



ED & MARION SHOOTE

Adventure travellers

Ed and Marion have previously cycled the Pamir Highway. Their website is welove-mountains.net

Great Rides

BABYPACKING

A child trailer can tackle more than the trip to the nursery. **Ed and Marion Shoote** used theirs for a trip through Slovakia's Tatra Mountains

Details

- **Where:** Poland and Slovakia
- **Start/finish:** Zakopane, southern Poland
- **Distance:** 240km
- **Pictures:** Ed and Marion Shoote

In a forest feathered with autumn colour, we pause to look at the map. We're taking a shortcut back into Poland through a rarely explored corner of these mountains. Today's bikepacking challenge is a new one for us: we've run out of nappies.

We ford a trickle of a stream where, very evident in the mud, are some large bear prints so fresh they're still filling with water. A noise crashes in the forest behind us. It seems we're on a bear hunt and we can't go back!

You might not expect an article about bikepacking with an 18-month-old in Europe to start with bears. Neither did we. However, Slovakia's rugged landscape is home to wildlife of all shapes and sizes – including, apparently, the densest population of brown bears in Europe.

We'd ridden across Slovakia before but it was a few fast days with glimpses of the High Tatra as the highlight. The Tatra are the highest mountains in the Carpathian range, rising up to 2,654m to encircle a precipitous border between Poland and Slovakia. It is an enchanting land of fairytale forests and jagged ridge lines, broken up by onion-tower churches in small villages that are surrounded by meadows dotted with wooden shepherd huts.

BORDER CROSSING

We fly into the well-connected Krakow airport, stopping in the city overnight to explore. Next is a direct train south to

“*Paw prints in the mud. A noise crashes in the forest behind us. It seems we're on a bear hunt and we can't go back!*”

Zakopane, the biggest mountain town of the Tatra. It has a quaint old centre with traditional stalls selling smoked cheese and sheepskins, set against stunning views. It is also where Poland comes to get fresh mountain air in their diesel cars...

We leave Zakopane's bustle behind us and are soon in our own peaceful mountain space. The Polish National Park area is quite restricted for bikes, but we still find pleasant gravel tracks to ride. Even with detours, it only takes a morning's ride to reach the Slovakian border. Here it feels like the road has ended, because it's where most tourists stop to hike Morskie Oko, a classic walk in the mountains to an Instagram-friendly moraine lake.

We leave Poland behind and meander uphill with our sleeping toddler to reach the first low pass of the trip, where there's a deserted ski resort. A fast descent, with loud whoops now coming from the trailer, takes us to the old wooden chalets of Ždiar village. We find a busy, traditional restaurant next to a local folk museum. I order a hearty stew while Marion reacquaints herself with her love of Kofola – a Czech herbal drink similar to cola which costs only pence. After lunch it is an open air nappy change and a play on some wooden swings. We start feeling like we are getting the hang of toddler bikepacking.

BEAR IN MIND

From Ždiar the main road looks busy but our map shows a track running almost



Top: Crucially, the Thule CX1 trailer has suspension
Below right: Refuelling



Family holidays

How to travel by train:
cyclinguk.org/cycle/aboard-family-cycling-holiday-train

parallel, so we try it with little hope of it being trailer friendly. To our surprise we discover a perfect gravel cycle path all the way to the next town of Tatranská Kotlina! We didn't expect to find a cycle path network in Slovakia, and keep thinking "Surely this must end soon!".

As we arrive at Tatranská Kotlina, a workman in a fluorescent vest comes up to us. Impressed by the baby trailer, he explains that he maintains the region's many miles of cycle paths. He runs to his car and grabs a dedicated cycling map, adding some pencil lines and instructions in broken English. We have a new personalised off-road route!

With the map to guide us, we cycle off along a bike path through a strangely stunted birch forest. I daydream about Peter Sagan and where in Slovakia he might have learned his trade, then am snapped back to reality to dodge a huge pile of what is unmistakably bear poo. We immediately speed up.

It's a relief to ride into the nice little campsite that was recommended to us, and we quickly settle into our routine of unpacking, cooking, and entertaining a toddler. Marion unpacks her pannier and is surprised to find a baby adder wriggling free. About the size of a little finger, it is harmless but still oddly disconcerting.

As an evening mist descends, it masks the eerie sound of rutting deer in the surrounding woods. It really is a mythical place.

FOREST LODGING

The next day we continue alongside Slovakia's Route 66, enjoying a combination of paths and

quiet roads. The drizzle in the air produces a dreich watercolour of the rolling foothills. Štrbské Pleso is a ski/hiking resort with a large scenic lake framed by mountains behind.

