

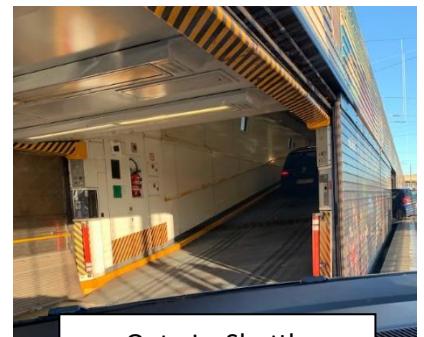
Trip report – To The Tower – January 3rd to 5th 2025

Where to start. The beginning is too far back...

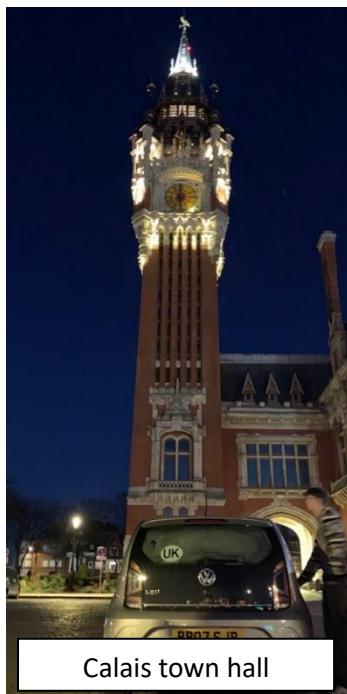
To The Tower was conceived as a way to encourage a sense of adventure and provide one such opportunity. Having completed the inaugural run from Calais to Senj (Croatia) and back over the first weekend of 2025, I can confidently say that the boxes have been ticked.

This was a trip for three. I wanted to give Matthew his first taste of European driving as he's now 18. And Mark is difficult to get rid of as he generally just says yes. Taking the Up! seemed like the logical next step - it's fine with just three people and goes some way to showing how easily this can be done without a big fast car. Not that a big fast car wouldn't have made it easier!

Preparation and packing started in earnest over the Christmas period. Crossings had been booked a few months ago with Eurotunnel. Hotels for Friday and Sunday had also been booked in advance. We'd sourced a full-size spare and had some new tyres fitted - Austria demand 4mm tread on winter stamped tyres. Some extra fuel, a can of oil, a tow rope, and some winter kit (sleeping bags, stove, etc) complimented a few basic tools.



Onto Le Shuttle



Calais town hall

We headed to Calais on Friday. Without drama and made our way to the Town Hall (mairie) where the challenge begins. We topped up the fuel, grabbed some last minute provisions (including a kilo of madeleines), and parked up to wait for the 6pm departure time. The clock tower is really rather impressive and has the benefit of showing the time - which confirms we didn't try to start early! Before leaving Calais those taking part must get a photo of the car and the tower at or after 6pm. We got the snap and got moving.

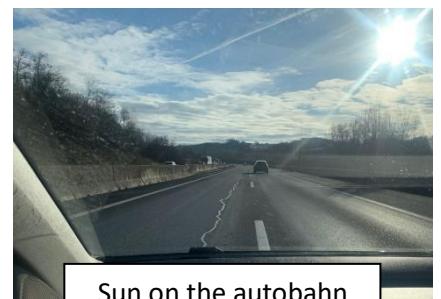
Out of Calais with Mark behind the wheel without issue. On to the motorway towards Dunkirk and Belgium, and straight up to speed. We'd agreed to a fairly strict rotation (Mark, Matthew, me) with two hour shifts. It had the benefit of giving everyone time in each seat and kept the company as fresh as it could ever be! It also happened to work well with fuel with the Up! doing around 350 miles on a tank and is doing around 300 miles every four hours.

We did fill at our first stop near Leuven, but this was to ensure we didn't need fuel when we stopped for the night, nor first thing in the morning. The trip through France, Belgium and the Netherlands was easy and uneventful. The weather and the traffic both kind. Into Germany and we knew we were nearly at our bed stop.

