



British boar shooter
Dan Muse at Spacva



Where do you go for the best-value boar in Europe? Charlie Jacoby joins a party of lads from Northumberland, who reckoned they found the answer in Croatia

Budget driven boar

Boarshooting is a big day out. It can be expensive, incredibly exciting, cold, wet, scary, long, dull, funny, rewarding or a complete waste of time. It can need a great many people to make it work. And at the end of it you can have that hoped-for moment of a giant wild male, the size of a big motorbike, charging past you, close enough for you to hear its hair bristling and giving you the most sensational shot that many shooters will ever have.

When syndicate guns and guests from the Whitfield pheasant, partridge and grouse shoot in Northumberland decided to go driven boar shooting in continental Europe, the choice of where to go, how much to pay and even how to get there became an almost military operation of strategy and planning.

Whitfield headkeeper Stuart Maughan was the lynchpin of the party. He wanted it to go right. The lads had been thinking of going to Germany but Stuart went on a recce

there last year. He saw plenty of roe and no boar, so cancelled the trip. But he was impressed enough by sporting agent Lasarotta's Croatia hunting offer to recommend three days of it to his guns at home in Northumberland. What clinched it for some was that there are no trophy fees. Lasarotta offers boar hunting in Croatia at a flat rate of £1,440 per gun for three days/four nights.

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First stop is Petrova Gora, a 14,000ha hilly hunting area two hours south of Zagreb. We were put up in a comfortable hotel and the next morning line up, kitted out for the three drives. The language barrier with the beaters is no barrier to our shared intention to bring home a bag of driven wild boar.

You can hire rifles for €25 a day with a €2 charge per cartridge fired. The gun I got was no beauty. A well-

used 8x57 with iron sights, it fired straight enough when they asked me to shoot it at a cardboard box.

After the traditional continental hornblowing ceremony where the headkeeper welcomes the shooters and reminds everyone of the safety rules, we set off into the hills.

Safety rules dominate boar shooting. This is not the casual chat you get before a pheasant day. Nobody, after all, is ever 'peppered' by a rifle bullet. The three main rules on the Croatian hunts were:

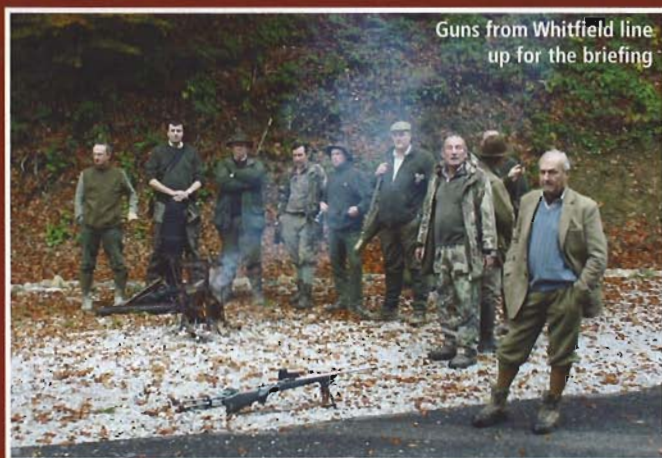
- Shooting starts with three blasts on the horn. It ends with one blast.
- During shooting, you stay on your peg. This was difficult when you could see you had shot a boar that you could not safely finish off, but the risks of walking into the drive to do that are too great.
- You don't shoot at all when the beaters come close. It is up to you to define the word 'close'. Other rules include keeping your rifle both empty and with the bolt open when not in use. Happily, they expect you to use your common sense.



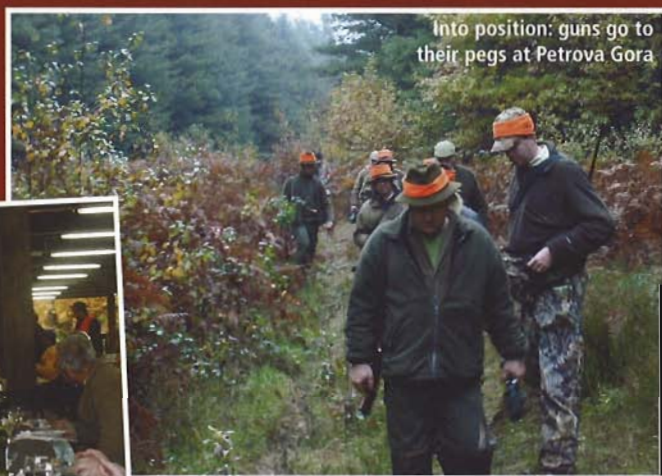
Morning line-up: beaters and dogs at Petrova Gora



Guns from Whitfield line up for the briefing



Into position: guns go to their pegs at Petrova Gora



Dining out: lunch at Petrova Gora



As we walked up the hill, we could see signs of boar everywhere. Their tracks churned up the paths through the woods and areas where they had been snuffling around looking for food looked like they had been harrowed.

Shooters are traditionally full of hope when the day begins. This boar activity fired their optimism.

