

TT No.140: Ian Hill - Saturday 1st and Sunday 2nd December 2007: Slovakian Hopping Weekend.

Match 1 - Saturday 1st December 2007: Slovakia First Division. **FK Inter Bratislava** 2-1 FC Kosice "B". Attendance: 437; Admission: 60Sk; 12pp programme: 10Sk; FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

Thanks to a Ryanair cheap flight a weekend in Bratislava was arranged to take in three games. An early morning 6.30am flight from Stansted arrives in Bratislava at 9.35am just giving you time to make a 10.30am kick off for an Inter Bratislava game.

There are definitely no frills with Ryanair and flight staff were struggling to break into an early morning smile for their passengers. In fact, the chief stewardess had a face like thunder so it was a very quiet flight with no complaints!

After a quick rush through passport control you have the option of a taxi or bus into Bratislava. A good tip is to get a free guide book and map from the Tourist Information desk in the airport. They are free and were good for finding your bearings.

I decided to take a taxi as I didn't want to miss the kick off so the price was negotiated 800Sk which worked out at just under £8.00. My driver was dressed in a very unusual sky blue, black and white leather jacket which had the names of various New York districts in the design. The taxi driver's seat was in the recline position. I presumed that he must have been having a sleep but no, this was the seat position he used when he was driving!! With the rap music on, off we went. To say he drove fast was an understatement as the estimated 15-minute journey took 5 minutes.

Inter's home ground is the Stadion Pasienky and it is your standard communist bowl type stadium. From the outside the stadium is run down with a gate facade, similar to the one at Bohemians Prague, looking like it needed a lick of paint to restore it to its former glory. Two kiosks were open and the admission price was a very cheap 60Sk which was approximately £1.30. Programmes were also on sale here for 10 Sk (25p). The programme was a 12-page A5 glossy issue with colour on the cover with black and white pages inside. It's always a bonus to get a programme and it is a nice issue.

Once your ticket is checked by a steward you are faced by high steps which take you into the bowl of the ground. As I arrived early I had a walk around the stadium. There is a road all the way round the ground and plenty a spare land. One small refreshment stall was open selling sausages, coffee and a hot fruit punch. It looked a bit grimy so I gave it a miss. As you walk round there are some of the club's offices (they also have an office block outside the ground) built in to the back of the only covered grandstand and that's about it. Two more turnstiles were

open on the opposite side of the ground but let's just say that there was no point in having them open. The stand out feature of this ground is its floodlight pylons. Large concrete columns painted in a wavy yellow and black pattern. They are clearly visible from quite a distance but unfortunately like the rest of the stadium have seen better days and need a paint to restore them to their former glory. There is a club shop located near the turnstiles but it was closed.

The bowl of the stadium has plastic bench type seats fixed onto the terrace and behind one of the goals is a very large old-fashioned metal score board. A normal feature in a lot of old East European grounds and this one actually works.

The game itself was quite good. Old fashioned football at its best. There was unmelted snow around the pitch as both teams gave it their all on a very heavy surface. Inter should have taken the lead after 10 minutes when they were awarded a penalty. The penalty taker decided to be a bit flash and attempted to chip the keeper. Unfortunately, he hit the bar and the ball bounced to safety. During the first half Inter attempted to play complicated football instead of getting a shot on goal. Despite this they managed to take a 2-0 half time lead against Kosice Reserves. One goal was a classic diving header which was great to see.

At half time the gates to the stadium were opened and a few people decided to go to the new shopping complex at half time. Likewise, people who had been in the shopping centre decided to have a wander over to the ground and have a look to see what was going on. Others came in and used the stadium as a short cut on their journey home. So, throughout the second half there a steady procession of people getting in for free then going on their way after 10 minutes.

They should have stayed as it turned out to be a great second half. Both teams decided to have a competition for the first 20 minutes to see who could kick each other the hardest without getting a booking. There were some great old-fashioned sliding tackles going in with screams of pain. There was no diving here just players getting a good kicking. The referee, to his credit, entered into the spirit by ignoring the fouls and letting game flow. It was real end to end stuff and anybody who thought they might need a bit of treatment was swiftly whisked off on a stretcher. No messing about here.

Kosice had scored early in the second half but Inter had no intention of holding back and went all out for another goal. The great second half ended with Inter on top and securing a welcome home win.

Inter published an attendance of 437 on their website but after doing a head count, I would say that there was no more than 120 people in the ground. So, I don't know where they got that figure from and as they were not taking any gate money in the second half, I don't think they could have included the shoppers in the total.

A great start to the weekend.

Match 2 - Saturday 1st December 2007: Austria Bundesliga. **Rapid Vienna** 1-3 Red Bull Salzburg. Attendance: 14,900; Admission: 20 Euros; 16pp programme: FOA; FGIF Match Rating: 2*.

A very slow tram journey took me from the Stadion Pasiensky over to the main railway station in Bratislava for a nice one-hour journey to Vienna which was my base for the night. After checking into my "budget" hotel it was off to the Gerhard Hanappi stadium to pick up a ticket for the Rapid Vienna v Salzburg game, I set off with plenty of time to spare which was a good job, as I went in the completely opposite direction to the stadium. Eventually I got there for a 6.00pm kick off. The Vienna experience is completely different to the Bratislava one. Tickets can easily be bought at kiosks outside the ground and I purchased a 20 Euro ticket for behind one of the goals. 20 Euros wasn't a bad price compared to English football but compared to Slovak it's extortionate!

