



# humpilo man

**BY EVELYN SPENCE**  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER MCBRIDE

Grunt. Mule. Sherpa. Call him what you want, but Slovakian hut keeper Viktor Beranek can schlepp a load uphill.

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Loaded: Viktor carrying 132 pounds to his hut, Chata pod Rysmi.



VIKTOR CARRIES PLASTIC-WRAPPED BOXES of Chateau Topolčianky red wine. He carries cases of Pilsner Urquell and Staropramen beer, handles of rum and vodka, miniature souvenir bottles of Horec—a local liquor made of the gentian flower. The caretaker of Chata pod Rysmi, the highest of a string of backcountry huts that dot Slovakia's Tatra Mountains, Viktor carries 150-pound kegs of beer, jars of sauerkraut, bricks of butter and cheese, chocolate wafers, coffee, huge sacks of potatoes, bundles of chicken legs, bags of bread, toilet paper, and lantern oil. He's carried mattresses, plates, chairs, a cruiser bike, a fake bearskin rug, a half-dozen sailor suits.

Everything he carries he straps on his wooden pack, which looks like a cross between a crude toboggan and a pallet—only with a water bottle holder on one side and a cell phone holder on the other, so he can carry them, too.

Viktor's a famous schlepper. But for someone who has made the same three-mile trek three days a week for the past 30 years, he's a hard man to meet. I was intrigued: Everyone who has skied in Slovakia seems to know him. In fact, you might even see him on the big screen at the Banff Mountain Film Festival next year. An award-winning Slovakian adventure filmmaker is working on a documentary about him called *Freedom Under Weight*.

But the guides I talked to simply said, "Call us when you get here"—"here" being a former Communist satellite with an economy the size of Utah's and a topography like Wyoming's. Sure, you can find Viktor by Googling him—but that only helps if you know what *Viktor Beranek vybrana budow nowej chatty* means. You can find him in the English-language newspaper *The Slovak Spectator*, if you happen to live in Bratislava.

Or if your mother—like mine—understands Slovakian, you can convince her to ask her Czech and Slovak friends to do some investigating. You can send her long letters of explana-



The sign reads "Embassy of the Free Kingdom of Rysy"; Viktor and his forearms outside his "Erotic Center."

tion to translate and forward to Viktor only to get this response: "I don't waste my time writing letters. I spend my time in the mountains."

That's when you have to fly over and track him down.

WE—PHOTOGRAPHER PETE MCBRIDE, our guide Oleg, and I—find Viktor the long way, by starting at the east end of the High Tatras, jamming our crampons up 2,000-foot couloirs, tele-marking down 45-degree slush faces, and stopping at huts along the way. Each afternoon, Oleg pulls out his cell phone and says, "Okay, I call Viktor." Then: "I leave Viktor message." Then: "Viktor is coming!" and "Mmm...I don't know where is Viktor."

When we finally meet him in the Kačacia Valley, three days and 10,000 vertical feet of slogging later, he agrees

to let us trail him while he humps a load to Chata pod Rysmi—a case of beer stacked on several cases of wine topped with a ridiculously enormous box that's in turn roped with a pair of skis teetering eight feet in the air. Pete, a former pro-level racer who grew up on a ranch and is built like a linebacker, tries to lift the pack. He can't even stand up. Viktor laughs.

As Viktor trudges uphill, his forearms bulge bigger than most people's calves. He doesn't wear a hat, and the wind lifts his Einstein hair. His face is round and stubbled with the whitish makings of what would be a heavy beard. His tile-blue eyes are kind. He's ugly-handsome, like Harvey Keitel.

For protection from the elements, he's wearing a pair of cutoff plaid pajama bottoms with a hole in the crotch over long underwear that's rid-





mule. Even when Chata pod Rysmi, his raison d'être, was partially destroyed by an avalanche in 2001—it was also smashed in 1947, twice in 1955, in 1965, 1982, and 2000—he refused help from helicopters and snowmobiles, preferring to carry out detritus and carry in rebuilding supplies.

YOU'VE NEVER HEARD of Viktor Beranek. He isn't the best skier in the High Tatras. He isn't the most accomplished mountaineer in the High Tatras. He isn't even really a ski guide.