Unlike other European countries, you are allowed to shoot any boar you see. Most don't allow you to shoot the lead female in a family group. There was disquiet about this among some guns. "I'm not sure in the wild area where we went we should have been encouraged to shoot the lead females," said one. "But under Croatian law, that is what we are contracted to do."

Other guns were enthusiastic. It meant more shooting and, with their lack of experience of boar-hooting, less worry about whether or not they were allowed to pull the trigger in the seconds you have when a boar charges past.

The pegging system is worked

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out with mathematical precision. Everyone takes a card from a hat. That card contains a grid of numbers: drive number across the top and number of guns down the side. To find out what number your peg is, you look at what number drive it is and how many guns are shooting. That allows gun numbers to change from drive to drive, which happens when you can be dealing with anything from eight to 33 guns.

The terrain here suits boar-shooting. We lined along a wooded ridge that was topped by little hill-ocks every 100 yards. With guns on the dips between the hills, they had

no chance of accidentally shooting each other. With the dips on top of the ridge, there was every chance of the beaters in the valleys below stirring the boar into racing uphill towards them. It is clearly a well-tested theory.

However, Petrova Gora was not a success for those who expected everyone to see a few boar. The animals simply weren't there in numbers. Perhaps the light snowfall the previous week had driven them off the hill. Boar hunting ain't pheasant shooting, we all knew. Even Stuart, who knows how hard it is to persuade wild birds to go in the right

direction, felt that the local keeper was having trouble keeping up his wild boar stocks.

There was a significant hiccup, too, on day one when one of the British guns shot a Croatian beater's dog. Emotions run high and doubt is fuelled by the language barrier. In both British and Croatian camps, views ranged from "the guns and/or beaters should pack up" to "the guns and/or beaters should keep going." With just one translator it took time to come to the point where the gun who shot the dog paid its owner £400.

The beaters kept going with some spirit but had the heart gone out of them? They had a curiously mournful beating cry at the best of times, as if they were bewailing the death of, or in this case, the lack of their precious boar. They also suffered bad luck — any sounders of pigs they put up chose to race away from the guns. Some of us could hear the boar go by, dogs at their heels, but few of us saw anything.

The British guns did shoot boar



Brits' speciality boar kit



Paul Bell from Northumberland was using a Holland & Holland .300H&H built in 1925 – about the time the company invented the calibre. It is the takedown version, designed for travelling. Paul says it should be used with open sights but he has fitted it with a Swarovski 3-10x42 Habicht scope. He has shot with it in Poland, Botswana and for all British deer except roe.



Paul 'Craggy' Cragg from Northumberland is using a Steyr Mannlicher in .308 with a Schmidt & Bender 2.5-10x56 scope, all of which he bought for the trip. He put a moderator on it without realising that they are banned in Croatia. The airport security staff in Zagreb clearly didn't know what it was, so let it through. He is pleased with the scope for its light-gathering.



Phil Lever from Dorset was using a scope he had bought specially for this trip. It works like iron sights, but instead projects a red dot on to a screen inside the scope which gives you your zero. Isn't that a bit gimmicky? you may ask. No, because there it has a clever bit. The clever bit is that it adjusts parallax error for you. Press your cheek to the stock and look through the scope and

you will see the red dot superimposed on your zero, however many yards away that is. Move your head slightly and the red dot moves to adjust for your new position. "It's like shooting a shotgun," says Phil. This scope is made by EOTech but there are several manufacturers making scopes like it. Aimpoint is a popular brand. Visit www.aimpoint.com and www.eotech-inc.com.

in Petrova Gora. Stuart and his son Jonathan, Whitfield underkeeper in charge of grouse, dominated the bag on the first two days. Stuart and Jonathan both shot boar on the first day and Jonathan one on the second.

Just six shots were fired on day two – four of them by Jonathan as one stopper and three safety shots into his boar. There were also two clean misses at another boar that another gun saw.

Other guns had not seen anything and, after a vote, they decided to move hunting areas. A brave decision. Nor was it easy to put into effect. After rattling up several large mobile phone bills, Lasarotta boss Bogdan Srejc, still in the UK, expertly organised the party to go in two minibuses to another hunting area for day three.

If you can count how many people you need for a driven pheasant shoot, you double it for boar. To find those people at 18 hours notice plus transport, hotels and food for the guns was a good piece of work. And to do it from several thousand

miles away was close to miraculous. Bogdan talks and talks and talks – you will notice that if you ring him up. We reckoned he had simply talked all his people into submission. Certainly none of them looked mutinous; they just got on with the extra work.

The second place we went to, Spacva, was on the eastern side of the country, close to the border with Serbia. It is a 25,000ha area next to the main Serbian/Croatian

motorway. Any other country would build a lorry park or houses next to its motorway junctions. Not here.

