

Swamps

A group of thirteen assorted miscreants from all over the UK banded together at St. Pancras station ready to set out on the expedition of their lives, lead by the wizened Nigel and the courageous Kathy, packed with excitement, adventure, death defying stunts and swamps galore! (before I continue I should warn, I'm prone to slight exaggeration). Our first adventure took place on the 'kissing swamp', where we were to clear what looked like an impossible excess of biomass. Fortunately team swamp were up to the task and having busied themselves with the brushcutting, chainsawing, forking and dragging skills of kings (and queens) the task was completed to much (one legged) merriment.



Site two, Torfy Oronskie, was conquered with similar fervour and we were treated, with mixed enthusiasm, to a multitude of beautiful wasp spiders. Outside our swamp labours, much of our efforts seemed to be directed towards the critique and consumption of Polish alcoholic beverages and to gazing at stars, both activities we all felt were, without fail, successful. Halfway through our first week a violent storm and, apparently, a tornado(!) hit the small town of Osieck and having eaten and drunk (no tornado can keep team swamp from their beer) by candlelight, and generally been soaked through, we awoke to a scene of soggy devastation. Wizened Nigel then kindly offered our services to clear the mess



in time for the two weddings that were to take place that day before we were to head back to work at the spider swamp, seemingly unaffected by the torrential rain and strong winds; it would perhaps have been nice if the storm had managed to remove a few trees for us, since it had managed to throw a few in our path en route. In return for our noble tree clearing services the hotel manager offered us not only a few crates of beer but also a carriage ride through the woods complete with Polish tea (unsurprisingly consisting of tea and alcohol).



Warszawa

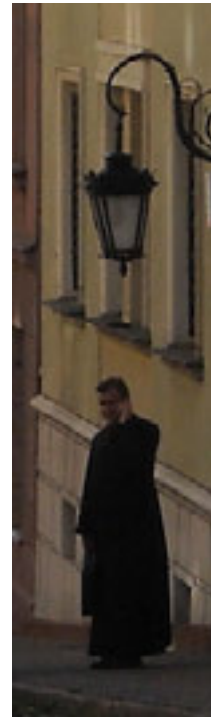
Towards the end of the week we struck forth to Warszawa for Pierogi, culture and aimless wanderings; Warszawa, according to my sources, was named thus after a man called Wars and a woman called Zawa who founded the city, a rather nice start to a city I thought. We were treated to a boat trip along the river Vistula followed by coffee in a church cellar, a walk in the woods in the rain and, as the sun came out, a trip to the university library roof for an amazing view of Warszawa surrounded by a rooftop garden. The 'Old Town' area was in fact not so old since such a vast area was destroyed during WWII, but the area had been rebuilt in the same style as it had been for hundreds of years so there was a surreal mix of old architecture and new buildings. The buildings surrounding the old market square retained much of their original qualities, with different colours, sizes and shapes for each building and in the middle the much loved mermaid statue, protected apparently by a basilisk that lived in one of the houses in the square who if you looked at it in the eye would see that you would immediately perish.



The churches were all vast, elaborate and striking, and while I was taking pictures of these I tried to include in each picture one of the many nuns or monks that covered the streets of Warszawa, spreading peace and holiness through sheer numerosy. When later I returned to Warszawa I attended an organ recital in St. Johns Cathedral, a huge cathedral modestly hidden on a narrow cobbled street, after which I was



completely incapable of resisting the small sign at the back pointing down a narrow staircase saying 'to the crypts'. The result was not as creepy as I'd hoped, excepting a couple of very small unlabelled wooden coffins hidden discreetly in dark corners. I also felt as a music student coincidently in Warszawa during the International Chopin Festival it would be rude not to attend a Chopin concert, at this concert I was treated to an exceptional piano performance by what I can only describe as a boy; he had certainly not hit his 20s by the looks of him. I was given a seat right at the back of the hall, far into the corner, I wondered whether this had anything to do with the fact that I was not only the only person without a hat and beautiful dress, I was in fact the only person in faded, holey jeans and scraps of material where shoes should be.

