TRAVEL REPORT · WINTER 2018

How a Stink Bug Sent Us to the Balkans

With Sixfoot from the Carpathians across the Black Sea and Greece to the snow of the Bernina Pass

Travel Dates: October 30 – December 4, 2018 | **Vehicle:** Sixfoot (> 3.5 t) | **Route:** Balkans, Greece & Adriatic Coast

SEPTEMBER 11, 2018 · PROLOGUE

New Zealand Is Off – Plan B Takes Shape

Originally, this travelogue was supposed to be all about rolling green hills, kiwis, and driving on the left, as we had already booked Sixfoot's passage to New Zealand with Seabridge. Then a tiny, uninvited guest from the insect world threw a massive wrench into our plans: the brown marmorated stink bug. Under new regulations from Down Under, every vehicle shipped to New Zealand or Australia between September and April had to be fumigated with methyl bromide or heat-treated to over 56 °C for 30 minutes.

Faced with the vastly increased advisory workload during stink-bug season, Seabridge pulled the plug on winter shipments altogether. We reached out directly to the shipping line, Wallenius—a genuinely friendly and helpful team—only to hit another wall: for shipping, the vehicle had to be completely emptied. Empty out Sixfoot? Impossible, even with the option of packing everything into a separate sea crate.

Then came New Zealand's parade of red tape: half a day for a "self-contained" certification by two volunteer camping-association inspectors checking wastewater seals and trash bins, an electrician's inspection just to plug into campsite shore power, an axle-mounted toll device for vehicles over 3.5 tons, plus the local roadworthiness test. At some point, we threw in the towel. New Zealand simply couldn't be that amazing; Australia is supposedly a little easier and can wait until next summer, outside stink-bug season. Since we suddenly had time on our hands—and plenty of fresh ideas from the overland camper meeting to rebuild our rear garage—Plan B came together quickly: at the end of October, Sixfoot would head across Romania to the Black Sea and onward through Bulgaria to Greece.

OCTOBER 30 – NOVEMBER 1, 2018 · GERMANY TO HUNGARY

Back-Road Culture Shock and Racing the Sunset

On Tuesday, October 30, 2018, we finally rolled out and made it as far as Amberg in Bavaria on our first day. Then the trip's first test of patience began: we had no toll box for motorhomes over 3.5 tons for either the Czech Republic or Austria, leaving us no choice but to stick to the smallest country roads.

At the same time, autumn caught up with us fast. Our relaxed summer rhythm from the North Cape—driving well into the late evening—simply didn't work here. Darkness fell far too early, and we needed a place to camp by 5:00 p.m. After spending an entire day winding along Czech back roads to Gmünd in Austria, our alarm went off at 8:00 a.m. on November 1, and by 9:00 a.m. we were back on the road.

We threaded our way along minor roads through Lower Austria's Waldviertel—the "Forest Quarter," though surprisingly little forest remained—before crossing a quiet border into Slovakia. There, we were finally able to buy a vignette and merge onto the highway toward Hungary, where another vignette for motorhomes over 3.5 tons kept us rolling smoothly. By evening, we were parked in the Puszta south of Budapest, bravely setting our alarm for 7:00 a.m.—let's see if we actually hear it.

NOVEMBER 2 – 3, 2018 · ROMANIA

Carpathian Acoustics Instead of Howling Wolves

We didn't quite make 7:00 a.m. on November 2, yet by 8:00 a.m. we were already on the highway, covering 400 kilometers across Hungary and Romania before turning into the Carpathians just before Sibiu. Following the Transalpina route for about two hours, we reached a remote mountain inn in the last rays of sunlight. Apart from us, the mountain farming family, and plenty of dogs, there was absolute peace and quiet—or so we thought.

