

#elektrogirl

Words and images: Trui Hanouille • Zero DS



When crossing a lean, tawny man with a cap and a walking stick, cheerfully dragging a huge suitcase on wheels along a winding, deserted country road, what would be your thoughts? Traveller, pilgrim, homeless? It haunts me. I make a U-turn, address him in English and look into his radiant, wrinkled face. We communicate in a Russian-style single word language.

“Remont!” (repair) he shouts. Promptly he gestures the first car to stop, which luckily doesn’t do so. Then he puts his suitcase aside and stands behind my bike. He signals that I should turn it on. Suddenly I realise he thinks I’m having a breakdown. He bumpstarts the bike, I give a little throttle and glide off. He nearly tumbles

to the ground. I laugh a bit saying “elektrik!” and ride two small circles to prove that my bike is in perfect working order. He approaches and stares dumbfounded at the spot where there’s normally the engine, but only batteries. Then he laughs out loud and nods admiringly. Like so many, because of the silence, he thought my engine had broken down.

I get off and give him a sesame bar. As far as I can tell, he can do with a little extra energy. Grinning broadly, we pump hands. In my mirror I see him waving till he’s a mere dot.

I’m on my return journey from Istanbul, in a sparsely populated region of Bulgaria, on a 100 percent electric motorcycle, the Zero DS.



The little-used border entrance to Albania



An abandoned stretch of the Bosphorus coast in Turkey

Even though raised in an analogue era, new smart ideas and technologies always intrigue me. Half a year before the journey, I dragged my favourite biker girl along to test the four different Zeros. We expected a kind of semi-soft green bikes. Not by far. The Zero distributor in Bruges was smirking when we re-entered his gate.

“By the look of it, you’re pleased.” We’d never stepped off anything smiling as broadly.

What if I could test a Zero on a journey? One which would be long and adventurous enough, with acceptable risks and feasible possibilities? Istanbul! Far, yet close, with a resounding name. Not only is the route across the Balkans fascinating and beautiful, I had ridden it often and have friends in several spots along the way. Istanbul met everything. Suffice to find the bike.

The Zero head quarters were not interested. “You’re riding outside of our dealer network and only specialised technicians can work on them,” they replied, adding: “Our motorcycles are not meant for this. They’re commuter bikes, not travel bikes. Besides, this is not our target audience.”

But one man thought otherwise. Patrick Naeyaert, the Zero distributor of Bruges, Belgium and owner of nLab, a company building solar panels, considered it a brilliant idea. “How long do you need her?” I confess, I jumped in his arms. #elektrogirl was born. And because she became my soul companion, I gave the Zero a name: Xena.

In order to reach the longest distances, I knew I had to ride slowly. Yet how slow, and how far I would get, I ignored. Due to the late delivery of the new DS, I could only fetch her two days before departure. Hence the real test started on day one of the voyage. I set the GPS on ‘shortest route, including off-road, no highways’.

For me, traveling means unwinding. Stopping enough, looking around, let coincidence and serendipity take

over, adventure, freedom, rerouting. And above all, meeting people, talking and listening. And motorbiking of course. This exploit on this motorcycle promised all that, and she fulfilled all of it and beyond.

Everywhere I harvest success. No one has ever seen a bike like this. Custom officers, truckers, parents with kids, travellers, imams, cyclists – everybody questions me:

How far? 250kms at very moderate speeds; 150 if you want to go fast. How fast? This Zero with full luggage reaches 115km/h; without 130–140km/h. How long to charge? 12–13 hours, depending on the strength of the local electricity network, say one overnight. Charging on the road, say during lunch, is of course also possible. Each hour adds some 10 percent or 20kms. How to charge? In every normal house hold plug. If there’s electricity, she can charge, i.e. almost all over the world except for remote areas. Dreaming of which, Tajikistan electric will have to wait. Can’t you add a dynamo? Nope, despite centuries of attempts, the perpetuum mobile hasn’t been invented yet. But she regenerates electricity on power and torque; refuelling while riding, as it were. And when at full power, I beat the guys on petrol monsters at the traffic lights. The tiny macha smile of an e-rider.

Another advantage, and not the slightest: at every fuel station I shout a cheerful “ciao!” in my helmet. Upon returning home I have spent 23 euro for 7,719kms. Only in camping sites I needed to pay. The real cost is a bit more than 1 euro per 100kms, depending on the energy prices of each country.

I exaggerated; not everywhere I collected applause. The motorcyclists, except for three, want none of it. They ask the standard questions and raise shoulders at answer number 1. “Come back when they ride double that distance and charge within one hour.” And: “No gears, how dull!” Another killer: “You need to hear an engine, that’s real motorbiking.” That ‘loud pipes save



Top: Is the writing on the wall for fossil fuel stations?

Centre: An abandoned Muslim-owned factory in the enclave of Srebrenica, a haunting reminder of the notorious Bosnian-Serb war in 1995

Bottom: Shooting in the perfect full-moonlight on the Bulgarian Shipka pass





This page: Under the watchful eye of a Slovenian guard-pig (above) and Isabelle and Patrick (below) during 'charger' repairs in France on day two

Overleaf: Proudly parked at the entrance to Buzludzha in Bulgaria, a mesmerising building

Weekly market in Tarlabası, one of the poorest yet most colourful and lively quarters in Istanbul



lives' argument and the macho image again. No need to believe me, and I have no shares in the company. Do go and test them though, and let's have a coffee then.

