

# BULGARIA

A Country of Kindness and Culture – Part I



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“My bike’s on fire!!” exclaimed Chantil, as she instinctively grabbed the clutch lever and allowed the momentum of her motorcycle to coast to the side of the road.

“What?! You’re kidding, right?” I just couldn’t believe what I was hearing through our connected Bluetooth headsets.

“No! Something is wrong with my bike. I saw a puff of smoke and now it smells like it’s burning.”

My mind raced as I imagined her BMW G650GS pack-mule burning into a smoldering mess on the side of the roadway. “Turn off the ignition!” I yelled while pulling over to make a quick U-turn. As I parked across the street, Chantil was already off of her bike and removing the tank bag so we could get access to the battery location.

Getting to the battery on our BMW mules is a process in itself – 10 Torx-style screws hold on the plastic center cover, with two of these screws being concealed by the seat. To remove the seat a latch must be popped, which lies behind a lockable cover under the trail rack. A process so long that it’s easy to imagine her bike being engulfed in flames, with us madly jumping around trying to remove luggage and Torx screws, while hopelessly flailing water from our CamelBak backpacks.

Thankfully, Chantil was able to get the bike over to the side of the road and shut off the ignition before any further damage occurred. The immediate crisis was over. We took a moment to compose ourselves, survey the area, and push her mule across the street onto a concrete sidewalk where we could escape the heat of the afternoon in the shade of a large maple tree.





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Once we had the covers removed, we could see, and smell, that the extent of damage was significant. A two-foot section of 10-gauge wire had burned through the main wire bundle. The plastic insulation was charred and had melted into other neighboring wires. This wasn't going to be a quick MacGyver fix using a Swiss Army knife, a few paperclips, and some chewing gum – this was going to take some serious time to rebuild or replace the main wiring harness.

## Not A Good Start

We had just crossed from Greece **UPSHIFT Issue 86** into Bulgaria a few days before and were looking forward to presenting about our travels at a Horizons Unlimited event at MotoCamp Bulgaria. Unfortunately, we were still three hours away from reaching MotoCamp – stuck in the southern Bulgarian city of Plovdiv. We quickly realized that there was probably no chance for us to present at the event unless we were able to get a new wire harness shipped and installed in the next four days. Not likely.

We booked a hotel within pushing range of Chantil's broken mule and got online to see if we could find a solution to our dilemma. We decided to contact the folks at MotoCamp and let them know the bad news. Within minutes of reaching Polly Marinova she had us in contact with "Peachy" who agreed to make a three hour drive to pick us up with a trailer. The rest of the evening we researched the process and cost of replacing a main wire harness. It was going to be expensive and time consuming – the harness was well over \$1,100 USD, but we felt pretty confident we could do the replacement ourselves with enough time and patience.

The next morning Peachy arrived with a minivan and trailer. We loaded both of our mules and strapped them down for the three-hour journey north to MotoCamp. Once at camp, we found a quiet corner where we could set up our tent and begin the lengthy process of removing the wire harness. Within the next day we had the harness removed and could get a sense of the damage. We discovered a portion of the metal frame which appeared to have worn through the wire insulation and shorted a two-foot section of the cable from the battery to the ABS computer.

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Over the following day we replaced the damaged section of cable with a new spliced-in cable and then insulated everything with copious amounts of 3M electrical tape. I also made a ride to the nearby city of Veliko Tarnovo to order a new wire harness from the local BMW dealership. We decided that it was best to replace the harness so that we wouldn't have to worry about future problems since we intended to continue motorcycle overlanding throughout the next year.

It was a busy week for us – working full-time from sunrise to sunset. Somehow Chantil carved out some time to bake a cheesecake to commemorate my 49th birthday and the 346th anniversary of the independence of the United States – complete with candles, blueberries, and strawberries to represent the Fourth of July. We also worked on our presentation about our European travels for the Horizons Unlimited meeting.

## MotoCamp Bulgaria And Horizons Unlimited

In 2006, the motorcycle culture in Bulgaria was in its infancy due to the economic isolation of this former Soviet Union satellite state during the Cold War. Doug Wothke, an American riding his 1948 Indian Chief motorcycle, saw potential in the rich history and natural beauty of this eastern European nation. He was riding through Bulgaria during one of his round-the-world trips, when he met Polly – a local Bulgarian who was impressed that Doug was riding such a vintage motorcycle around the world. A year later they began the process of purchasing a large 200-year-old farmhouse and property that they hoped to refurbish and share with other motorcycle overlanders. Ivo Stefanov joined the MotoCamp team as well, and manages the daily tasks of overseeing the camp, ordering tires and parts, and coordinating insurance policies for motorcycle travelers.

