – semi-professional singers and certainly very passionate. Thanks to Tomas who carried my birthday present up to the mountain we clinked glasses with Borovicka – original Slovakian Schnaps and didn’t go to bed until we finished it all ;).

8 August

The Durkova team split into three groups, with two groups descending into the valley by different trails, and the third team staying behind to pack up tents, load up the Land Rover, and take the off-road trail back down to tarmac. The trails took around four hours to complete, with some sightings but generally not a great deal to report. The walkers were collected and the team was back at base for around 14.00.

Chopok

We (almost) all got up at 5 in the morning to see the sunrise – fantastic views from the peak of Chopok, only 15 minutes from the hut. The Kamena chata staff told us that there will be chamois too in the morning close to the hut, so everybody took their cameras.

It was worth it. We got fantastic close-up shots in the morning light. A weird experience: here they were, the animals we were looking after with binoculars and spotting scopes, suddenly so close. After breakfast and filling our lunch boxes we again split into three groups. We didn’t see much as it was foggy and windy and came back to the hut after two hours of surveying finally to leave this beautiful place and get back to base. The way down was as a challenge and everybody was happy when we finally sat again in the chair-lift that brought us back to our Land Rover.

The afternoon was spent cleaning ourselves and sorting equipment, followed by the screening of a wonderful documentary about the High Tatras (we are surveying the Low Tatras, and the animals encountered are very much the same) that had been made by Tomas, our resident Slovakian wildlife photographer for the week. We also had a talk about the other expeditions that Biosphere does and the day (and week) was rounded off with dinner and the gentle sipping of wine outside base under the stars. All that is left for this slot is to say goodbye to some of the team in the morning (our Hungarian group are taking the Spanish contingent back with them to Hungary) and then the drive back to Bratislava. It has been an excellent week with amazing luck with the weather that I can only hope is repeated for the next team. Bon Voyage to the first slot team and thanks for all your efforts!

12 August

The first day of research for slot 2 began today with the team dividing into pairs and being dropped off around the forest area to walk different routes set by Slavo. One of the vehicles doing the drop offs was lucky enough to find some tracks on the way, and several of us now have wonderful pictures of a baby bear track, the paw print looking very like the footprint of a small child. It was a lovely start to the day. After a day of walking, the group came back with a lot of information on bear movements. It was surprising to find that there were no signs of bears in some areas where they would have been expected, for example where there were lots of intact blueberry bushes (well, intact except for the blueberries that hungry team members had taken - you can spot the individuals because they come back with very blue-stained hands and blue lips!), and that the bear movements were quite concentrated in other patches. I was very pleased to find that no-one had got lost, but as I write this a few days on, and knowing what I know now, I will not be too triumphant on behalf of the team quite yet!

13 August

With good weather largely forecast for the next three days, the team packed up and set off in two groups for the two different huts on the mountains.

Durkova

Uwe was very keen to take his 4x4 camper up the off-road track to the hut and so we set off in convoy, with the Land Rover Defender leading the way. Even in the first few metres of the track it became very clear that Uwe was not going to make it and the smell of burning coming from the engine was the final signal that we were going to have to abandon the attempt. Uwe said goodbye to the group and set off to undertake some research in the forest, and to go up to the Chopok hut the following day. Unfortunately, he was taken ill and ended up having to leave the team and return to Germany. Our best wishes go to him for a speedy recovery.

The rest of us made it up to the top and set up the tents and Land Rover roof tent after some intense negotiations with the Hut Meister who tried to tell me that this week it was against the park rules to put up tents (last week he had had no such objection). I have named the young guy in charge of the Durkova hut the 'Hut Meister' in retaliation for the names he has been giving me - I started off as the 'environment leader', soon became the 'environment soldier' moving obviously to 'eco soldier', and taking a short hop to 'eco warrior'. Finally we seem to have settle on my favourite, that of 'rainbow warrior'. He is an entertaining bloke who seems to stand about smoking most of the day, wearing his baseball hat and baggy shorts whatever the weather, but his cooking left a bit to be desired last week so we are doing our own meals this time.

After lunch we set off in bright sunshine, going a short distance all together, and then splitting off down different tracks. Julia and Hartmut sprinted around a long course to the north of the ridge, while Wolfgang, Gaby and Till set off down a walking track to the south. This southerly route is already known from the first slot as an area where people get lost, and today would be no exception. The first to fall is Till, who is our resident camera man for the slot and who is carrying about 2 tonnes worth of camera equipment. He is left behind on the track and decides to turn back rather than go on and get lost. This means that no one knows where he is as he does not carry any other equipment, such as a radio, but a short search reveals him heading back up to the ridge. All is well after the administration of some rehydration sachets (which I fear he is now addicted to) and lots of water. The second casualties on the yellow trail are Wolfgang and Gaby who, armed with the knowledge that the track disappeared on the group from the week before, had valiantly set off saying that they liked 'going off-road'. The first signs that we have back at the hut of trouble for these two is when they radio to say that they will not be back by the cut-off time of 7pm, but will be back about half an hour late.

