

THE ANIMAL MEDICAL CARE FOUNDATION

TRIP TO SLOVENIA AND CROATIA TO SHELTERS HORJUL AND RIJEKA

31ST OCTOBER – 3RD NOVEMBER 2010

On Sunday 31st October, the President, Betty Heideman, and the Secretary, Sylvie Hood, left Les Blancs, France, to travel to the Shelters of Horjul in Slovenia and Rijeka in Croatia, to take them food, beds, bedding, medicines and miscellaneous items, to help them cope with the forthcoming winter.

Horjul is a small, privately run shelter, reliant upon volunteers and in receipt of only assistance for one month for each rescued animal. After that period of time Horjul shelter has to rely on itself and donations to care for the animal in every way.

Rijeka Shelter currently cares for more than 190 dogs, who live in a clearing in a wood about 20 minutes drive from Rijeka. This Shelter is totally reliant upon volunteers to care for the animals and donations to help to feed them. The only assistance they get is that the land on which the cages of the animals sit, is rented by Rijeka Council. The dogs live in appalling conditions, in cages open to the elements.

Having left Saulieu at 8.00 am on Sunday 31st October, we travelled to Mont Blanc tunnel and into Italy. The weather once we hit Italy was terrible, with strong winds and heavy rain, which continued all the way to Slovenia. We had rooms booked at a Sports Complex in Logatec, a small town inside Slovenia.

We drove virtually without stopping past Milan, Verona and the outskirts of Venice and from there onwards into Slovenia. By the time

we were near Milan it was dark and the heavy rain and wind made the driving difficult.

Eventually we arrived at Logatec and were glad to get some sleep.

In the morning we were confronted by more rain and drove the short distance to meet Ada, an assistant from Horjul, at Logatec, and then drove the 4 kilometres up a winding road to the Shelter. We were able to look around the Shelter and see the dogs and cats and ask questions about how the shelter is run. Currently there are 90+ cats and about 38 dogs.

We were impressed at the manner in which the animals are cared for and also thought the precautions taken, before an animal can be adopted, are good, with many questions being asked and checks being carried out. The Shelter receives negative comments from some people because of their policy, but they are adamant that it is for the future wellbeing of the animals.

After unloading the things we had brought for Horjul and photos having been taken, we continued on our way to the Slovenia/Croatia border. There we were meeting Zdenka and Laurens from Rijeka, because it would be necessary to leave the bulk of the food at a house near to the border, as the Croatian Customs would not allow food to be taken into Croatia.

A kind woman in a house five minutes from the border allowed us to unload the food and store it in her outhouse. Afterwards she offered us tea and cake, which we gladly accepted. We were impressed at her kindness as she had been widowed just a week or so earlier.

Our next obstacle was to convince the Customs that we had nothing new with us, or anything we should not have. Croatian Customs are known for being difficult and unfriendly. Fortunately having answered their questions and having studied our passports, they allowed us through, much to the relief of the people from Rijeka and us.

It takes approximately 30 minutes to drive to Rijeka and we were struck by the size of the town and its rundown condition. It is the biggest port in Croatia.

We were led to the back of a small restaurant, and parked in a derelict area. The restaurant was owned by one of the volunteers of Rijeka shelter and it gave us an opportunity to meet some of the volunteers. We stayed about an hour and met five of the volunteers, besides Zdenka and Laurens.

Volunteers work about one day a week, and from what we understood about 3 different volunteers each day go out to the shelter around 8 – 9 a.m. to feed the dogs, clean out the cages and allow each animal the chance for some exercise for 10 minutes or so. The dogs are left on their own once evening comes.

Zdenka kindly allowed us to spend the night at her house. Her house is also the rescue centre for the cats of Rijeka, with very many being cared for by Zdenka. In the morning we left just after 9.00 a.m for the Shelter.

We arrived at Rijeka Shelter about 9.45, having driven down a long, winding, muddy track through the wood, and again we had rain as we looked around the cages and saw the animals. It struck us how many old German Shepherd cross dogs there were. There were also a lot of young dogs and puppies. Although the conditions in which the animals lived were extremely bad, the animals seemed in a reasonable condition.

The cages are not on a hard surface, and therefore in wet or snowy weather, the animals are in constant damp and cold. The cages have no sides and the tops of the cages sometimes have corrugated iron and sometimes rolls of plastic material are spread over the top, but it is not hard to imagine how the animals must suffer in adverse weather. It would be a good project for strong, permanent shelters to be constructed on a concrete base.

The women volunteers battle through mud and dirt to get to the animals and to get into the cages to clean them - a difficult and dirty exercise. The only source of water is cold water from a stone storage tank, which

reaches the shelter by means of a fireman's hose and a tap, which has been installed inside a spare cage, which serves as a "kitchen".

We unloaded the van in the rain, and stored everything we had inside a small wooden hut. One of the women commented that they had just run out of puppy food, and therefore the bag of puppy food that we had brought in the van was desperately needed. We told her that there was a lot more being stored at the house on the other side of the border.

The beds, igloo, puppy feeder and toys were grabbed and put into immediate use, which pleased us very much. It was great to see the puppies exploring the igloo and playing with the toys, and we noticed that some of the young dogs had no beds, and were given beds from the ones we had brought.

We said goodbye to the people at Rijeka Shelter. We could see how bad conditions were, but were struck with the care that the women showed the dogs. They were obviously fond of the dogs and were doing their best under difficult circumstances.

We had to drive back into Rijeka in order to take Zdenka back, so she could go to work and once this was done we headed for home. Again we had to get through Croatian Customs, who decided they wanted to look in the back of the van, but as we had nothing except personal effects, we were allowed back into Slovenia.

We were struck by the difference between Croatia and Slovenia, with Slovenia being a thriving country and Croatia still suffering from the long-term effects of the Balkans War.

We were headed for Italy and hoped to get past Milan before nightfall, but hit more rain and floods in Italy and came across blocked motorways, which resulted in us having to find somewhere to stay for the night just before Milan. We were tired and hungry, having eaten virtually nothing all day, and were pleased to stop.

The following morning the weather was better in our part of Italy, although the news in Italy emphasized how bad the floods were. We set

out early, travelling through the Milan rush hour and on towards the Alps and home.

It was a long journey, 2200 kilometres in all, and the weather was not good, but we were pleased that we had managed to get to Rijeka and to know that everything we had taken to them would be put to good use, likewise Horjul. The people we met were welcoming and pleased that people in other countries were thinking of them.

It was with relief that we arrived back in France, knowing that the donations received had gone where they were most needed thanks to the kindness of sponsors who covered the cost of the hire of the van, the petrol and tolls. The cost of accommodation was paid for personally.

Sylvie Hood

Please visit the [album](#) with photos and some videos: