

## **Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia & Herzegovina - June 2010**

*'It is harder to crack a prejudice than an atom' – Albert Einstein.*

### **ALBANIA.**

Bordering 4 countries - Greece, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro - Albania has experienced more than its fair share of prejudice. In recent times it saw the influx of 465,000 refugees from neighbouring Kosovo during the NATO bombing and the Serbian ethnic-cleansing campaign.

### **Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> June.**

Tirana, the capital of Albania, is a fusion of building site and ghost town. Construction work is taking place everywhere but amidst all of this new build are the ivy covered buildings of abandoned hotels and crumbling houses.

There is warmth and calm here that makes exploring this peaceful city an absolute delight. In places it may be loud, crazy and dusty but Tirana is simply fascinating.

### **Monday 14<sup>th</sup> June. Berat (Central Albania).**

I arrived in Berat around midday after a slow and bumpy three-hour bus journey. It was baking hot and the streets were almost deserted. I checked into 'hotel Mangalemi', fell on the bed and enjoyed a well earned siesta. By the time I had made it back out onto the streets the town had come alive with people enjoying the cooler temperatures of the now setting sun. Shops were opening and the many bars and cafes were buzzing.

The white Ottoman houses of the old town hug the mountainside with death defying agility. Exploring the labyrinth of narrow passageways is both confusing and exhausting. Berat, so I have been informed, is one of the country's most beautiful towns. It joined the UNESCO ranks in 2008 and it's not hard to see why.

It is a very relaxing place to be, with few distractions other than the hill top castle and a few scattered mosques and chapels. This suits me (unusually) fine. With midday temperatures hitting 35 degrees centigrade it's far too hot to do very much apart from chill and read my book on the tranquil rooftop terrace of the hotel.

### **Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> June. Shkodra. (Northern Albania).**

A rather disappointing town, there is little reason to visit other than to cross the border into Montenegro.

The young woman behind the reception desk, at 'hotel Kakadu', has a large bosom and an even larger cleavage. I tried desperately not to stare but as she was checking my passport my eyes were inexorably drawn to the 'heaving duo'. I looked to regain eye contact and seized the opportunity to ask about the border crossing into Montenegro. 'Come with me', she said, in a deep Slavic accent. I was led to a cafe next door and introduced to 'the man who can get you across the border'. I was told that it would cost 5 Euros. I shook hands to seal the deal and put on a brave smile as the man crushed my hand with his vice like grip. The receptionist, and her heaving bosom, escorted me back

to the hotel where she informed me that the man and his brother do the border crossing every day; one has a mini bus the other a car. 'The car is a Mercedes' she said and, as if to avoid any uncertainty, clarifies the point by saying 'a Mercedes Benz'. For some unknown reason I nodded and tried to look impressed.

## **MONTENEGRO.**

*'If you judge people you have no time to love them'. Mother Teresa.*

'Imagine a place with sapphire beaches as spectacular as Croatia's, rugged peaks as dramatic as Switzerland's, canyons nearly as deep as Colorado's, palazzos as elegant as Venice's and towns as old as Greece's and then wrap it up in a Mediterranean climate and squash it into an area two-thirds of the size of Wales and you start to get a picture of Montenegro'. (Lonely Planet guide to Western Balkans, page 333).

### **Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> June.**

Border crossings have always fascinated me. There is always that slightly nagging uncertainty with regards to the success, or otherwise, of such an activity. Most of the time, at least in Eastern Europe, countries tend to blend into one another and there is, by and large, very little difference between two sides of a border. This particular crossing was very different. The houses – much neater, the roads - no potholes, the rubbish strewn everywhere – none, the clothing – much classier. Altogether wealthier! Welcome to Montenegro!

**The Adriatic coast, en route to Sveti Stefan:** My Lonely Planet guide book informs me that this particular section of the Montenegrin coast provides the biggest 'wow' moment of the entire coast. As the bus travelled along, hugging the magnificent coastline, I lost track of the number of superlatives that came to mind. It truly was breath-taking.

The hotel that I was hoping to stay at was full so I had to resort to looking for alternatives. Scanning the streets I caught sight of a house with the sign 'Zimmer' outside. I rang the doorbell. The owner answered and nodded eagerly, when I questioningly said 'Zimmer?' I tried to avoid appearing too desperate and asked if I might first take a look. My potential host didn't understand a word I was saying. However, with a few hand and eye gestures she got my drift.

The view from my small but adequate balcony is awesome. To my left are rugged mountains that plunge dramatically into the clear blue Adriatic Sea. Slightly to my right I have an amazing view of the impossibly picturesque island of Sveti Stefan, which is connected to the shore by an extremely narrow jetty. The island is crammed full of terracotta-roofed dwellings, which once housed a simple fishing community. Straight ahead, well, just a mass of clear blue sky and sea.

### **Friday 18<sup>th</sup> June. Sveti Stefan.**

This morning I took the local mini bus for a day trip into Budva, a large town further along the coast, about 5km north of Sveti Stefan. I wanted to visit the old town, a mini Dubrovnik, with marbled streets and Venetian walls that rise from the clear waters below. In one of the cafes, where I enjoyed my morning coffee, I got talking to a local couple who live in the town. The young man was

an electrician by profession, but currently out of work. His English was very good and he explained to me about life in Montenegro. 'It's very expensive here now; we have no industry left, which means no work. The government is corrupt and has sold everything off'. Wait a minute, this sounds a bit like the UK! He didn't know when he would be working again but said that his parents were helping to support him and his wife, how long this could go on for he did not know. To look around at the number of hotels being built I found it difficult to understand the lack of work for skilled labourers such as him, but I guess it's not a simple as that.

### **Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> June. Sveti Stefan to Budva to Cetinje to Niksic to Zabljak.**

Zabljak, in the Northern Mountains of Montenegro, is not an easy place to get to, particularly when you are relying on public transport. The 1,500 metre climb from Budva to Zabljak took just under six hours. The countless hair pin bends we rocked around were negotiated with ease by the nonchalant bus driver who chain smoked for the entire journey. The final hour was spent travelling along what can only be described as a farm track. This narrow piece of road finally opened up in front of us to display a glorious view of the narrow plain on which Zabljak sits. This is skiing territory in winter but in summer it provides fantastic hiking opportunities, of which I am here to enjoy. The air is clean and fresh, but the rain clouds are building!

In Zabljak I met up with two delightful girls from Hong Kong. We chatted about the countries we had been to, they were obviously well travelled. However, I found it extremely amusing when they told me about their catering arrangements. Complete with a wide array of food, small camping stove and kettle they did all their own cooking. They could not adapt to Western food. Instead of rucksacks they had 2 massive suitcases on wheels. They had everything but the proverbial 'kitchen sink'.

### **BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA.**

*'Prejudice is all in your head'. As seen on a button at [evolvefish.com](http://evolvefish.com)*

You may be scratching your head wondering where on earth this unusually named country is. Once a republic of Yugoslavia, Bosnia Herzogvina (BiH) is a relatively new independent state. Perhaps you remember watching the 1984 Winter Olympics that were held here. Or worse, perhaps you remember the news coverage surrounding the Bosnian war that took place from 1992 to 1995.

I'm really struggling to understand how this country fits together as a union. Under the Dayton agreement of late 1995, the country was split into two roughly equal-sized 'entities', Bosnia in the North and Herzegovina in the south. If only it was that simple! In addition to this, the country has also been divided into two entirely different political entities. Add to this the diverse religious groups that make up this country, Muslim/Orthodox/Roman Catholic/Protestant, and you have one of the most diverse countries in Eastern Europe. Rebuilt churches, mosques and synagogues huddle closely, kindling an intriguing East-meets-West atmosphere.

### **Monday 21<sup>st</sup> June. Zabljak to Mostar.**

In the early nineties I vividly remember the horrific images of the destruction that took place during the Bosnian war, in particular the destruction of Mostar Bridge. Little did I know that nearly 20 years on I would be standing on that very same bridge.