But if you ever find yourself in the High Tatras, in what some call the "miniature Alps" and most others agree is the national symbol of tiny Slovakia, you'll quickly learn that Viktor, 54, is the most rugged out-

doorsman—and vainglorious Casanova—this side of Bratislava. His job is to look after and resupply Chata pod Rysmi, a 20-person *chata* (mountain hut) that's part of a small hut system in Tatra National Park. In the winter, a handful of skiers tour to the hut; some 500 hikers a day climb to it in the summer.

Chata pod Rysmi is co-owned by two local hiking and mountaineering clubs,

He humps loads from his supply cabin (a cramped bedroom he's dubbed the "Erotic Center"), behind a lakeside lodge at 4,900 feet, to Chata pod Rysmi, 2,500 feet above. His route is always the same: up Žabia Valley and past the Kotlina Žabich lakes to where the slope turns into a near-vertical rock wall. Here, Viktor breaks his load into a few smaller loadlets, pulls out his ice ax and crampons, and practically ice-climbs up the rest of the way.

He's been walking the same route for three decades, every other day, in both summer and winter. At 2,500 vertical per load, 180 days a year, that's like climbing Everest 465 times—from sea level. The average weekend granola-eater's backpack weighs about 40 pounds. The average pack Viktor carries weighs more than 130—and sometimes twice that. Forget the strain to his skeletal system; Viktor's burning at least eight times as many calories per hour as the normal backpacker. But he's not exactly running under that load. Sometimes it takes him a half-day to reach his front door.

On his days off, Viktor goes hiking, exploring the rest of the High Tatras, visiting other *chatas* and their keepers. His playground is a rather tidy little range—only about 16 miles long and nine miles wide (roughly the size of 24 Whistlers). From the highest vantage points, you can see into the low valleys of Slovakia and Poland. The range isn't particularly high—the tallest peak, Gerlachovský štít, is 8,711 feet—but it rises abruptly some 5,000 feet into steep granite walls, dark faces, and shark-tooth spires.

Viktor knows it all like most people

dled with still more holes. "It's porter *moda*. Now all the other porters want to look like me. They'll start wearing this to the bar, to the disco. They'll wear it to church!"

Viktor doesn't sweat. He doesn't strain. He doesn't groan. He just moves his 132-pound load uphill. He walks and skis like he's on a tightrope: gingerly, the box over his head tilting

**On the wall,** Viktor has nailed a sign that reads, VEGETARIANS OF ALL NATIONS, GET LOST!, with a cleaver on a string nailed next to it.

and leaning, his gaze on the snow a few feet in front of him. He doesn't even have to look where he's going.

After delivering his burden to Chata pod Rysmi, Viktor skis back down. This is what he does. He goes up heavy and comes down light. He is a skiing

but it's ruled by Viktor: He recruits volunteers (usually young women), tells stories, spikes tea with rum, sings folk songs, fixes broken windows, deals with the government bureaucracy, shovels out the front door. But his primary duty is schlepping.

know the way from the bedroom to the bathroom. He often skis and climbs alone, but he never gets frightened—despite many close calls. "I get more scared crossing the street in Bratislava," he says. When he takes vacation, he still finds ways to climb, though it



sometimes gets him into hot water.

While mountaineering a few years ago in Austria, he fell into a crevasse as he ski toured uphill, dropping 40 feet into the bottom of a tight, frigid wedge. He was in a bad way, folded awkwardly in half. His pack was over his head, left ski and boot crammed into the ice, his nose touching the cold wall. "I felt like Christ," he said. "It was like hell, like an icy hell." After an hour, the ice had melted enough that he could breathe better. At which point he pretty much went superhuman: He pulled his foot out of his trapped boot—while it was still buckled—and proceeded to kick steps with the other boot. He literally crawled, with his bare hands and one bare foot, out of the hole. Then he skied down over a thousand vertical feet, in the dark, on one ski. His friends call him *Spalten Mann*, Crevasse Man.