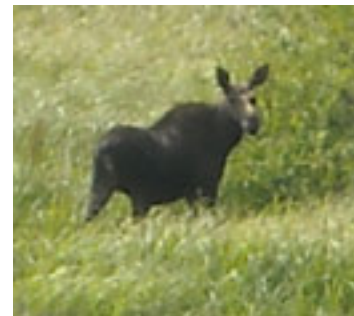




Just before I left for Germany I thought I would try and find the only synagogue left in Warszawa from before the war, I found instead the only Jewish street left standing from before the war. The houses were obviously very old and dilapidated but fortunately had not been demolished and were being propped up with scaffolding, the street was only about 200m in length and was surrounded by modern, commercial central Warszawa. Along the walls of the buildings were large photos of people and families who had been lost during the Nazi regime and on the adjacent street tiny Jewish cafes and shops.

Kukle

On our way up to the second site, near the Lithuanian border in the north-east, we stopped at the Biebrza marshes to look out onto a vast flat wetland, and to see, even within the couple of hours we were there, a greater spotted eagle and a moose! At our second site we were provided with a beautiful lake to swim in, bikes to ride, kayaks to paddle, woods to walk in and, of course, beer to drink. Unfortunately after our first foray to an adjacent hotel for a quick dance we discovered that the only way back in after hours was through the window, which we were obliged to provide as an entrance for all beer dwellers to crawl through.



While we were enjoying a conservation team ice cream Kathy heroically prevented a reversing car from running over an elderly man who was lying in the road, we later saw this man again, stumbling against a fence and, thinking he had been run over and was hurt, Mary and I helped him to a seat, unsure

what to do with him. When Kathy came to find us after a few minutes of holding his hand and nodding at his slurred Polish, she told us he had not in fact been run over and was just a drunk old man, which was, presumably why he had been on the ground in the first place. I still hope he enjoyed our company none the less.



On site we were to clear more biomass and to look at more butterflies, spiders and storks, the latter of which we saw in an enormous flock, circling slowly above in an incomprehensible multitude. Off site I learnt much more than I ever thought was possible to learn about moth identification over the two weeks, my favourites being the 'Setaceous Hebrew Character', the 'Maidens blush' (with a red blush on each wing) and the 'Purple Clay', which I (a moth novice) passionately argued the identification of despite Nigel's (a moth expert) dissent. In reward for all our hard work we were taken to a house with a sauna by a river for cooling off, which was very enthusiastically greeted and towards the end of the week we were taken to Lithuania for an hour or two ("it would be rude not to"). During one of the fairly regular thunder storms we managed to befriend a large group of drunk Poles round a campfire, who shared their Polish vodka along with Nigel's Hungarian plum spirit, Palinká, a surreal experience against the backdrop of lightning flashes. We did not, needless to say, make it to the fen for 9am the next day.



On our final night a few of us decided to take our blankets out to the jetty to sleep under the stars, a beautiful night and a great way to finish our two weeks of gallivanting together.

Post Swamps

Goodbyes at Augustow station were swift and muted, but with quiet determination to meet again in another swamp in another part of the world, and thus Jelle and I found ourselves standing looking lost and forlorn in Augustow city centre. We were told that Augustow's hostel was located 5 miles or so out of the city centre, but after finding the remarkably well hidden place, we found ourselves standing in an empty hotel corridor with an enthusiastic woman who spoke no English. I had temporarily lost my Polish phrase book so was passed a phone with an English speaking daughter on the end and was told that I could have a room for 40 Złotys and had to resist being ushered up the stairs into the room. On our escape we encountered a young woman with a very large pet brown rat, whom she was walking without a lead; the rat was apparently responding to her gentle persuasions and finger clicking's, trotting along distractedly ahead of her. When she saw us she exclaimed happily, picked up the rat and, chattering away in Polish, held it out for us to pet, obligingly we both stroked the rat briefly on the head and gave it an English hello before she put it back on the floor and continued its walk. Rat free and back in the centre of Augustow I found a place to pitch my tent by the river for a reasonable 12 Złotys and we finished the day with wanderings, vagaries and fish sandwiches. I fell into a deep sleep outside my tent in a cloud of mosquitoes before Jelle went to catch his midnight bus to Estonia.