After baking a pizza in our oven, we were ready to turn in early when, right on cue at 8:00 p.m., live Romanian folk music began echoing through the mountains with concert-hall acoustics. We couldn't see a thing in the pitch dark, yet somewhere nearby a celebration with live music raged well past midnight—so much for lonely Carpathian nights and howling wolves.

The next morning we continued through the Carpathians past Sibiu and across Transylvania to Sighișoara (Schäßburg). The local campsite, supposedly open year-round, was locked tight at 1:00 p.m. and looked unlikely to reopen anytime soon. With a stroke of luck, we found a lovely spot all to ourselves at Villa Franka. Sitting outdoors on the terrace for dinner on November 3, gazing out over Sighișoara, felt almost surreal.



Evening light at the mountain inn along the Transalpina—shortly before the live folk music kicked off.



All to ourselves in the autumn woods: our peaceful pitch at Villa Franka in Sighișoara.

NOVEMBER 4 – 5, 2018 · TRANSYLVANIA & BLACK SEA

Bears, Vampires, and the Great Silence by the Sea

On November 4, we set off in glorious weather at 8:00 a.m. into Transylvania and reached the truly worthwhile Liberty Bear Sanctuary in Zărneşti around midday. Next up was a classic stop: Dracula's Castle in Bran. On a sunny Sunday in November, however, half of Romania seemed to have had the exact same idea, trapping us in a four-hour traffic jam on the way toward the coast—just 20 kilometers in four hours.



Two worlds meeting under a bright November sky in Transylvania: Sixfoot 6x6 framed by the Carpathians as a horse-drawn cart laden with firewood rolls past.

In the dark, we crossed Wallachia and pulled into the small coastal town of Olimp around midnight, only to discover that the supposed camper pitch didn't exist. Even the police patrol at the edge of town couldn't help, leaving us with a restless night along a very lonely street.

By November 5, an unmistakable truth began to sink in: we hadn't seen another motorhome since Austria a week earlier. We appeared to be the only travelers crazy enough to tour Romania and Bulgaria by camper in November, and every single campsite listed as open had long since shut its gates. Crossing into Bulgaria, the campsite in Topola was closed as well. Exhausted from our short night, we cruised along the coastal road and spotted a gorgeous Golf & Beach Resort—the resort was closed, too, though the golf course itself was open. We must have looked sufficiently desperate, because thanks to warm Bulgarian hospitality, they made an exception and let us spend the day and night right inside the resort.



Bulgarian hospitality at its finest: we were kindly granted an exception to stay overnight at the closed Golf & Beach Resort.



Bright sunshine and deserted chalk cliffs along the resort's Black Sea beach.

NOVEMBER 6 – 9, 2018 · BULGARIA TO CORINTH

Foggy Borders and Greek Ease

On November 6, our alarm rang at 6:00 a.m.—and this time we actually heard it. By 7:00 a.m. we rolled out of our Bulgarian golf sanctuary bound for Greece, with roughly 650 kilometers ahead of us, mostly on country roads and through light drizzle. Just before the Greek border, signs appeared prohibiting trucks over 3.5 tons. We bravely convinced ourselves that we were a camper, not a truck—over 3.5 tons, sure, but still.

We reached the border crossing in pea-soup fog with visibility down to three to five meters. The very friendly border guards asked to inspect the vehicle, checked whether we had any dogs on board, and then politely informed us that this crossing was closed to all vehicles over 3.5 tons—campers included. Lady Luck was on our side, and they waved us through anyway. Around 5:00 p.m., we rolled with great relief onto a genuinely open campsite in Kavala.

On November 7, we slept in and cruised along Macedonia's coastal road under brilliant sunshine, passing the monastic republic of Mount Athos and spending the night right on the beach to the sound of the surf. The next day brought another 650 kilometers south via highways and back roads. Neither our maps nor our stubborn sat-nav warned us before we suddenly found ourselves on a road restricted to 3.5 tons—just as a huge truck came rumbling straight toward us. When in Rome, we adapted. At 6:00 p.m., we received a warm welcome at the "Camperstop" in Ancient Corinth, and on November 9, after 4,200 kilometers on the road, Sixfoot got a well-earned wash-and-repair day.