I was like a little kid waiting to get into the sweet shop when the bus finally dropped me off a few hundred metres from Mostar Bridge. To say that I was extremely excited would have been an understatement. I swiftly found the small guest house, 'Pension Oscar', checked in, dumped my bags and, armed with my camera, raced out to explore the old town. The area around the bridge is so incredibly picturesque – a photographers dream, both during the day and at night. One of the luxuries of sleeping in the old town is that once the tour busses have left you get the place pretty much to yourself.

Tonight I dined at a delightful restaurant, overlooking Mostar Bridge, the fresh trout was the most delicious that I have ever tasted, the view only adding to its flavour. The fact that I had been travelling for nearly 10 hours and had not eaten for almost 24 hours further added to the pleasure of the meal. It has been a long day. The bus from Zabljak left at 07:15 and arrived at Mostar at 17:15. It has rained non-stop all day, a heavy tropical rain, perfect weather for travelling.



**Mostar Bridge, the indisputable visual focus that gives Mostar its unique magic, completely rebuilt in 2004.**

### **22<sup>nd</sup> June. Day trip from Mostar to Blagaj, pronounced Blageye.**

At the far end of the pretty village of Blagaj the Buna River gushes out of a gaping cave backed by soaring cliffs. Beside it is a very quaint half-timbered Monastery. The charming wobbly interior has carved wooden ceilings and entombs two 15<sup>th</sup> century coffins. It's a delightful place and very, very picturesque. The pointy white gravestones, in the graveyard at the other end of village, are a stark reminder of the severity of the recent war. Sadly, a countless number of them share the same date -

11.11.94. I would see many, many more of these gravestones as I travelled from place to place, an endless number of them are scattered all over the country.

In 1995 Mostar resembled Dresden after WWII, with all its bridges destroyed and all but one of its 27 Ottoman-era mosques ruined. Various eerie remnants still remain along the Bulevar, which was the former front line. Visiting these dramatic ruins is both moving and intensely thought provoking.

I am very sad to be leaving Mostar; it has proved, for me, to be one on the highlights of my trip so far. This afternoon, I had a 'brief encounter'. Standing at the main bus station I struck up a conversation with a lady who was waiting for the same bus. She looked to be the same age as me and spoke excellent English. I commented on how beautiful Mostar was. 'It used to be', she said, 'sadly there is still a lot of rebuilding to be done'. I asked her if she had been in Mostar during the war. She told me that she had, and hit me with some sobering comments. 'The worst bit, apart from losing my husband and my two children, was not the destruction of the city but the fact that neighbours and people one knew turned on you, just like beasts. You just didn't know who to trust anymore. I just pray that this never happens again'. I could see that she was getting upset and left it at that.

**Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> June. Mostar to Jace, pronounced Yiyeatse.**

Where the Pliva and Vrabas rivers meet, on the edge of the little town of Jace, there is an impressive 21 metre waterfall. The Pliva cascades down into the Vrabas with a thunderous roar and, if the sun is shining in the right place you can see a large rainbow created from the rising mist of this stunning waterfall.





The picturesque waterfall at Jace, and the delightful town behind it.

**Friday 25<sup>th</sup> June. Jace to Sarajevo.**

I plunged myself into the delightful pedestrianised lanes of Bascarsija, the old Turkish quarter and headed for the place that I have wanted to visit for over 32 years.

At the age of 13 my history master told me about a city called Sarajevo where in April of 1914 the assassination of Austria-Hungary's royal heir, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, took place, an event, he told me, that was to kick start the First World War. I was fascinated by the name of this city and even more fascinated that this one act led to the loss of so many lives. The small but informative museum, situated on the exact spot where the assassination took place, gives a brief but precise overview of the events that took place on and around that fateful day.

I do hope you have found my ramblings of some interest and that they may motivate you to visit one, or more, of these wonderful Baltic countries. If you have the opportunity to visit at least one place then please make it Mostar, you won't be disappointed. It's an easy trip from Dubrovnik!

This is my penultimate journey through Eastern Europe, an adventure that began in June 2003. The last three countries left for me to visit are Kosovo, Serbia, and Belarus. God willing, I will get to see them next June.

*'Havala, Zbogom'* (Thank you and goodbye).