The journey had started off as a marvel: wonderful weather and a new friend at my first night in Sedan, France. The next morning we chatted so long that it's late when I arrive in the hamlet beyond Nancy, in a camping site appearing to consist of residential inhabitants. During the summer, people from the region leave their cold concrete apartment blocks behind, and spend the summer in a caravan, tending their vegetable gardens and living outside all the time. From here they go to their jobs or spend the holidays. Patrick and Isabelle is such an epicurean couple. I'm still at the poles of the tent, as the warm hearted frenchy hands over a hammer and an aperitif.

Before dining, I plug Xena in. Weird, no electricity. Another socket, ditto. To cut a long story of jumping fuses, several extension cords, volt meters and a surly camping owner short: the Zero short circuits all of it. I can ride, nothing wrong with the bike, but she cannot charge. There follows a series of phone calls to the travel insurance and in the end to Patrick, the real owner of 'my' DS. It's official, I have a break down. On day two.

Patrick decides to come over with a new charger; a six hour drive. As he arrives at midnight, the friendly bunch of campers crack another bottle, serve him a fresh bit of roast and offer a bed in their caravan.

The next morning it's all hands on deck. Patrick 1 works, Patrick 2 hands over the tools, and I translate between them. Once the new charger is connected, we plug Xena in and... she starts charging as if nothing happened. All around applaud. I've never been so grateful, for Patrick the Belgian and Patrick the French. Before returning home, the Belgian adds with a broad grin: "I'm not driving to Istanbul, you know!"

And the cause of the matter? Unknown. The charger – under guarantee – ended up at the factory and is currently being researched. Apparently it was not the first failing charger.

Except for Patrick, I will meet no other mechanic or electrician on this trip. That is a pity, for I hold the fondest memories of oil changers in India, bike cleaners and blacksmiths in Iran, valve adjusters in Yemen. While electric motorcycles do have high tech parts aboard, they

need no oil, no coolant, no valves, no air filter, no gearbox, not a single hot element. It's basically a pack of batteries, a rotor (thank you, Nikola Tesla) and a charger, hanging in a frame with wheels. But the voyage with its frequent pauses, offers me loads of other encounters. I discussed with an imam in Banja Luka and with a Serbian soldier in Sarajevo. I spent days with the youth of Srebrenica in Bosnia and with women in Istanbul in one of the poorest neighbourhoods of the city. I passed unforgettable hours with activists in Thessaloniki who fight the crisis on a daily base. I listened to Bulgarians, Albanians, Bosnians who want but one thing, to leave their poor destinies. On top of that and by coincidence, during the emerging refugee crisis of last summer, I happened to travel along their paths for most of my return route. As every border crossing took me five minutes, I asked myself: "What exactly is my merit to own this European passport?"

On a deserted country road in Albania, I approach a herd of sheep with their shepherd. Knowing Xena is too quiet to split the sea, I slow down. Once alongside the man, he scares me as much as I do him. With a huge leap he dives into the ditch. Once recovered, we laugh out loud and he mows a passage.

"It's really dangerous that no one hears you." I hear this all the time. Car drivers sit in their boxes, often listening to music or on the phone; pedestrians look around, for cyclists are silent too. It goes without saying that one has to ride even more slow and vigilant in urban areas. Or let me put it this way: the future will be silent, much more silent. Moreover, it adds a sense to the experience of motorcycling. Smelling, seeing, tasting, feeling, and now also hearing.

During the entire journey I was curious: what does she do when the battery is totally empty? Now I know: she slows down to half of her speed. For how long? Not the faintest idea. I leave from Slovenia and aim for a hamlet in Austria. I know it will be a close call, but I presume I can break my own record of 275kms when riding slow enough. On top of that, I'm in Austria and lodging should not be an issue. It gets colder and colder but we're nearly there, only 25 kms to go. But I ascend steadily. I see the percentages decrease frighteningly quickly. I continuously calculate. "Once over the pass she'll recharge." I reassure myself. I come across a village with one bed & breakfast.







I never make it over, far from it even. Two tunnels later with three percent on the counter, Xena abandons me. She doesn't go above 25km/h any more. "That's impossible, you still have power, I can see it!" Nope, she says. The dashboard is precise but not so precise. It's U-turn and back to the last houses. The road is steep enough and at a smooth 70km/h I whiz back down. I ring the bell of the guesthouse where all windows are dark. In my best coal miner's German, I ask for a room.

We're hauled in and installed at our respective schnapps. I get a real one, Xena gets a plug. We're saved.

None of this has affected my love for Xena. Moreover, at the end of the journey I'm convinced of one thing: the Zero DS is close to the best travel bike of the moment, for all the above reasons and another few. Only the Zero company headquarters doesn't realise yet. I had a taste of the future. Or better still, she's right in front of us. And believe me, e-riding is definitely sexy ♦



Above: Improvised garage in a posh but cheap hotel in Serbia

Below: Crossing lake Koman in northern Albania remains an adventure

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