About 6,800ha of Spacva is ditched and fenced. The operators have been trapping local wild boar and releasing them into the fenced area. We passed two tractors each pulling two trailers loaded with maize cobs that would be fed to the boars which survived our shoot. This fenced area consisted of 500-metre wide square blocks of

forestry, divided into six back-to-back drives. The terrain is flat, about 80 metres above sea level.

It is not wild hunting. The only chance any of the boar have is to break through the line of guns without being shot. That said, shooters see a lot of boar – and that's what many of the British shooters had come to do. And standing on the rides or in the mini high seats, the beech and oak woods stretch away from you in all directions, light and beautiful as the most romantic images of shooting in prime Hungarian forests.

Stuart's keener eye read the situation. "This is commercial boar shooting," he said. "You could probably even tailor your bag here."

One aspect of hunting here that caused much delight was the trophy fee price list that the hunt owner normally charges. Guns noted with pleasure that should any of them shoot any of the biggest keilers (male wild boar), the trophy would have been more than £3,000 and each medium-sized animal was £50. With Lasarotta's deal, there

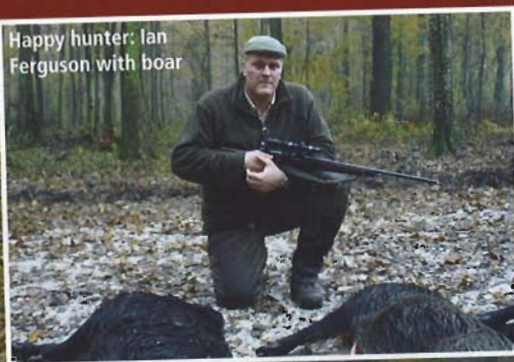
'A moving carpet of boar come charging out of the woods beside Ian Ferguson. He fires, reloads, fires, reloads, fires and works the bolt again. He kills three of them with those three fast shots. Ian is using a Remington 700 in .308'



Sporting Rifle editor
Charlie Jacoby with his
two, shot at Spacva



Happy hunter: Ian
Ferguson with boar



End of day three: some of the
Whitfield lads with their bag

are no trophy fees. That means you don't have that worry at the back of your head in the split second a boar comes charging out that it may be too expensive to shoot.

Once again, we line out facing the beaters. This is easier work for them — though goodness knows how Bogdan had managed to find so many of them. Once again we have our safety lecture. Those of us who have not brought our own rifles are issued with estate rifles, still Yugoslavian-made in 8x57 but this time with Tasco scopes. Then we are driven to the forestry blocks and led to our stands.

We are generally arranged in a horseshoe pattern around one end of each block of forestry. It is what pheasant shooters call "gallery shooting" in that you can see your next door guns and judge how well or badly they are doing. This adds to the noisy and spirited competition between the guns.

The beaters have no dogs here. For one ghastly moment we all wonder whether our reputation from Petrova Gora has preceded us.

But the reason is that this is such a tight site, the keeper cannot risk a dog crossing any of the rides into what will be one of his next drives. The boar drives here are laid out as neatly and compactly as skeet.

The rain is teeming down. Scopes easily get fogged in these conditions so you need a system of dry and drier hankies to keep them clear. Would today be any better than the last two?

It was. Ian Ferguson from Co Durham had not had much luck to date. But on one of the last drives that changes. A moving carpet of boar come charging out of the woods beside him. He fires, reloads, fires, reloads, fires and works the bolt again. He kills three of them with those three fast shots. Ian is using a Remington 700 in .308 with a Leupold 1-4 scope. His ammo is 167-grain Interbonds. His pal Dan Muse, with a Blaser R93 in .300 Win, nearly pulls off the same from his stand — and the straight pull of the R93 makes reloading easy under those circumstances.

The bag is 12 on the third day

— a significant improvement. Only one gun has not had a shot during the three days.

All the guns enjoyed aspects of both the shoots they went on. Those who enjoyed the numbers preferred the second shoot. At least half the team preferred the first shoot — but were glad to be able to go on the second shoot.

One of these latter said: "I got my first boar on the second shoot but when I come back, I'll go back to the first shoot. This one [the second shoot, Spacva] is a bit too manicured. I prefer the wild. The adrenaline you get when you see a boar coming through the woods is extraordinary.

"I come for the nature and the sport. As a salmon fisher and a stalker, I know that if you come off the river or the hill without a fish or beast, it was a fair battle. I don't get upset if I lose. I'm glad I have done both. I will come back and do the first one, or something like it."

The guns pack up that night and the following morning. Dan is quick to book Spacva for next year.

You can do this too

For the Whitfield Shoot trip to Croatia, Lasarotta organised hunting, accommodation, board, transport and licences from the Croatian Hunting Federation. Lasarotta also deftly dealt with their request to transfer to a new hunting area. Contact Bogdan Srejic 07832 100524 www.lasarotta.co.uk. Guns arranged their own flights with Croatia Airlines, Gatwick-Zagreb, which flies guns (Wizz from Luton does not). For more about the Whitfield Shoot, contact Stuart Maughan on 07802 436028



Woodland idyll: the
hotel at Petrova Gora