November 8 right beside the Aegean: open sea views, an empty coastal road, and the drive continuing south.

NOVEMBER 10 – 24, 2018 · THE PELOPONNESE

South-Sea Vibes, Lumbago, and a Little Break

On November 10, we drove past Arcadia all the way to the very southern tip of the Peloponnese. For four hours we wound through blossoming landscapes and increasingly narrow villages and lanes until we arrived at a huge campsite directly by the sea. Including us, there were just three vehicles on the entire grounds, with a good 100 meters separating us from our nearest neighbor. That very afternoon, I jumped into the pleasantly warm sea.

When a bout of lumbago struck on November 11, pure relaxation became doctor's orders. Swimming several times a day worked wonders for my back, reception was only staffed for half an hour each evening anyway, we had the beach almost completely to ourselves, and our biggest daily worry was how long our batteries would hold out with the help of solar power.



Unwind mode at Camping Ammos near Finikounta—plenty of space and total serenity.



Tucked right behind the reed belt: Sixfoot beside a nearly deserted sandy beach on the Peloponnese.

On November 17, we left our dream beach behind and traced the southern fingers of the Peloponnese through steady rain, still spending the whole day climbing around the wonderful rock town of Monemvasia. When the sun returned on November 20 for what were likely the last warm days of the season, we treated ourselves to a four-day break from Sixfoot at a lovely hotel. Back on the road on November 23, we didn't get far—we immediately lingered in a secluded cove just past the hotel, braved one more refreshing morning swim the next day, and then crept around the Methana Peninsula at a walking pace. We spent the night perched high on the cliffs with a breathtaking view, missing the full moon by just two days.





Four days of well-earned luxury away from Sixfoot in the serene setting of Amanzoe.

Sidetracked right past the hotel: dusk settling over Paralia Korakia beach, all to ourselves.



Sunny cruising along the Peloponnese coast with clear views across to the offshore islands.



Our cliffside pitch high above the sea on the Methana Peninsula in golden evening light.

NOVEMBER 26 – DECEMBER 1, 2018 · ATHENS TO CROATIA

Olive Oil, Sky Monasteries, and the Quiet Adriatic

On November 26, we stocked up on truly excellent olive oil and visited friends in Athens before spending a windy night by the fortress of Ancient Corinth with a sweeping view over the Gulf of Corinth. Early the next morning, we followed the gulf, crossed the bridge at Patras, and enjoyed effortless driving along almost deserted Greek highways toward Central Greece. By early afternoon we reached the Meteora monasteries—a jaw-dropping backdrop even in the rain, which we took in from a small parking spot high up right between the rock pillars.



Between drifting clouds, autumn foliage, and sheer sandstone spires: the Meteora monasteries—with Sixfoot perched on the rocky ledge at bottom right.



A magical atmosphere as mist rose slowly between the towering rock formations of Meteora.



Our quiet overnight spot high up beside a stone wall with sweeping views across the valley.

On November 28, we descended from the monasteries to the Ionian Sea and crossed into Albania. Setting off at 9:00 a.m. on November 29, we tackled a demanding yet spectacular stretch along the Albanian Adriatic coast: 350 kilometers took roughly eight hours before we arrived in Shkodra, where overnight temperatures were forecast to drop to around 0 °C.



Unwinding after the long coastal drive along the Albanian Adriatic: evening calm at our campsite in Albania.

Heading north through Montenegro on November 30, we strolled through the old town of Stari Bar and paid our third visit to wonderfully preserved Kotor, which felt especially charming at the end of November with barely any tourists around. After circling the Bay of Kotor, Dubrovnik proved tricky for a large vehicle—all parking lots were strictly for passenger cars—until we found a quiet spot outside the closed campsite. On December 1, the rain refused to let up; after a short hop through Bosnia and past Split, we landed in Primošten. Where finding a parking space in summer is impossible, we had our pick of an empty bay-view lot—though as the only tourists in town, tracking down an open restaurant was a challenge in itself.

