

At first glance, our trip was a failure. We failed to complete our aim of travelling from Belgrade, Serbia, to Severin, Romania by SUP due to an injured shoulder less than half the way in.

This was not the outcome we had expected or hoped for but equally, in reality, our expedition was no less of an adventure than we'd dreamed of. In fact, we maybe even learnt more from our 'failure' than we might have done if we'd continued without issue.

Arriving in Belgrade airport, we caught a taxi as far as the nearest stretch of River Sava (a tributary of the Danube), and paddled the few hours through central Belgrade to our hostel.



*Preparing to leave down the Sava*

Our second day of paddling took us from the hustle and bustle of central Belgrade beyond its fringes into the surrounding countryside. We made sure to greet the funny looks of passers by with a big grin, and even attracted the attention of several boats eager to rescue us (we declined). Towards evening, getting hungry and ready for sleep, however, we feared we'd met our first disagreement with locals; shouts and calls from the water's edge demanded our attention, which we cautiously gave. To our delight, the shouts weren't demanding money, tedious paperwork or warnings but instead offered us our first Serbian beer! With only a handful of words in common, including 'Manchester City or United', we managed to negotiate Yugoslavian politics and (we think) invite all five of our new friends back to London to taste some British ales instead. This attitude was common of nearly every person we met in Serbia. Friendly, generous and proud of their country.



*Alex with our new Serbian friends*

After leaving we continued paddling to set up camp in field by the side of the river. The setting was more beautiful than we expected, for sure, but it seems we'd also underestimated the midges. Ideals of peacefully watching the world go by from the water's edge were quashed as we retreated to hide away in our tent, still suffering too many mosquito bites to count.



*Campsite at the end of our second day.*

After a quick breakfast we were up and raring to go for our first full day on the river, and what a day it was; SUPing down quiet forested valleys, past small towns nestled in hillsides and alongside barges and reeds. The river was much wider than expected, over a mile in places. We also didn't expect to suffer such a ferocious headwind all day.



*Photos from our final day paddling.*

After more than nine hours paddling, we'd accomplished approximately 35km - more progress than we'd expected to make even without considering wind factors - taking us as far as Smederevo. Unfortunately after this much paddling, Alex's shoulder was really starting to hurt, the pain had been getting steadily worse through the past couple of days and the week before whilst surfing in Cornwall. We decided a medical opinion from our home medical contact was a good idea.

Advice the next day from our UK medical contact, Dr Chris Press of Wilderness Medical Services, was sound but disappointing; Alex's shoulder was certainly not going to improve with more paddling but was likely to worsen. Being less than half way through the trip and about to enter a much wilder and more remote area, the only safe option was to stop here.

Obviously frustrated and exhausted, we spent a day licking our wounds and considering options. It was clear we needed to stop and get Alex examined by a physio quickly, but that didn't mean the adventures had to end here, making the most of the time booked off from work, within a few hours, we were back in Belgrade for a proper look around, before boarding a sleeper train bound for Budapest.

While we didn't get the prolonged physical and mental challenge of a long and continuous expeditious, we were pushed in other unexpected ways - the difficulty of recognising when to say 'no'; dealing with difficult decisions, especially when other stakeholders and sponsors were involved; and compromise. We were very fortunate to have the support of our fantastic sponsors, Origin Paddleboards and Aquapac, in coming home early in the interests of safety. The advice of our medical support at Wilderness Medical Services was invaluable in giving us the tools to make the right decision - from physio examination back in the UK, it seems stopping was definitely the right decision. Alex's injury has left no damage that is not recoverable but continuing may have changed this.

We have learnt so much from this experience, we will definitely be back to try something similar again in the future.

The budget went according to plan, before the injury. Origin Paddleboards and Aquapac provided us with all the necessary dry bags and Paddleboards, significantly reducing the cost of the expedition.



*Approaching the end of our paddle: hurting but still smiling*