We had booked a hotel near Cologne airport as it was near the motorway to Frankfurt and had good rooms at a sensible price. We arrived just after 10pm as planned. Any earlier would have been uneconomical in terms of the rules which state that you have to stop for six hours overnight and this must include the hours between 2am and 4am. We were therefore cleared to leave soon after 4am. Mark and I actually ventured to the bar for a swift half and it might be that, next time, we plan a six hour trip on Friday evening and a later start on Saturday. We'd not considered that 10pm in Germany is 9pm at home, so maybe no surprise we weren't quite ready to hit the sack.

Saturday's 4am alarm roused us from our slumber and we packed and left the hotel. There was no frost and it was dry. We left the hotel at about 04:20.

We'd had a tyre pressure warning come on just before we arrived at the hotel. The tyres all seemed fine, so the reset button was pressed and we waited to see if the warning would reappear. It didn't. And we've seen nothing of it since.



Sun on the autobahn

I drove the first stint down to Frankfurt and east towards Nuremberg. We stopped for fuel and the loo and rotated drivers. The roads were filthy, so we took advantage of the washy machine (sponge and bucket) to clean glass and lights.

Crossing Germany was painless until the washers froze. Lesson learned - use more washer concentrate! We stopped to buy extra concentrate and attempted to de-ice the water hoses and washer jets. We had no luck, so pressed on with fingers crossed. The jets did finally clear after another half hour or so, but not until we'd proven that pouring water from a glass bottle onto the windscreen at speed doesn't work!

Matthew managed to set the world speed record for a VW Up! somewhere south of Regensburg. It wasn't intentional, we were just generating heat to clear the hoses. Clearly speed fixed everything.

We bought the Austrian vignette (road tax) online as we approached the border. No stop was therefore required to buy a sticker. We also sorted automatic payments for the two Austrian tunnel toll booths which meant payments were taken like they are at Dartford. I'd already sorted the Slovenian vignette, so the trip continued without unnecessary interruption.

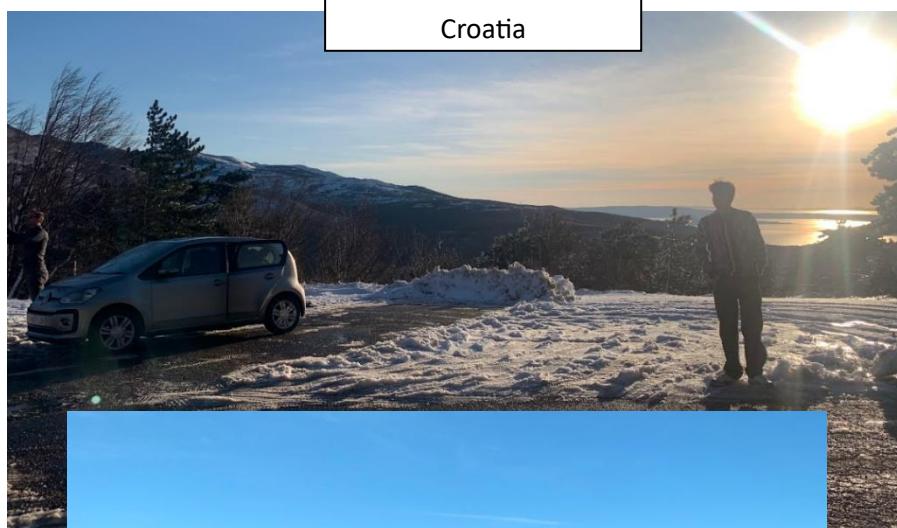
The Alps in winter are always a treat. It wasn't as white as it might have been, but that meant the roads were clear and flowing well. In fact, it's difficult to remember any significant traffic at any point through the journey. Whilst we may have played roulette with the weather at this time of year, we certainly were blessed with the lack of hold-ups.

