

Around the World Circling the Sun

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photo: Benka Pulko

On her motorcycle, Benka Pulko travelled across 75 countries and seven continents in a journey that lasted five and a half years. Recently the readers of the weekly *Jana* honoured her for this remarkable feat by selecting her the Slovenian Woman of the Year. Being a daring global adventurer rather than a mother or a wife, Pulko is a tad different from the previous winners of this award.

Why do you think you were chosen to be the *Slovenian Woman of the Year* this year?

Because the majority of the readers of family weekly *Jana* said so. I'm well aware of the observations being tossed around. People have noticed a different woman; they have noticed the audacity, the perseverance and the courage. They are talking of the personal contribution to global awareness about Slovenia, for which I have humbly put in five and a half years of tireless and voluntary work. It looks like the decision of the readers was truly unlike those of past years, indicating a shift in how stereotypes of women are perceived on this side of the Alps. I have always believed that a woman can be herself and still be accepted and recognised. This should be an incentive to all: live first for yourself, and only then for others. A woman need not be a sacrificial lamb; she need not give herself away, forgetting about herself in the process, to the extent that society is left to seeing no more than a weary, annoying, gossipy, spiteful, exhausted and completely spent human being that was put on this earth for others, rather than herself. I started putting my life in order because of the belief that unhappy people are a burden not only to themselves, but for all of society and that a happy community is based on happy individuals.

What pushed you down this path?

Curiosity and a thirst to learn. I have dared to ask more of life than just a warm, secure and familiar environment. I believed that there are many new things out there, foreign and worthy of my attention. I wondered how I would do when faced by challenges all alone. I believed it was worth the risk and followed

my gut feeling that said that everything would go right.

Do you think that women know how to follow their happiness?

Yes, some at least. They are human beings that feel and are aware of it for the most part. I'm convinced that they could be so more often, and to a greater extent. But it is no secret that today's society expects and demands too much of women. Few are spared the whole cast of inherent, rather than wished-for, titles that she ends up being given: a laundress, a mother, a wife, a lover, a shopper, a companion, the driver of the family; all while doing her best in her job with the will and energy that is left over. There are only 24 hours in a day you know. Women will have to take it a step further to rid themselves of the burdens of tradition and the demands of modern society. Too many responsibilities rest on female shoulders. It is true that we are resilient and patient, but it's worth asking the question of what we truly want to achieve during our short stay on earth. I cannot imagine how women could do a good job with all the tasks that are expected of them.

Do the features of Slovenian people stand out more clearly now that you have experienced a trip around the world?

We are hiding a warm heart under a cold exterior. It is a pity that we lack self-confidence. We have a tendency to act scared and withdrawn; we are often in doubt. We are also overly humble. We are ashamed to admit that we are good and that we should be recognised. I think we whine too much.

We do not believe that we have the power to realise our wishes, aspirations and plans. Nobody has said that it is easy. Life is never easy; but it is interesting! Too much positive energy is wasted on thinking about our problems, instead of dealing with them.

So what kind of a life do Slovenians have compared to other nations?

Excellent. The sky looks to be the limit.

How do you mean that?

Well, in general. We are free; we can decide what we are going to do. There are many opportunities before us. There is a good deal of work. You just have to see it.

What was the most valuable discovery of your journey?

The discovery that people are born friendly regardless of their place of birth, race or the religious beliefs of their parents. And also that it is a great shame to allow ourselves to be corrupted during our lives. I also learnt that everything depends on me. It is nice to have someone around, but expecting something from others is always worse than relying on yourself. The fate of a person should be dictated by oneself.

Did the fact that you're a woman influence your journey in any way?

Being a woman proved to be an advantage in my case. This was because I was doing something that most believed was a man's domain. For the most part I was received with surprise and admiration, as well as a fair share of openness and hospitality. Many a time the people I met felt a certain responsibility towards me and ended up acting in a very protective manner.

Did you feel alone at any point?

Alone? I was too busy for that! There was always something beautiful around me, or something interesting going on. I was sur-

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rounded by so many different people to whom I, in turn, dedicated my time and energy. At times there was just too much of everything. There were many occasions when I just wanted to be left alone. Especially in certain parts of Asia and some remote parts of Africa, where there was just no stopping the endless masses of kind, curious and mischievous people. There was no time for boredom and loneliness; the world is too beautiful, vibrant and interesting for that.

Did you miss home?

Home is a feeling in your heart. I learn and adapt quickly, which is why I embraced different places as my temporary home – if you will – in no time. I'm a person that could live anywhere. However, my birth town of Ptuj is something I would never want to swap. I do call Ptuj home, although I'm rarely seen there.

You recently published the book *Around the World Circling the Sun*. Are you happy with how it is doing?

My aim was to write a book to celebrate a unique event. I felt that I had to share my experience with anyone who might be interested. So this is how the book came about. I think of it as my baby – something that will remain when I'm gone. Selling the book is a consequence of having written it. Personally, I would have been satisfied with one copy...so my delight surpassed all expectations when it was released and then again when it was given the *Winged Lion Grand Prize* for the best all-around written Slovenian book in 2003. I'm proud. As regards to the exact sales numbers, I don't really know exactly. I have no time to check out how it's doing. But I know it hasn't been forgotten, since a lot is being written and said about it.

Did the fact that you had no man or child with you get under your skin at any time?

Absolutely not; otherwise I would have made suitable adjustments to preparations for the trip.

So what are your plans for the future?

I'm not too bothered about the future. It will come only too soon...I like to deal with the present, so that it doesn't whisk by. The future will happen when the time is right.

You come across as being very optimistic



and full of positive energy. How does a person achieve this?

Optimism is not a mood; it's a lifestyle. It probably has something to do with the state of having found yourself; with admitting who you are and what you want. It is the state when you finally assume responsibility for yourself, for your own work, achievements, disappointments and happiness.

Does Slovenia enjoy the global acclaim it should?

Not in the least. We are either poorly recognised or, for the most part, not recognised at all. I think that people would never ask if Austria or Serbia was a food, or a region in Russia, or perhaps a river in Africa...it is true that we're still a young country, but several years of travels across different parts of the world have made me believe that we have gone about promoting Slovenia the wrong way in many facets. We have targeted the wrong audiences that do not fit what Slovenia has to offer. Expensive, fancy presentations of a small alpine country at world tourism fairs are, let's say, not worthwhile. Slovenia has the ideal conditions for genuine tourism. We could become the adventure capital of Europe: a place where the world wants to

travel to as a ritual. Slovenia has been mentioned by independent globetrotters from all parts of the world. They praise it for its size; its public transport that lets you get from A to B cheaply; the possibility for unusual experiences in the post-communist era of what is a recently altered Europe; the safety; its good food; and its fascinating environment. Slovenia is not for tourists who are looking to spend a week lying on the beach for as little money as possible. So once again I return to the fundamental point of this whole interview: the call for the creation of something different and unique that would attract and "dazzle".

So what is your message for Slovenians?

They should remain Slovenians. They should preserve the good and the beautiful in them; and shake the anxiety, because nobody wants to do us any harm. Let's be who we are and live in harmony with each other. It doesn't matter what our neighbours think of us or if we meet the accepted criteria; what matters is that we're happy, no matter who we are and what our place is under this sun that shines for us all. ■

For more information on Benka and her fascinating journey around the world go to: www.benkapulko.com