After passing miles and miles of woodland on a bus the next day, I arrived in the village of Białowieża and, glimpsing a large sign announcing a hostel, requested that the bus driver stopped; the driver asked me if I was looking for a hotel and told me I should stay on and he would take me to such a place. Having looked already at a map of the village I knew that the hotel he was thinking of was not of the cheap variety and commenced a short cross lingual argument over whether or not I should be released from the bus at that point, an argument I managed to win. As I left the bus I was accompanied by an elderly gentleman with that very particular pungent scent of moth ball repellent that you only ever associate with gentlemen of this particular age, I took a discreet breath and held it as I hurried away from him as quickly as I could. I made myself comfy in a very nice and ridiculously cheap hostel, which turned out to be Białowieża's only hostel, only to find that I was sharing a room with the very same elderly gentleman. I discovered guiltily that he was a very nice man, so dutifully held my breath as I helped him make his bed and took part in Polish only conversations from which the only thing I could gather was that he was referring to me as 'Pani', which I think is akin to being referred to as Madam.

Białowieża

On my first day in the forest I joined a mish mash of Europeans who had hired an English guide to take us into the restricted part of the forest. This is the part of the forest that was restricted as early as 1500 by the local Royalty to be used purely for the royal hunting needs, with targets such as Bison, Elk, Moose, Deer, Wolves and lynx, all of these still present today. Whatever we may think of the motives behind these restrictions there's no denying that people, and almost certainly all of the above animals, are very grateful for what has been kept from human interference, preserving a mass of forest that has hardly been seen by mankind for thousands of years that covers over 700 square miles in Poland and Belarus. We were whisked around a walkway near the outskirts of this restricted section of the forest and enthusiastically shown a large variety of lichen, fungi, moss and tree species, many of the latter averaging at over 200 years old. After the tour I looked at the area we had covered on our walk in comparison to the overall area of restricted forest in Poland; a tiny circuit covering a miniscule area on the brink of the forest, I had to quell my curiosity about what was residing, hidden far from human intervention, deep in this forest. The guide told me that of the few people who were allowed further into this part of the forest, most were researchers, and that their job was very difficult due to the vast amount of uninterrupted space available for the creatures to hide in the forest. However even this miniature forest area was a brilliant example of succession in its full glory; with all the trees reaching a similar, unfathomable height, competing for soil and entwining together. While the lower levels are almost empty but for mosses and fungi since the competition for the light was won absolutely by the high tree canopies, even outcompeting their own lower branches. The faster growing, early succession trees such as birch and pine could no longer seed in the dark forest floor, leaving room for the more robust, slower growing trees such as oaks and elms.



Two Romanian cyclists (who were asking me about the weather in the UK in February...I asked if they had raincoats) told me that Greenpeace had just won a protest banning logging completely throughout the whole of the Białowieża forest, rather than just the restricted section. This law was probably passed in slight vagueness since I came across three sturdy looking Poles with chainsaws during my exploration of the Białowieża village later that day, I decided (since I didn't know the Polish) not to ask them if they'd heard the news and settled for a friendly 'Dzien Dobry', in the sing song accent of the forest I liked to imitate. After getting lost, as is my general habit in a new

place, I settled myself down for the most expensive coffee in Poland (9pln! –

4pln was my coffee budget) and decided to put the map aside and continue my exploration until I reached the edge of the forest on the villages outskirts and then turn back in what I considered to be the right general direction. Needless to say this method pleasantly filled the rest of my day. On my way back I stopped at one of the villages tiny shops and discovered that in order to buy anything of any use I would have to ask for it in Polish, which is why I found myself eating something called kasca for my dinner. Not in a position to waste food I asked the person with the most English I could locate in the hostel how it was cooked; she told me to mix it with boiling water (which was good because I was already halfway through doing this) but then added that she usually used it to make soap...I sincerely hoped she meant soup! At any rate perhaps my insides could do with a good polish. Despite the relatively unenthusiastic taste of kasca I ended up eating it for breakfast as well, since I hadn't managed to buy any breakfast food during my complicated visit to the shop.