We get only glimpses of the view between the clouds before a fast 30km descent to Pribylina, where we stop for supplies. It's a smart town with a large Roma settlement squeezed in next to the river. On the way out we pass Liptov, a preserved traditional village museum complete with a forest steam train. Disappointingly for Orrin, it isn't running!

After the day's drizzle, we need to dry out and opt to stay in a lodge called Penzion Sileo in the Račková Dolina valley. It is easy to find the Račková Dolina turn-off because there's a huge wooden sign with two giant wooden sculptures of hikers. Then outside the penzion there's a 12ft wooden angel to greet us.

A complimentary strong local spirit on arrival ensures it is a warm if surreal welcome. The communal rooms, like the surrounding forests, are full of mushrooms, though here in various states of dehydration. The lodge has a hot tub, playground, and a good, filling breakfast. It's a touch of luxury for us.

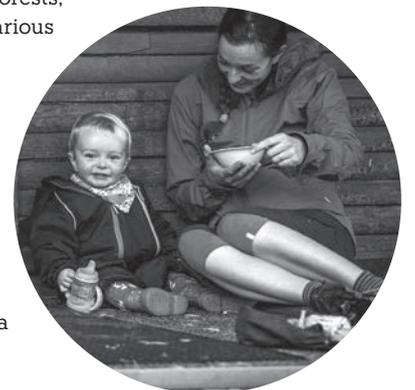
Although we receive a warm welcome here, in general we find the locals reserved. We are often greeted by an indifferent stare and shrug in shops and cafés, and unlike places like Italy even a baby doesn't engage people much. When we do find a

Do it yourself Travelling with a toddler

After years of traveling fast and light by bike, we were initially daunted by bikepacking with a baby and lots of kit. We picked a fairly short route that offered detours so we could adjust as we went along. Not having a set plan or schedule meant we could stop and relax whenever Orrin wanted to.

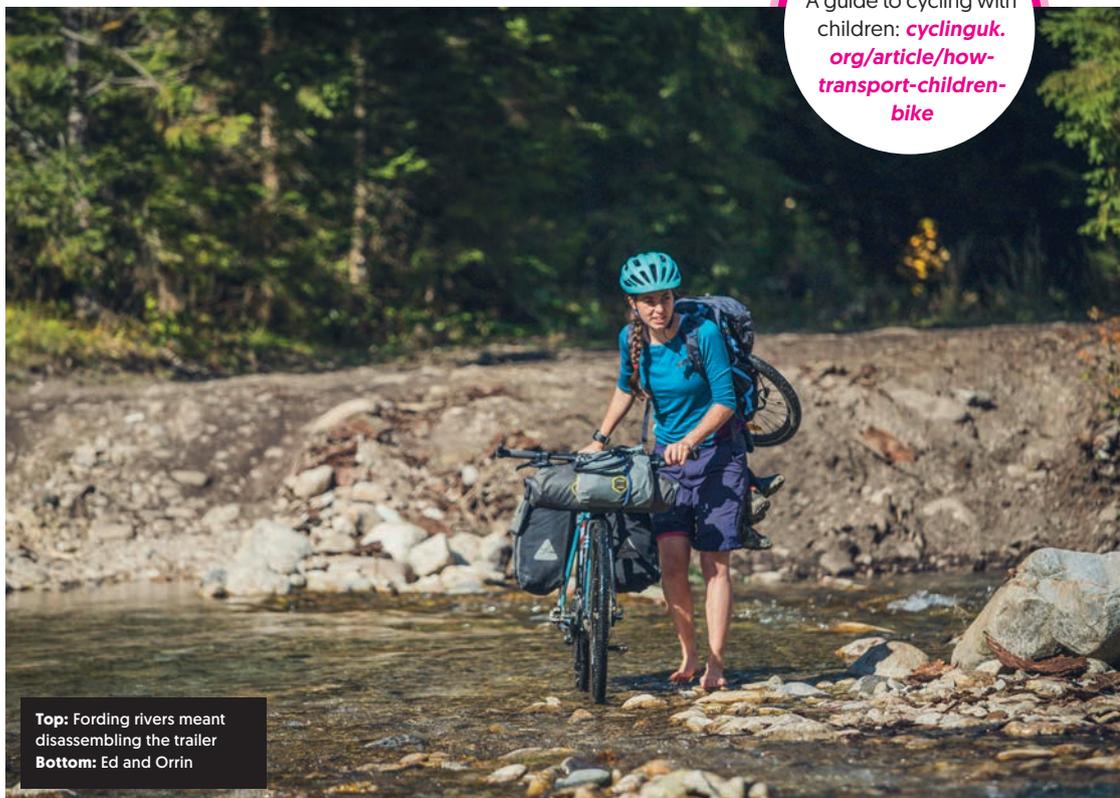
With two bikes and a trailer, it is stressful at the airport or train station moving and loading it all. Make sure your bike box has wheels, leaving more hands free to carry stuff without a trolley if needed.