DECEMBER 2 – 4, 2018 · ITALY, SWITZERLAND & HOMEWARD BOUND

Chianti on Lake Garda and Starlight in the Snow

On December 2, Primošten gifted us one bright morning before the gloom returned, prompting us to switch from the coastal road to the highway for a brisk run through Slovenia, past Trieste, Venice, and Verona all the way to Lake Garda. In Sirmione, we found an ideal camper pitch right by the lake—and lo and behold, there were other campers again, open bars and restaurants, and a delicious Italian dinner paired with a fine Chianti.



Pre-Christmas sparkle on Lake Garda: the festively lit gate of Scaligero Castle in Sirmione.

After a calm, sunny morning stroll through sleepy Sirmione on December 3, we set off into the Alps at midday. Narrow country roads—a real threading-the-needle act for Sixfoot—carried us up to the Bernina Pass, where we parked at 2,300 meters surrounded by snow beneath a crystal-clear starry sky. On December 4, 710 winding kilometers through the Swiss mountains still lay ahead. With every kilometer closer to home, the highways grew busier and the roadworks more frequent, until we rolled safely into our driveway that evening.



A world away at 2,300 meters: Sixfoot parked in deep snow atop the Bernina Pass under a clear starry sky.



A wintry finale the next morning on the Bernina Pass before tackling the final 710 kilometers home.

REFLECTIONS ON AN OFF-SEASON JOURNEY

It was a wonderful, deeply restorative tour so late in the off-season—from shuttered Black Sea campsites and deserted Peloponnese beaches to starlight in the snow on the Bernina Pass. Now the washing machine is running nonstop, because in three weeks we are heading to New Zealand after all—sadly without our trusty Sixfoot.

LOGBOOK · AT A GLANCE

Stage Overview of the 2018 Balkan Tour

	Stops & Region	Highlights & Notes
Oct 30 – Nov 1	**Amberg → Gmünd → Puszta (Hungary)**	Back roads through the Czech Republic and Waldviertel without a toll box (> 3.5 t); highway travel by vignette from Slovakia and Hungary onward.
Nov 2 – Nov 3	**Transalpina → Sibiu → Sighișoara**	400 km highway, mountain inn with late-night live folk music; outdoor terrace dinner at Villa Franka on November 3.
Nov 4 – Nov 5	**Zărnești → Bran → Olimp → Bulgaria**	Liberty Bear Sanctuary, Dracula's Castle (4-hour jam for 20 km); campsites closed, hospitable overnight stay at a Bulgarian golf resort.
Nov 6 – Nov 9	**Kavala → Athos → Ancient Corinth**	650 km through thick fog across the border, beach night in Macedonia, another 650 km to Ancient Corinth; wash-and-repair day after 4,200 km.
Nov 10 – Nov 24	**Peloponnese & Methana Peninsula**	Nearly empty beach campsite, swimming to cure lumbago, Monemvasia in the rain, 4-day hotel break, cliffside night on Methana.
Nov 26 – Nov 27	**Athens → Patras → Meteora Monasteries**	Olive-oil shopping, visiting friends in Athens, windy night at Ancient Corinth, empty highways up to the Meteora rock pillars.
Nov 28 – Dec 1	**Albania → Montenegro → Croatia**	350 km (8 hrs) along the Albanian coast to Shkodra (0 °C), Stari Bar, quiet Kotor, Dubrovnik, rainy deserted Primošten.
Dec 2 – Dec 4	**Sirmione → Bernina Pass → Home**	Italian dinner with Chianti on Lake Garda, tight climb up to 2,300 m in the snow, 710 km drive home through Switzerland.