Trundles

I spent the next day on a slightly dubious hired bike, following at first a signposted touristic route that lead to a place called miesca mocy. This was apparently a place of ancient spiritual energy with



creepy twisted trees and large flat rocks scattered over the ground that would give out good energy; those most sensitive to this energy were said to be unable to stand on



the stones at all. Disappointingly I was completely able to stand on these stones, but the place was beautiful and I rested on a stone under the canopy of a four trunked oak tree watching two nuthatches run up and down the bark, also apparently unaffected by the deeply spiritual trees they were befriending. Following this I decided to ditch the tourist route (perhaps on some deep spiritual impulse but more likely out of pig headed curiosity) and attempt to find a small village called Czerlonka that appeared to be totally unconnected to any major roads. I think it's important to emphasize here that my definition of 'lost' is slightly different to that of most other peoples: I think if I don't specifically intend to take the most direct route to any

destination then any diversion, intentional or unintentional, I may take on the way is purely an unspecified addition to the route, a decoration perhaps. My day was full to the brim with such decorations, in which every time I stopped to rotate the map uselessly I was distracted by the vastness of the trees around me and the uninterrupted silence stretching as far as I could ascertain. Every now and then I would stumble to a halt whilst gazing fruitlessly into the distant canopy trying to identify an interesting call, to lift my bike over a fallen tree (which were always left to their own natural processes) or to take a picture of an enormous tree, for which my camera was just not up to the task. Never before, it must be said, has a tree managed to make me slam on my

non existent brakes and exclaim my comparable diminutive stature with quite so many uncouth words from a heap on the ground ("**** me! look at the ***** size of that ***** tree!").



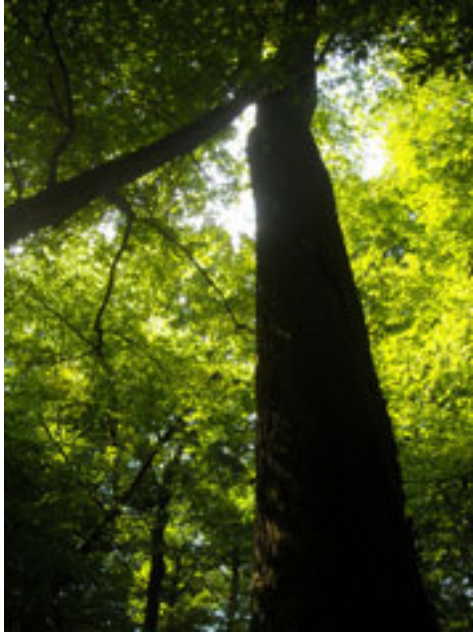
I did manage to find this village and, as I should have expected, it was incredibly empty and creepy, but there was, disappointingly, a sandy road for cars. Just as it was starting to get darker, and I was starting to notice how much a 50 foot tree trunk can sway from side to side in a relatively mild wind, I cycled with relief past a sign announcing 'Białowieza 1km', the first signpost I'd seen for some time now. Unfortunately five minutes later I passed another sign announcing 'Białowieza 9km', but eventually I emerged onto the first tarmac road I'd seen since that morning at a completely different location to the one the map said it thought I should be, at the Belarus border control. Cautiously I arranged my face into a touristically confused expression and gesticulated wildly at my battered map, partly to find out what the hell the thing was playing at but mostly to prove to any snipers nestling over the border that I was not a Polish spy. I then swiftly U-turned the bike and set off with renewed energy in the direction of Poland.