Slovenia passed quickly and Zagreb was skirted with ease. We were now on the run in to Senj with a little over an hour to go. Peculiarly, Croatia was completely white. The uplands through which the main arterial motorway runs was a picture for mile

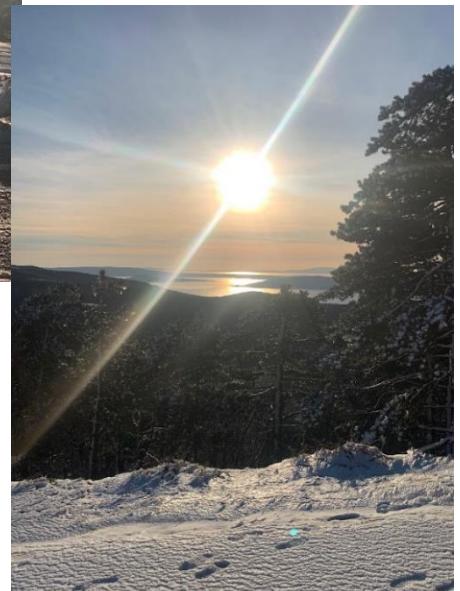
Austria



Croatia



after mile. But the roads were, thankfully, well gritted and clear. Even the descent into Senj was without challenge and the view of the snow covered landscape giving way to the Adriatic coastline with its islands and calm waters was a treat.



Senj, Croatia – destination of To The Tower



Senj is a pleasant Croatian fishing town with an old fort and a nice harbour. At this time of year it's quiet but still has a charm. The southern breakwater has a tower at its end - our destination before turning for home. The choice of Senj as



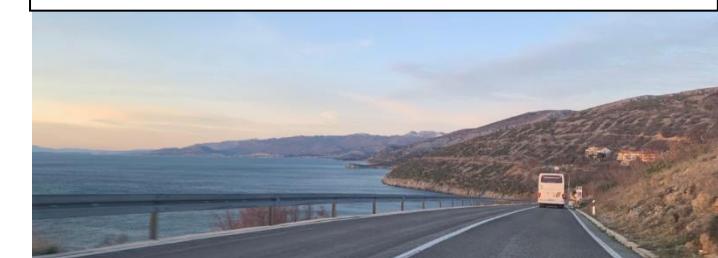
destination for the challenge isn't random. The destination needed to be far enough to provide challenge but not so far as to prove too difficult to reach in a weekend. Senj is easily reached from Calais via an almost infinite number of routes. Whilst there are likely a handful of 'obvious' options, those following our lead will have lots of choice with chance to vary according to traffic, weather, or whim. It also feels like an occasion as you cover the last few miles either down from the motorway or along the coast.

We headed straight to the car park beside the tower and spent some time taking photos and feeling pleased with ourselves. Mark had a quick paddle and we stood and took in the views. The sunset wasn't far away, but we had time to fill with petrol before heading back to get some more photos.

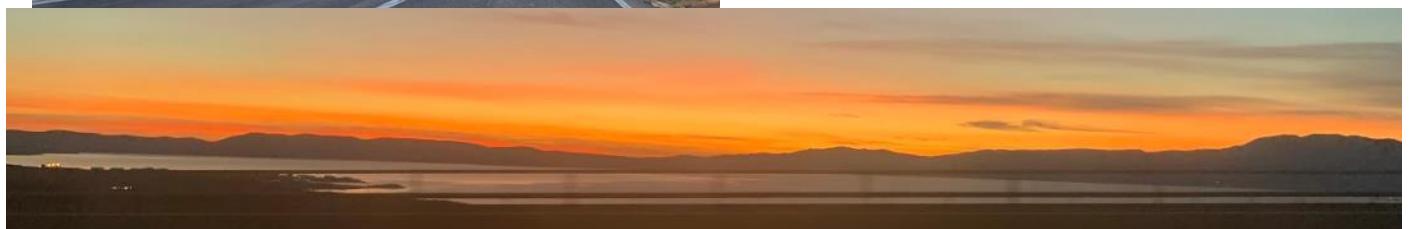


Matthew drove us north along the coast. This road is lovely and (if you get a chance) I'd recommend following it all the way south to Split and beyond. It's not a fast road, but it clings to the coast (often to the hillside above) and offers countless beautiful views.

The coast road - Croatia



The motorway which bypasses Rijeka heads straight toward Slovenia. It's another short hop across another wonderful country. Other routes would take you through more of Slovenia and, having spent plenty of time enjoying the countryside, it's certainly an option I'd recommend.





We stopped for dinner just before the Italian border. Food is cheaper and we were two hours the right side of Senj, so we're due a driver change. We shared a grill platter and feta salad. It went down rather well! We didn't linger and were away after an hour or so.