16 years later it's grown into a low-key and relaxing oasis that feels like returning home. Polly and Ivo are always happy to greet new arrivals with warm smiles and set them up in either of their clean and comfortable guest houses or in the large tent camping area. The camp's dog "Harley" is a big and bushy black dog that's as chill as MotoCamp itself – content to just lay in the afternoon sun and enjoy the relaxing vibe. The camp has cold drinks, warm showers, and a sense of history and family that is rarely seen in today's corporate camping sites. It really is a special place that no motorcycle overlander should miss on their travels through Bulgaria.

During the Horizons Unlimited event we had the pleasure of meeting many travelers from all over the world including Europe, North America, Africa, and Asia. Most notably we met Dan Rowland and Phil Crofts from the UK, Kira and Brendon Hak from Canada, and Anita Yusof from Malaysia. Anita has been recognized as the first Muslim woman to ever ride around the world, and she presented on the challenges of riding through Africa as a single female rider. During our presentation, we talked about the difficulty of traveling during the COVID pandemic and shared many stories from the last two years of travels through Europe and north Africa. It was especially nice to see so many motorcycle riders come together from all different countries and cultures to share a cold beverage, a laugh, and stories from the road. There really is something quite special about the motorcycle community.





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Just 13 km (8 miles) east of Shipka Pass, via a potholed filled and broken concrete roadway, are the remains of the Buzludzha Monument, or the Monument House of the Bulgarian Communist Party. This Brutalist-styled architecture has the likeness of a 1950's UFO flying saucer and a tower that stretches upwards 70 meters (230 feet) and is topped with a large communist red five-pointed star.

The building was completed in 1981 at the current equivalent cost of \$35 million US dollars. The interior used 35 tons of cobalt glass, and 60 artists to create the intricate mosaics that illustrate the history of the Bulgarian Communist Party. The structure's round ceiling features a large mosaic of a hammer and sickle encircled with a quote from the Communist Manifesto: "Proletarians of all countries, unite!"

Over the next decade, the building was used by the Communist Party for ceremonies and hosting delegation visits. It was also visited by more than two million Bulgarians for free since it was largely funded and built by many volunteer laborers and artists.

On January 15th, 1990, the Bulgarian National Assembly abolished the Communist Party's leading role in politics and the first multi-party elections were held in June of that same year. It was the beginning of the collapse of the Communist Party and the decline of the Buzludzha Monument. Looters stripped away the metal, copper ceiling, and other expensive materials. Over the next two decades the winter weather continued to deteriorate the monument, leaving just a skeleton of its former grandeur.

After exploring the outside, we rode down to the large torch sculpture, at the base of the mountain, and parked the mules. We marveled at the sheer size of the architecture and contemplated what visiting this monument would have been like in the 1980s. Thankfully, there are efforts to restore some portions of the building. During our visit, a permanent guard was stationed to prevent future looting, and there was a small team working to conserve and restore some of the murals. It's hopeful that the Buzludzha Monument will be open to the public once again in the future.

## Back On The Road To Discovery

When we returned to MotoCamp we were now fairly certain that the original fault was an electric short and we could confidently reinstall a brand-new wire harness. Over the next two days we removed the old harness and reinstalled a shiny, brand new one, all while filming a YouTube video tutorial to help anyone who may have a similar problem down the road. We certainly hoped this was an isolated issue and not something we ever wanted to repeat again. However, we were also glad that we were able to tackle the complexities of such an endeavor by ourselves and with the help of Polly, Ivo, and Peachy at MotoCamp. As a parting memento, we created a wooden plaque, that we nailed the old wire harness to, and wrote a handwritten message of gratitude.





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It was time to move on. We said "Do skoro!" (so long) to all the wonderful folks at Motocamp, gave Harley a pat on the head, and climbed aboard our traveling mules bound for the next pin on our Google Map. As we were heading east towards the city of Veliko Tarnovo, we came across a massive field of incredibly bright sunflower fields. We stopped to marvel at how they seemed to grow from horizon to horizon in this sunny and temperate part of eastern Europe. They also gave us hope to continue on despite the hardships that we sometimes face while traveling full-time. Sometimes it's a world-wide pandemic like COVID, or a burned wire bundle, but in the end, it always seems to work out. Like the sunflowers all around us, we turned toward the sunny day and headed to explore even more of the wonderful country of Bulgaria. More adventure awaits...

## About viajarMOTO

Travis and Chantil Gill started full-time motorcycle overlanding in early 2020 with the hopes of seeing and experiencing the different countries and cultures of the world. You can follow them on their website at [www.viajarMOTO.com](http://www.viajarMOTO.com).