Back in Białowieza (somehow) I made another attempt at buying food and managed to come out not only with some useful ingredients for my next kasza dish but also some new vocabulary, even though I had to move to a new shop every third ingredient because I was holding up queues of people trying to explain what I wanted.

Filip

Filip had been responsible for the rabble of volunteers squelching about in swamps, and on hearing I was making my way to Białowieza the following week kindly offered to take me on a small tour of the area while he was visiting his grandparents who lived in the area. My visit had coincidentally coincided with a famous orthodox pilgrimage destination, and hundreds of people were making their way to a tiny chapel perched on a small hill near a village just outside the forest. During the plague the villagers of Grabarka had erected a cross on this hill near their village and prayed for their village to be spared the plague; consequently none of the villagers fell ill despite the fact that many people in neighbouring villages were killed. Out of gratitude the villagers built a church on this hill and thence forth people from miles around chose this sight to make their pilgrimage, each pilgrim brings their own cross to the hill so the church is surrounded by hundreds of crosses of every size, scattered all around the hill beneath the church. Unfortunately the church, made entirely of wood, had burnt down completely ten years previously and

only a Virgin Mary icon was salvaged, but they had apparently managed to rebuild it in exactly the same way as it had been before. At the bottom of the hill there was a well from which you could extract holy water to drink or to wash your face (I decided not to attempt it at the risk of severe burns) and a stream behind this well had the power to heal an ill if the source of the hurt is washed with a cloth soaked in the streams water and then hung beside the stream. Filip and I could not think of any ill that currently needed healing so



we just watched curiously, he told me he had seen people making the pilgrimage on their knees but as we left we passed an enormous tour bus full of people with a Virgin Mary picture in the front window, I suppose there are varying degrees of dedication.

Filip was a brilliant guide, despite his occasional neglect of the steering wheel, and was a fountain of knowledge for my unending questions, many of which satiated my curiosity regarding religion. I was surprised for some reason at the complete lack of synagogues; I had thought that some at least may remain but I saw only one in a small village and Filip told me it was not in use. Most people were Catholic or Orthodox, Catholic being the prominent faith within

the government, but in the small churches I visited both religions seemed to rub along side by side happily with graves of both religions surrounding the church. The churches I crept nervously inside were filled from floor to ceiling with iconography and elaborate decoration in bold colours; every inch of the tiny wooden buildings were devoted to God. I also got a look at one of the reserves Filip was working on for Stone Curlew and Black Grouse beside the river Bug, apparently there are three different meanings behind this one pronunciation of Bug, which made me very sceptical about the fact that Poles are always telling me their language is completely phonetic. Incidentally the Polish translation of the English word Bug is possibly the most ridiculous word I've ever attempted to pronounce: chrzascz! I was treated to a short Polish lesson where I managed to still not be able to pronounce the word for 'three' (trzy) but did manage to order two ice creams in memory of EUCAN (dwa lody prosze).

The Tourist

I decided it was time to be a proper tourist and set out on the forest trail leading to the zoo, this took longer than was necessary because I was continually enthralled by the magnificent trees I had to stop and gape at every couple of minutes. As I was gazing up into the vast canopy I heard the piercing screech of a buzzard and, a second later saw him glide effortlessly across one of the only gaps in the foliage. As I watched him quietly I heard a rustle much closer to home and lowered my eyes to meet those of a Roe deer, watching me nervously through the trees a few metres away. This made the zoo seem incredibly underwhelming, although it was refreshing to see it built into the forest rather than on top of it, as it probably would have been in the UK. I saw some domestic Bison herds, Konik (polish horses) and the Zubron, a hybrid of a bison and a cow that somehow created what looked like an enormous bison. The breed seemed a little pointless to me seeing as every first generation male was infertile so the process of cross breeding must be maintained continually, which must be a fair amount of effort, however the race was apparently very old so traditions must be upheld! The rest of the cages contained various forest animals that were too well hidden to be seen and I found myself wondering around grumbling about the lack of trees protecting me from the strong sun and the noise of children squabbling and tourists shouting, so made a hasty retreat back to the silent forest to eat my lunch in peace.