Shortly after 7.30pm the rest of the group start to try and communicate with them, and soon after 8pm we establish comms and get their position from them using GPS co-ordinates, they are still a fair way away. As darkness descends and the clouds roll in the decision is made to go out and find them and bring them back in the Land Rover. The roof tent is swiftly packed and two people go in the vehicle whilst the other 2 stay at the hut to act as central command (ok, slightly exaggerated position, they really stay to look after the supper). Driving around a couple of valleys the radio communications improve hugely and it is then simply a matter of good team work that brings the Land Rover and the missing team members together. When Wolfgang gives his final co-ordinates and we plot them on a map in the Land Rover, we tell him that he must be on the track, he says no and we begin to wonder whether we have got something enormously wrong with the navigation. But seconds later the call comes through that they have found the track and that it looks wide enough for the Land Rover to drive up and meet them. After meeting up with them we have to reverse back down the track for a while before we can turn and we then head back to the hut. Everyone is well and we are all pleased to start our supper at 9.30pm. The Hut Meister is also pleased to see us all return and serves us beer long past his bedtime whilst swearing good naturedly that he will kill us for keeping him up so late. The yellow walking route that has now claimed all of the team members that have been down it is named the 'demon road' and many myths about it are started.

## Chopok

The Chopok team have a rather less dramatic day, with no one getting lost at all. The team go up on the chair lift and take the same steep path up to the hut as was taken the week before. The walk is pretty much straight up for 2 hours and they manage it with no rests (although Lars looks as though he wishes there had been one). It is busy at the hut but the team manages to get seats on the terrace outside to have a drink and their lunch. They split into groups for an afternoon survey and meet back at the hut at 6pm to finish the work for the day by talking through their findings. After a good dinner (apparently they get wine at this hut, very posh and not something that Hut Meister would condone) they all have a good night's sleep, with no snoring from anyone, a nice surprise from a full hut.

## 14 August

### Durkova

After most of the team decide not to get up for the sunrise (except for Hartmut who has more energy than he should have) we all have a leisurely breakfast, discuss the findings of the last day (apparently there are a lot of bears on the demon road) and head up onto the ridge for the day. The paths are very clear up here and there is little opportunity for anyone to get lost, but the weather has changed and the clouds come over to cover our view, so we have a very limited morning's observations on the main ridge.

Wolfgang and Gaby manage to set up a spotting scope to observe their first chamois, but the clouds swallow it and the rain set in. After sitting it out for a bit and having an early lunch, we have just called it a day and started back for the hut, when the clouds miraculously lift and from then on, despite it being a bit patchy, the weather basically clears for a good afternoon of observations. A solitary male is observed for a while by one group (Till following it as best he can with the camera, something that is quite fun to watch as Till is a big chap from Hamburg with a large camera that is attached to an even larger tripod, not a set up that is designed for speed or agility. Whereas the chamois is a mountain goat.) and a large herd of around 20 is observed by both the other two groups. Some very interesting data is collected and we all return to the hut happy after a long day. Supper is a bit earlier tonight and we all settle down in good time, some determined to get up for the dawn in the morning.

## Chopok

The day starts early for Andrea and Fabian who head out at 5am to catch the early light. They are happy to find the solitary male chamois who is so frequent a visitor to the hut in the mornings that he has been given a name, Christian. They are back at the hut for breakfast with the team and everyone gears up and heads out in their groups. It is a very wet day on Chopok, with clouds and rain obscuring the view almost totally. A call comes over the radio from Julien, our French team member, 'I can see only rain' and then his British companion clarifies things saying, 'we're lost, we're going back to the hut'. They are found several hours later, fast asleep in their beds!

Meanwhile, Malika, Andrea and Fabian are sitting out the rain in the lee of some stones. They do not see anything during this period, but as they make their way back to the hut they are rewarded with the sighting of 2 chamois and as they settle down to observe the animals, the clouds lift further and they are gazing at a large herd which they continue to watch for more than an hour. Once they get back to the hut Malika collects the recalcitrant British and French members, and after waking them up she takes them back outside to continue the research. Luckily for them the weather has lifted and they, too, are rewarded with several sightings. The team all meet back at the hut at 7pm for drinks and supper. I don't know exactly what went on that evening, but there is a now infamous 'french guitar' picture that may be used to gain donations for Biosphere in the future if we become too strapped for cash.

## 15 August

The Chopok team wake to thick fog and agree to take the long road down together. The way takes them close to the peak of Dumbier and after 3 hours of walking with no rest they reach the top of the chair lift that is to take them down. After a farewell drink to the mountains they complete their descent in the lift and drive back to base to shower and sort equipment.

The Durkova team have better luck with the weather. Hartmut and Till go up to the peak early and are well rewarded with observations of a large herd of chamois that Till films for over an hour. After their return and breakfast,

Two teams set off to walk different routes down to the valley. Meanwhile, Till and I pack up the camp and take the off-road track back down, stopping for Till to get some shots for his film. Everyone meets up and we too head back to base and a much needed clean up.

The afternoon is taken up with a general debrief followed by going through datasheets and packing all the equipment away for our final departure from the base the following day. We note with regret the absence of Slavo and Uwe, who are both away from us due to illness, but we wish them well in their recoveries. We have a nice evening meal and a small contingent make it down to the bar by the lake to watch a local band on the outdoor stage there. In the morning we say goodbye to 4 members at base and the rest of the team have an uneventful drive back to Bratislava. We have a drink together (and are pleased when Pau and Alvro from the first slot drop in on us) and then make our farewells.

It is only left for Malika and I to thank all of the members of slot 1 and slot 2 for their work this year and their tireless good humour. We have both had a great couple of weeks and are feeling a bit lonely here at the German base as we unpack and store the gear and finalise our paperwork. We hope that you all return home safely once you have completed your travels and we hope to meet up with you again in the future. All the best from Bayern!

Kathy and Malika