RANGE ROVERS

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

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 give 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 was rumbling through the valley, and there was constant rumble of thunder – we didn’t have continuous bursts, and there was a break in sight. The next day was our last chance, 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 set up a base to the shore 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 mixture of electric/non-electric zones to choose from. We were lucky enough to find a spot right by the shore, 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 camps, and it 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 camper 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 best take advantage of the sunny weather if we could, and so, before doing any hiking, we decided to spend one relaxing day on the lake. 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 Orlova Glave, marked by a sign (to the summit were superb with views of the nearby Vogal (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 Vogal? 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 hikers and tourists 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 have missed. One of these places was Gesause 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 spoken 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 tourists 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 delay stations or perhaps some sensibly placed bolts, but in no way resemble a climbing gym. He showed us some routes in one of the guides books, 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 that day.

The campsite, situated near the main road in the National Park and a great place...
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 Hochter 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
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know 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 us 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.

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When to go: Hiking in the Alps is possible from June through 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: To find out more about the AIR Opus camper we travelled in, go to www.opuscamper.com. For Triglav National Park, go to www.triglavnationalpark.co.at/en and for Gsause National Park go to www.gasausenationalpark.com and for Gsause National Park go to www.gasausenationalpark.com. For info on the Fiz Mountains, go to www.visitchamonix.com

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 Gsause 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 near the river), so barbecues are a regular occurrence.

Multi-pitch climbing at a variety of grades.

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 Gsause 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.