I found the next tourist spot completely by accident since I was completely unable to resist a path that was not marked on the map but clearly skirted the restricted part of the forest, this path eventually lead to a dead end in a swamp and I'm fairly sure the last part of the path wasn't actually a path but a wild boar track. Despite this I obstinately kept walking across the swamp, determined to rediscover a path of some sort but discovered instead a



multitude of mosquitoes and a particularly beautiful Comma butterfly who was kind enough to sit still long enough for me to take a picture. Needless to say I was forced to give up and turn back and took myself to a small educational footpath circuit. Although I soon realised I was walking it backwards I didn't worry myself too much since the attractions were in the form of informative notices praising some Lithuanian Prince

or other and some amazing elderly oaks at which these Royals apparently used to stand near or dance around or some such thing. On my way back I rejoined the tourist trail I had abandoned earlier as there was apparently something of intellectual interest on it; this turned out to be sporadic signs describing the different tree species but they appeared not to have been placed with any reference to actual nearby trees. The forest was dense, colourful and full of life with fallen trees scattered over the forest floor, always left to themselves, with rotten hollows creating long wooden tunnels through



the trees. An unexpected sneeze into the silence revealed just how close animals were to me as I heard quick, panicked rustling around me, although I rarely saw anything more than a distant deer or a cheeky red squirrel.

That evening I felt, for the first time since arriving in the forest, a sense of unease: having rested my feet with a coffee in the palace gardens I made my way back to the hostel before darkness fell, on my way out of the gardens I walked past three boys about my age, and as I approached their

lively conversation fell silent and they all turned to watch me walk past. Just as I passed them one said something in Polish and the one closest to me replied, with all the subtlety of a demented Gorilla 'tak' ('yes'), whilst looking pointedly at my legs. I hurried my pace a little and when I glanced back they were still watching me silently. I should perhaps console myself that if they had wanted to rob me all they would have gained would be an English book, a bottle of tap water and some after bite spray (which I wouldn't have lamented the loss of since it did nothing but make my bites greasy). Looking back on it I may have been a little irrational, the boy may have asked "do you think those shorts are made out of 100% natural fibres?" or "do you think she could win a fight against a Zubron?" obviously having seen my legs his answer would be 'tak' or possibly he asked "do you think one of those legs is wooden?" and as I was walking away they would have been discussing what sort of tree the wood had originated.

The tale of the heroic milkmaid and of how curiosity can kill the cat

At 5am I leapt out of bed to see the forest at dawn, and with the hope of seeing an exciting forest creature, marched into the wood along a trail with a board walk built over the marshy forest floor. After walking for about fifteen minutes I heard a clap of thunder in the distance, it sounded far away and having heard a few thunder storms during my stay I was convinced I had a fair while before the thunder arrived, and that I would easily make it through to the next road, so I continued on my way. I began to get more and more nervous as the thunder rolled closer at a much faster pace than I had anticipated and I soon realise that I was definitely not going to make it through the forest before the storm arrived. Barely had I turned back in the direction I had come when I was bombarded with torrential rain, thunder so loud I was instinctively ducking and lightning so bright I could see the flashes through the high, thick tree canopy. At this point the sudden realisation that I was alone in an empty forest at 5am being attacked by high winds and lightning hit me, and it must have been at this point that I completely lost it; all logic completely out the window I



broke into a full pelt run with one thought in my mind, that of making it out the forest as fast as was humanely possible. As I tried to navigate the slippery, broken board walk strewn with broken trees and patches of swamp, I thanked all those unsung childhood skills you never lose: clambering through bushes and trees, squelching through puddles and streams, running as fast as you can for the sake of it. Simple logic is not relevant in situations like this, where you can hear thunder so close that it starts in one ear and rolls over head to the other ear like surround sound speakers, what use was running? Except to get myself as far as possible from the threatening dense foliage, being lit every few seconds by alarmingly bright flashes of lightning. Perhaps in retrospect I should I walked carefully along the slippery path, watching for falling branches and stepping carefully over the obstacles, gauging the chances of anything managing to break off and land on me or of a nearby tree being struck by lightning, as was very unlikely.