Programmes are free of charge and can be picked up from the "Press" window near the VIP entrance or from the VIP desk outside of the ground. They are also given out inside the ground. The 16-page B4 size programme is full colour glossy printed on thin paper. I can't complain as it was free but it was disappointing.

Entrance through the turnstiles is by bar coded ticket and then you are searched. Back to western football!

My seat in the ground was behind one of the goals. The seats were different as they were made out of metal with lots of holes. This is apparently to let snow melt through them.

It was clearly apparent that the Rapid supporters behind both goals are more interested in putting on a display than watching the football. People were asked to move their seats so that there were enough supporters in certain sections to hold up pieces of green and white paper before the kick off. At the opposite end of the ground, green and white smoke bombs were set off in unison when the teams came onto the pitch. The problem was that the smoke did not disperse so then game kicked off in a foggy atmosphere.

The singing supporters have a "conductor" who leads them in the singing. The man has a small metal stage at the front of the stand. Armed with a megaphone he continued to sing out of tune throughout the game. If only he had shut up for just one minute!

The main thing I will remember about this game is the cold. It was freezing.

Red Bull took the lead in the first half which was countered by a spectacular Rapid response to make the half time score 1-1. In the second half Red Bull took control of the game and ended up with a comfortable 3-1. The game was disappointing. It was dominated by diving and player pretending to be injured.

Frankly I was glad when it was over.

Match 3 - Sunday 2nd December 2007: Corgon League. **Artmedia Petralka** 2-1 FC Nitra. Attendance: 2,800; Admission: 80 Sk; 20pp programme: FOA; FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

After an overnight stay in Vienna I caught an early morning train to Bratislava Petralka (pronounced Petraschalka) railway station for a 10.30am kick off at Artmedia. The club is one of the oldest in Slovakia founded in 1898.

Petralka is a district of Bratislava but it is on the south side of Danube. As the train arrived you are met with the site of numerous grim tower blocks. It is certainly depressing. Over 115,000 people live in the district and the crime rates are supposedly high.

The station is a new facility and my challenge was to get from it to the ground. I managed to work out a bus route which took me towards the Danube. Artmedia's Stadion Petralka is located close to the river. A word of warning - if using the buses or trams in Bratislava then you need to buy a ticket before you get on either. The major stops have ticket machines located nearby but they only accept coins. When you buy something in the shops you usually receive your change in notes and if you ask for coins you are usually met with a negative response. Ticket inspector's prey on tourists and the "fine" for being caught without a ticket is £47. You must also stamp your ticket in a machine on the vehicle. You only get 30 seconds to do this after it leaves its destination before the machine closes itself down.

After being dropped off at a new very large shopping centre I made my way towards the river and had a nice Sunday morning stroll. As I reached the ground the pre-match music started with Bucks Fizz "Making Your Mind Up" followed by a Roy Orbison disco mega mix - very cheesy.

The ground itself is great. It's very quirky and would have the ground graders in England "passing out" in horror.

There is a rickety metal fence around the ground and tickets can be bought from wonky metal rusting kiosks which form part of the fence. 80Sk gets you admission and a free programme. It's a nice little programme with lots of information inside. The early kick off was due to the ground having no floodlights.

The ground itself is one of contrasts. Three sides of it are surrounded by large cantilever stands that somehow have a half finished look to them. Green plastic bucket type seats are attached to the concrete and were very dirty. As the game kicked off the majority of the spectators were cleaning their seats and not watching the game.

The fourth side of the ground is a real mish mash. There is a large white building that has a balcony at the front of it with seats for VIP's. To the left is some very uneven terracing. To the right is a press grandstand that is made out of a very thin steel frame. A good gust of wind would probably have blown it down and very unusually there is a tree trunk growing at the back of it, inside the stand. It actually takes the place of two seats. Next to this is some steel framed terracing,

the terracing being made out of wooden planks, which also looks like it could collapse at any moment. Most of the planks look rotten and there are numerous large holes in them.

The good thing about this ground is the steep rake of the stands and their closeness to the pitch. It is a very good ground to watch a game. The pitch looked like someone had just driven a tractor over it. It was very wet and muddy.

The game itself was very good. Both sides attacking end to end with numerous bone crunching tackles going in and an unsympathetic referee.

Artmedia were led by Jan Kozak the former WBA player who was outstanding at this level of football. FC Nitra took the lead before Artmedia hit back with two goals either side of half time.

There are few facilities for the spectator at the ground. There was no bar and spectators walked up the road to a bar and brought their beers back with them. There was a small gazebo where you could buy coke, punch or popcorn from a dodgy group of men who all wore combat trousers for some reason. There is also a dingy looking shed that sells some refreshments but I didn't venture.

Toilets are Portaloo's under the grandstands but most men just looked for the nearest wall.

The crowd recorded for the game was 2800 but like at Inter Bratislava they have funny ways of counting crowds as there was no more than 800 people in the ground.

I would highly recommend this ground as it is a really enjoyable experience and the locals are very chatty and will look to talk to you about the game.

06/20