VIKTOR WAS BORN IN 1951 IN THE CZECH capitol of Prague but spent most of his childhood following his father, who in turn was following employment farther and farther east toward Slovakia—and the mountains. While his father was busy installing high-voltage cable, 15-year-old Viktor started hiking. "When I saw the high-mountain porters, I thought, 'My God, what a terrible job!'" he says. "I saw it as plain physical exertion. Up and down, up and down, every day.... I wondered, don't they get bored?" He spent his teenage years as a "hooligan" (his word). "I was lazy and thin," he laughs. "It's a mystery how I turned out like Schwarzenegger."

In 1968, Viktor refused to take mandatory Russian classes—and had to leave school. He started shoveling coal for a living, but he got caught writing letters denouncing the Soviet occupation—and was promptly fired. At age 17, he landed a job as a porter, and carried his first professional load in the Tatras.

Ask him why he carries, and he pauses. "Hard physical work frees you," he says. "And it isn't important to be just strong. It's important to be intelligent and careful." He waves his



The hotel in front of the "Erotic Center" (above). Viktor skiing back down from his *chata*, wearing only his empty "pack."

hands when he talks. "When you carry, you believe you are healthy. You have a fit body and mind. It is a great school for life."

Viktor became the full-time caretaker of Chata pod Rysmi in 1975, at a time when everyone at lower elevations was oppressed by a rigid Socialist regime. "The bureaucracy couldn't regulate us way up there," he says. But they tried: Young Communists used to carry a big plastic bust of Lenin up to Rysy, the peak above his hut, in an annual pilgrimage. Eventually, the government asked Viktor to store it.

He complied—but each time they left, he urinated on it. "And I talked

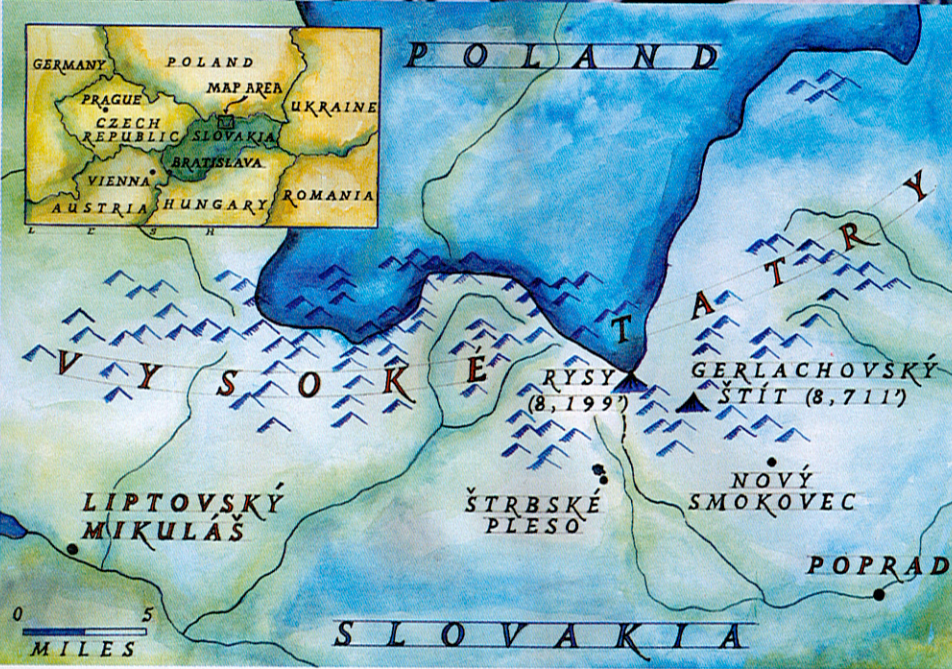
other people into peeing on it too," he says proudly. "But the authorities always blamed me." When the avalanche tumbled over the hut in 2000, the Lenin head was destroyed.

"It was a tragedy!" Viktor bellows. "But in some ways it was better back then," he adds seriously. "Every Easter, we would throw girls into the lake [behind the Erotic Center] and no one cared," he says. "Now if we did this, someone would look at her, you know, her—" he holds his enormous hands in front of his chest and bounces them up and down in a universal sign for breasts—"and it would be sexual harassment."





Toasting the fruits of Viktor's labors.