I emerged from the forest, hurtling into the middle of the road looking like a drowned rat and wheezing like a bulldog, pulled myself to a halt and peered dazedly around me through the rain. I realised slowly what a ridiculously excessive reaction I had had, my panic was gradually replaced by a feeling of severe embarrassment (and thankfulness that no one appeared to have seen) and I began to stumble down the middle of the road as far as was possible from the trees towering on either side of the road. I do feel however that it's useful to know that the most I can manage running flat out in walking boots in a thunder storm is 20 minutes, this is certainly a fact that will be of use one day. At the sight of a sodden girl hobbling down the middle of the road a car stopped to offer me a lift I've never before been more grateful for. The woman spoke only Polish but we somehow managed to hold a conversation all the way back to the hostel where she dropped me off, probably about two completely different topics but I don't think this is as important as people think. I think I managed to ascertain from the nature of the stops she was making along the way that she was in fact the local milk lady, the best one I've ever met.

I huddled over a coffee in the hostel while the storm weathered itself out and when I was absolutely sure I could see the sun, I boldly set out and hired another bike for the day, pretending to be unfazed by the morning's assault. I



made my way to the north of the forest this time, making my way around the edge of the restricted part of the area, an exceptionally beautiful part of the forest. There was barely a soul without wings in sight, two or four legged and I gradually forgave the seemingly innocent surrounding trees their previous aggressions. The signs were only in Polish here (which I thought added an extra sense of mystery) but they seemed to point to little boardwalk circuits, showing you patches

of wetland with trees sprouting out of little raised islands sporadically and moss covered fallen trees creating new islands. As I cycled closer to the restricted area I could see the different stages of succession from the newer forest with pines, birches and cluttered ground vegetation, to the ancient forest where the only pines and birches left were enormous and fought for soil with oaks and ash, and the ground vegetation was minimised by the high, dark canopy. A greater spotted woodpecker fluttered up to a branch just above my head from a puddle on the path as I passed, not three metres from me! where he shook his feathers irritably waiting for me to leave so he could continue his bath. I stood and watched him in fascination until he tired of waiting and shot off to find another bath. On my way back I encountered the smallest village ever ('Lancyzno', consisting of one house and a bus stop), what looked on the map like a large town, Nerawka, but was in fact another fairly empty Polish village (they did at least have ice creams), and the longest, straightest road leading back to Białowieża.

By this time the language barrier was starting to make me lonely, in the last few days I had spoken to two American women who wanted to be entertained but didn't want to do anything (apparently the idea of getting on a bus to the next village was just appalling), a pleasant Polish man who spoke a bit of German (he jabbered away about his daughter while I tried to gather my secondary school German together and it took me a while to realise that 'isslant' was Iceland, when he did a volcano mime) and the hostel owner who appeared to be some sort of missionary and who told me about some of the other Polish reserves. Thus I decided it was time to leave the forest and learn how to converse again.

Goodbye Białowieża

Having learnt my lesson from the previous morning I stayed sensibly in bed until 8.00, missing the bus to Warsaw and the bus to Białystok. So to get to Warsaw I took a bus to Hajnowka, another to Białystok and a train to Warsaw, a nice lady on the train chatted away to me in Polish the whole way to Warsaw despite the fact that I could clearly not



understand a word.

Far from forests and swamps part two of my journey began, where I first had to remember how to exist in a large city and secondly had to remember how to get appropriately lost in a large city, the latter I found came naturally with immediate effect, the first took a few bottles of Zubr.

Kirstie Hazelwood