Italian motorways are generally easy and quick if there's no traffic. Owing to it being about 8pm now, the traffic was light and the progress good. Trieste, Venice, Verona all passed without drama and we headed for Bergamo. We'd booked a hotel at dinner which we hoped we would reach by about 11pm. As it happened, we were in the filling station next to the hotel right on time. With the car ready for the next few hours we checked in and found our room. With just one double bed we didn't find what we'd expected, nor what we'd booked! Thankfully reception rectified the error quickly and we bunked down for a night in our triple bedded room.

There had been some noise from above overnight, so when the alarm went at 6am it seemed more difficult than usual to get moving. We soon did, and we passed Milan easily and without any traffic. We'd booked the 9:12 departure from Iselle aboard the Simplon car train to Brig in Switzerland. This avoids the pass which, whilst open, may have proven tricky and taken more time.

Breakfast was just what we needed. Italian petrol stations tend to serve great fresh coffee and pastries. Three coffees and three pastries for less than £10. Nice.

The car train wasn't there when we arrived at about 8:30. There were a couple of cars in front of us but the queue soon grew. In fact, by the time we loaded it was clear that there may not be room for everyone and, sure enough, two vehicles were left with the choice to wait for the next train or drive over the pass. It takes around 15 minutes to get through the tunnel and popping out into the Valais brought a more icy scene. We unloaded quickly, bought our Swiss vignette and stopped to take some photos before making a move.

Driving towards the eastern end of Lake Geneva was uneventful and only punctuated by a coffee and loo stop. The motorway is high above the towns and the lake with views across to the mountains on the other side. We had blue skies and sunshine!

Leaving the lake, Waze had suggested a cross-country route across French Comte to the motorway near Dijon. It was a pleasant drive with plenty of snow and a couple of friendly speed cameras which flashed as we drove by.

Reaching the motorway left us with about five hours heading north to Calais. It seemed sensible to stop for a hot dinner, but it wasn't, as it turned out. My chicken escalope was cold and, when I took it back, the server pointed to the microwave.... Not a good way to run a restaurant. But, when travelling you have to take the rough with the smooth, so I got a bit agitated, got put right by my son (soon to be in charge of everything) and left without finishing my meal. A bag of Haribo came to the rescue.



BLS Simplon car train – Iselle to Brig



Back in
Calais at
19:20

Calais was reached soon after 7pm and we could easily have found ourselves in the ship port owing to a lack of Waze clarity (unusual). The town hall had been the start of this trip and was to be the end of our adventure. 2020 miles through nine countries (ten if you include the UK) and over just one weekend. An absolutely fantastic excuse to spend some time with the boys and do more daft stuff. And the car was the star - what a piece of kit. Thanks to my wife for the loan!

I can't recommend this kind of thing more highly. We're all busy and life passes so quickly. Driving 'To The Tower' has given us more memories and talking points - something which should never be underestimated. Do what you can while you can.

I'm now looking forward to the next time - Ellen will be 18 next year and it would only seem fair to repeat this (with a different route) with her. But for now I'm happy to have started 2025 in the right way - doing crazy things with (some of) my nearest and dearest. x

Route: FRANCE - Calais - A16 = BELGIUM - E40 - Brussels - E40 - Leuven - E314/A76 - GERMANY= Aachen - 4 - Koln (overnight) - 3 - Frankfurt - Nuremberg - Passau = AUSTRIA - A8 - Wels - A9 - Graz = SLOVENIA - E59 Maribor = CROATIA - E59 - Zagreb - E65/E71 - Zuta Lokva - 23 - Senj - E65 - Smrika - A7 - Rijeka - E61 = SLOVENIA - E61 - Kozina = ITALY - SS14 - TRIESTE - E70 - VENICE - VERONA - BERGAMO (overnight) - E64/A4 - Milan - A8/E62 - Stresa - E62 - Iselle - Simplon tunnel (train) - BRIG - 9 - Montreaux - Lausanne - Ballaigues = FRANCE - N57/D9 - Granges Sainte-Marie - D9/D47/D107 - Censeau - D471/D21/N5 - Poligny - N83/A391/A39 - Dijon - A31/A5 - Troyes - A26 - Reims - Calais

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