VIKTOR LOUNGES ON HIS DOUBLE BED, his boots off, striking a suggestive pose like an over-the-hill *Playgirl* model, idly chatting with Oleg, Pete, and me. "Let me tell you the real reason I am

that Viktor founded some 25 years ago when he wanted to see who of the local porters could carry 60 kilograms (132 pounds) from the valley to his hut. It's a Chinese downhill in reverse,

**Five of** his staff, mostly young women, often crash with him in his double bed—and Viktor makes several allusions to orgies. There's a waiting list to work with him.

a porter. The women say, "Oh, Viktor, you are so strong!" Oleg and I laugh, and then Oleg remembers a funny story. "I bet you can't guess the winning prize of the Sherpa Rally a few years ago!"

The Sherpa Rally is an annual race

and the first one to the front door wins. The award changes from year to year, and last year it was a naked girl covered with what I gather is the Eastern European goat-milk equivalent of Cool Whip.

"So who won the race?" Pete asks.

"Viktor, of course. He was the one who chose the prize."

Oleg and Viktor chuckle. "Viktor says that he licked it all off."

Sometimes, Viktor lives with his young girlfriend and their seven-month-old daughter, Lenka, in a town down-valley. (He has two other daughters, ages 25 and 12, each with a different mother, neither of whom he ever married.) Other times, he lives with his employees in Chata pod Rysmi, sprawling on mattresses behind the kitchen with his harem of female student volunteers. Five of his staff often crash with him in his double bed—and Viktor's made several allusions to orgies. "There's a waiting list to work for Viktor," one of his young friends, a lithe woman named Adriana, tells me later.

The rest of the time, he crashes here, in the Erotic Center. On the door hangs a sign that reads *Ambasáda Slobodné Kráľovstvo Rysy*—"Embassy of the Free Kingdom of Rysy." The sign shows a cartoonish, lascivious lynx (*rys* is the Slovakian word for "lynx") with his tongue hanging out, holding a mudflapworthy naked woman in each paw as they both smooch his cheeks.

WHILE VIKTOR TAKES DELIBERATE steps, balancing his 120-pound load on his shoulders, we skin quickly, stopping to let him catch up, observing him as zoologists might examine a plodding elephant. When he reaches his hut, we're waiting; he unlocks the heavy metal door and lets us inside while he puts the wine, the beer, the souvenirs, on their proper shelves.

A few years ago, Viktor carried up a

bicycle to "rent," despite the fact that there's no way to ride over the rocky terrain around the hut. He was scolded by the park authorities. "They told me that bicycling was not allowed in the

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**HUMPING** *continued from pg. 151*

park," he says. "I was making a *joke*." The bicycle still sits in Chata pod Rysmi, with a list of rates hanging on the handlebar basket. On the wall, Viktor has nailed a sign that reads, **VEGETARIANS OF ALL NATIONS, GET LOST!**, with a cleaver on a string nailed next to it. The rest of the wall is covered in photographs of people cleaning up the debris after the 2000 avalanche knocked off the roof and tossed bottles of wine hundreds of feet downhill.

We don't stay at the *chata* long—just long enough to drink rum spiked with tea and catch a buzz for the ski down. Viktor's pack is empty; it looks like he's slaloming down the Vahou Valley straight from Home Depot. Bending into his turns he makes powerful, utilitarian arcs; he's not graceful, but he's unflappable, even over slush that has frozen into rubble.

It's a fast, 20-minute run—including the time it takes to downclimb the steepest section and put our skis back on. Pete throws a heli off a snowdrift; Viktor tries a spread eagle and falls. We ski back to the Erotic Center, just as he's done a good 5,000 times.

Viktor is happy in the High Tatras, where things get complicated only if you let them and each supply run is a statement against modern civilization. "I don't have any plans for the future," he says. "I'll bring up another load tomorrow. I've been carrying for 35 years and my body and knees are still okay, no small success. Maybe I'll do it for 150 more years." In his lair, surrounded by photos of his naked baby and his almost-naked female volunteers, he's gathering up another load, pulling out a case of mineral water, a case of Chateau Topolčianky, a box of postcards and key chains, a 12-pack of beer. He lashes them up to his pack. Tomorrow, he'll hold his hands together, right over left, in front of his stomach, taking one ponderous step at a time, watching the ground inch by. ♦

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