Once on the road (or better, the path), bikepacking with a baby is amazing. You just need to factor in those play stops. Young children open your eyes to more and make the everyday seem fantastic – which isn't too hard in the Tatra.



Have kids, will travel

A guide to cycling with children: [cyclinguk.org/article/how-transport-children-bike](https://www.cyclinguk.org/article/how-transport-children-bike)



Top: Fording rivers meant disassembling the trailer
Bottom: Ed and Orrin

mutual language, it nevertheless results in a warm conversation.

HIKING AND BIKING

From the lodge we head west along rough forest tracks, guided by our recently acquired map. The western Tatra are less explored, and it is here we discover more of what makes the area special. We love the hidden villages and the shepherd huts clinging onto to the forest fringes, and it is easy to see why the Slovaks love the area. Today is our first big detour up into the higher Tatra, which involves a seemingly endless climb to a mountain refuge. The baby trailer feels heavier than ever as we slowly spin upwards.

On the other hand, travelling so slowly lets us appreciate the views, sounds, and smells more. A short stop by the river becomes a playground for a toddler, with stones to throw. A pile of small logs becomes a balance beam and picnic table. Luckily the 1,200m of climbing is followed by a lovely mountain hut and a classic dinner of dumplings (pierogies). The refuge is welcoming. They find Orrin a toy pushchair, which he proceeds to trundle up and down the public bar with a frog in it – to the amusement or bemusement of other guests.

In the morning, the mountain air has refreshed us with inexplicable levels of enthusiasm. We store bikes and bags and hike up to the summit of one of the highest peaks, with Orrin in a cloth sling pointing out the birds and aeroplane trails on the way. On our way back down, we surprise a few hikers and pass a mountain biker carrying his bike

to the top. The trail north into Poland is apparently amazing singletrack.

We reload the bikes and descend the epic climb from the day before in minutes. It develops into a very long afternoon of riding, however, and it is dark before we reach the charming town of Zuberec, its atmosphere enhanced by the lighting of the old wooden buildings.

The next day is a short one: a quick up and down to and from the hamlet of Oravice, which has hot springs. We buy locally-made mead and smoked cheese from a roadside stall, then soak in the hot spring water. As we lie in our tent at night, we hear more deer rutting in the misty, primeval forest.

Our close encounter with the bear comes near the end of the trip. We never see it but can feel that it's watching as we escape via a knee-deep river, crossing towards a popular tourist track. The ford requires five trips to carry Orrin and his trailer, which needs unloading and dismantling.

Now back in Poland, we're not far from Zakopane, and the traffic gradually returns. Our first stop is for more nappies, followed by a pizza to celebrate the end of a successful babypacking adventure. ●

Fact file Slovakian babypacking

- **Distance:** 240km in total, 35-55km per day.
- **Route:** We loosely followed the shortest road loop of the Tatra Mountains massif from Zakopane via the Route 66 mountain road in Slovakia. We added cycle paths and tracks.
- **Getting there:** We flew into Krakow airport and transferred by train into the city. The Station Hotel stored our bike boxes for us. Then we caught a train to Zakopane.
- **Accommodation:** Mostly in campsites; wild camping is banned in national parks. The mountain huts needed booking by phone. Penzion/B&Bs were reasonable.
- **Trailer used:** Thule [Chariot] CX 1 trailer [with suspension!],
- **Maps/guides:** Cykloturisticka Mapa, [mountainbiking.sk](https://www.mountainbiking.sk)
- **I'm glad I had...** A waterproof suit for Orrin so we could let him loose at campsites on the dew-laden grass and on wet days. Shoes [SPD and flats between us] that were comfy off the bike.
- **Next time I would...** Explore the foothills to the south. Stay longer to maximise the time between the stressful transfers and flights.



More Info

Read Cycling UK's guide to child trailers:

[cyclinguk.org/article/cycling-guide/guide-bike-trailers](https://www.cyclinguk.org/article/cycling-guide/guide-bike-trailers)

