



# Free float on the DUNAJEC

**AN 18-KM RIVER RIDE ALONG THE POLISH-SLOVAK BORDER IS LIKE A TOLKIENESQUE JOURNEY**

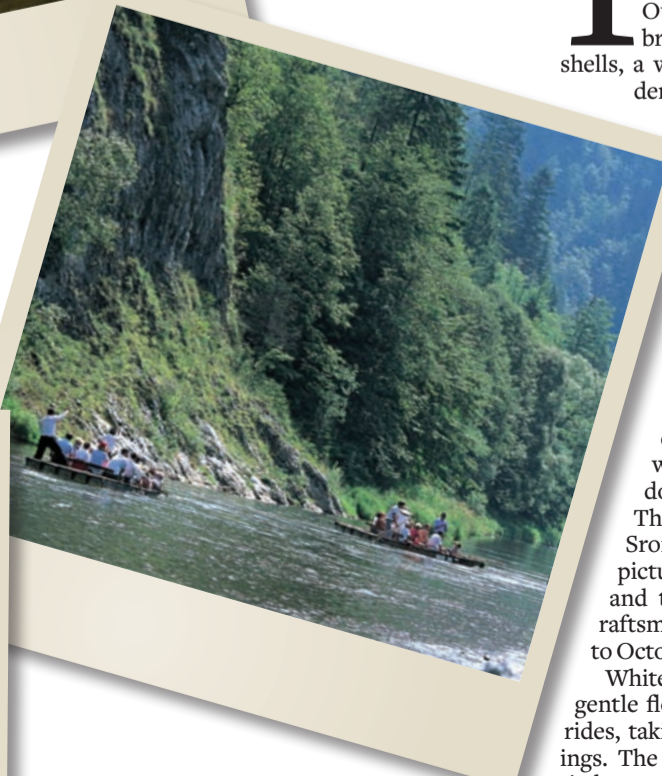
**A Raftsman punts his way with a long wooden pole along the green Dunajec River**



**Robber's Jump: Slovakian Robin Hood jumped across the river to escape the police while defending the locals**



**Passengers awaiting their turn to raft across the river between Slovakia on one side and Poland on the other**



**Kalpna Sunder**

**I**t is a Polish golden autumn day. Shades of bronze, russet, brown and red, cloak the surrounding forests like a burst of pyrotechnics. Our raftsmen in a jaunty round brimmed black felt hat with cowry shells, a white shirt and a fancy embroidered waistcoat with coloured flowers punt his way expertly with long wooden poles through the green Dunajec (pronounced Doo-na-yets) River. The Dunajec, a tributary of the Vistula River in Poland flows through the chalky white turrets of the Pieniny mountains. Rafts have been plying the Dunajec since the 17th Century. The ride originated in the logging industry. Trees were felled and logs were floated down the river to the sawmills. This 18-km stretch from the village Sromowce Katy is one of the most picturesque rides in Central Europe and there are about 500 *fiscacy* or raftsmen who ferry tourists from April to October, down this winding stretch.

White water rafting this is not; more a gentle float punctuated by some bumpy rides, taking in the impressive surroundings. The raft is made up of five canoes tied up together made from hollowed tree trunks and assembled like pontoons. There are 12 passengers sitting on three rows of seats and an assistant raftsmen called the *pomocnik* at the stern.

Almost the whole Tolkienesque journey is along the Polish-Slovak border. It's strange to see a river as a natural boundary between two countries, as we take turns

in admiring Slovakia on the right bank and Poland on the left. The countries are, by all accounts, good neighbours.

Our raft mates are a boisterous group of Hungarians, with a repertoire of jokes that are translated by our guide. They make the ride pleasurable with raucous bursts of laughter which threaten to rock the raft! On the right is the Pieniny way — a narrow ledge open to walkers and cyclists running along the whole length of the gorge. There are emerald green meadows filled with butterflies, wildflowers, eagles and black storks soaring above, red-roofed wooden chalets and mountain shelters and the glorious pure air. There are quaint wooden Catholic churches on the Polish side facing their Evangelical counterparts across the waters in Slovakia. The Slovakian village of Czewony Klasztor is the starting point for Slovakian rafts. Cyclists wave to us from the Slovakian side. Our boatman says that the Slovaks are not as well trained as them and often overload their rafts (Polish raftsmen have to undergo training under a master rafter for three years and then take an exam to get a licence).

We reach a swish, ultra-modern bridge over the river at Sromowce Nizne linking Slovakia and Poland. Thanks to the porous borders of the EU, many Polish visitors can now visit the famous Red Monastery so named for its red roofs. According to lore, there was a monk called Cyprian here who was into alchemy, botany and astrology — and could actually fly!

Suddenly the river bends sharply. The true gorge has begun. For the next three kilometres the river bends in about seven meanders. We are surrounded by narrow steep limestone cliffs like intimidating corridors and it's suddenly cool as the sun is blocked out. The play of light and shade casts mysterious shadows on the cliffs. It's one of those 'once in a lifetime moments'.

Gradually, the Dunajec narrows into a

bottleneck and this place is called the Robber's Jump. Legend has it that Janosik, who was a Slovakian Robin Hood defending the local highlanders from their rich oppressors, jumped across the river here to avoid being caught by the police. Cut into the rocky ribs are silhouettes called the Monks because of their shape.

On the Slovakian bank we see the Highlander Year source — a spring that according to legend allows the person who drinks the water here to live to a 100 years. Down the source the river turns 180 degrees and reaches its lowest point — the Dungeon. The trip ends at the village of Szczawnica where we have lunch at an 18th century Highlander restaurant with some traditional Polish food — *oscypek* or traditional smoked goat's cheese with cranberry sauce. From the river it's on to a medieval castle next. Picturesque Niedzica Castle looks straight out of a Gothic novel, perched high above a dam built on the Dunajec River. For many years the owners of the castle were Hungarian. Today, it functions as a museum and has panoramic views of the mountains and a reservoir by the Dunajec.

Niedzica has a beautiful courtyard, restaurant and even a hotel where you can stay in private, antique-furnished guestrooms and be pampered like a king. It also has a torture chamber and rooms furnished with hunting trophies. Like any other self-respecting castle, Niedzica too has its share of tales and legends. The most fantastic one we hear is how one of the owners of this castle travelled to the New World and fell in love with an Inca princess. When her father was murdered by the Spaniards, the princess fled to Hungary with her new husband with valuable Inca scrolls and treasures. It is believed that in the depths of the castle somewhere, some Inca treasures are still buried. It's a fitting romantic ending to a day filled with wondrous moments.