



# 7 in 7

## Day 1 - Destination Croatia

**'YOUR mission should you chose to accept it? Swim or run in 7 countries in 7 days...'**

This is what I told my best mate, Mark Kincaid, several months ago. He accepted the challenge with alacrity. We've been doing daft stuff for years together.

Fast forward to last week when the flight on fire from Easy Jet was of course, 40 minutes late.

The car hire process was easiness personified. Mark and I were to share the driving duties and off we headed towards Dubrovnik, one of the most famous walled cities on the Mediterranean.

We fought our way in and arrived at the Pile Gate at about 10:30 to have just missed my cousin, Trish from Perth, who was over on a European jaunt.

We grabbed a slice of Pizza (28 Kuna, about 4 Euros) and headed down the coast to Cavtat to our first Airbnb.

It's always a relief to actually find your room when it's dark and your tired.

We celebrated with our first Croatian brew - an Ozujsko.

We might not have been able to pronounce it but we were able to drink it! Our aim was to drink the beers of 7 different countries in the next 7 days. We were on a tour of the Balkans! All I wanted was to bring back a fridge magnet from each territory - and lots of memories and of course we had a sporting aim as well.

A training session in each country.

Croatia was the dearest of the seven countries with the most developed tourist economy with prices to match.

I had booked accommodation for the first two nights only.

After that in the words of Paul Young, 'Wherever I Lay My Hat, That's My Home'.

Croatia along with most of the Balkans was involved in a bloody civil war in the early 1990s where nobody was a saint and there were very many sinners in a fratricidal murderous frenzy.

We wondered if we would see effects of the war 28 years later.

It probably wouldn't be the wisest conversation starter with one of the locals - What did you do during the war? - Maybe we would just talk about the weather instead or maybe the football. Croatia were the runners up in the World Cup Final only a few months ago and their star player, Modric, was voted best player in the world recently.

There were the familiar red and white checked football shirts everywhere but we did meet quite a few in Dubrovnik with Belfast accents when we were down town!

The world is a global village.

Stats for Croatia - Currency = Kuna; Capital is Zagreb; Population 4.3 million.

Interesting Fact - Croatia has 1,244 islands.

## Day 2 - Destination Montenegro

We were awake from about 6:00 excited about what lay ahead.

When we pulled back our curtain we had a view across the bay where we saw a massive cruise ship which had just let

Dubrovnik and an island and a mesmerising coastline of inlets and bays.

We went out for a run about 7:00.

As we couldn't find anywhere for breakfast we had a strong coffee in the pretty little fishing village of Cavtat which was festooned with boats and yachts and vessels all sitting serenely in the turquoise water.

On our way back, we jumped in for a swim to wake us up even more.

The crystal-clear waters were one of the main reasons why tourism is so successful.

We were at the border for 10:00am for a forty-minute wait to get past (a) the exit procedure for Croatia and (b) no man's land and (c) the entry procedure into Montenegro.

If this is a hard border then Lord help us all come March 2019...

Mark was driving today so I was meant to be in charge of navigation.

Thankfully all I had to do was keep the sea to my right.

We had the possibility of a ferry across the bay but we meandered and weaved our way round the headland and ended up in Kotor where we entered the city via the Seagate where we met some American tourists off the cruise ship.

Normally we criticise Americans who want to 'do Europe' in a frantically short space of time but as we however were visiting seven countries in a week I didn't think I was in a position to throw stones!

Kotor is described in Lonely Planet as 'achingly atmospheric'. It's another walled city with a lot of history.

We didn't have time for lunch but funnily enough we found time for a beer and an ice cream and the compulsory fridge magnet.

We meandered further along the bay to Budva which is the 'poster child of Montenegrin tourism'.

We had a view of an island with a tongue of land jutting out into the bay which was prettier than any postcard of a tourist heavenly haven.

We of course went for a swim to tick off a sporting discipline in this unbelievably pretty country.

We had a bit of a search for our Airbnb. I gave my phone to various locals to talk to the owners of the B&B. Nobody however on the line could speak English.

Eventually after talking to a water melon salesman, a passing Russian tourist and several people in a garage, we met our landlord for the night, Marko.

We were invited to join him and his family for a Turkish coffee which would have put hairs on the palms of your hands never mind your chest.

We offered him a glass of our wine and before you know it we were practically Facebook buddies.

Mark and I lingered on our balcony over a glass of red while an orange fireball of a sun dropped like a stone into the sea on the horizon to bring to a close a memorable day two.

Stats for Montenegro - Currency = Euro; Capital is Podgorica; Population 676,000.

Interesting Fact - The local firewater is Rakiya a domestic brandy (40% proof).



## Day 3 - Destination Albania

We were in the car at 6:50 and it was my turn to drive.

We climbed up out of Slanomore up through tunnels then onto a huge wide plane with a vast lake beside it which took three hours on a ferry to cross.

We were amazed that we were parked up beside the bus station in Podgorica the capital of Montenegro before 8:00am and wolfed down a fried breakfast with freshly baked bread that would win competitions back home.

We then boarded our trust minibus which held about 12 and the ticket only cost 16 Euros.

The journey had quite a few stops (probably so that our friendly driver could indulge his nicotine habit).

We were on the border a lot quicker than the previous day. If it's Friday it must be Albania!

The country which boasts a black double eagle on a red background for its National flag had been ruled by a mad dictator i.e. President Enver Hoxha for 40 years.

He had helped free the country from the fascist occupation in 1945 then went mad with power.

First of all he got rid of his rivals and former colleagues.

We had a tour in Tirana the capital of the Bunker of Art and also the National Museum. Hoxha's police had 35 methods of torture for political prisoners.

They executed 5,500 of their own citizens for crimes which included trying to leave the country - never underestimate the value of your precious passport!

Last year I stood on the balcony of the Monstrous Palace in Bucharest where Romania's former, Ceausescu addressed his people in December 1989.

He had done the same as Hoxha and ruled his people with an iron fist for decades. Someone in the crowd however in December 1989 had had enough and shouted up 'You're an old fool!'

Others joined in and inside two weeks Ceausescu had been executed on Christmas Day 1989.

Hoxha escaped that fate dying in 1985. Some of his old communist cronies tried to take over power but after six years, the game was up and in February 1991 the chains of bondage were cast off and Albania declared itself free.

As any woman will tell you, giving birth is never easy and involved a lot of trauma but Albania has settled down and is now emerged, blinking uncertainly, in the light of the European stage.

There were tourist here. We heard a lot of German accents.

The road infrastructure was great (certainly better than ours) and we

wandered around Skanderbeg Square which had an opera house on one side and the National Museum on the other.

It was the largest square I had been in since Tiananmen Square in Beijing with hopefully not as many secret policemen in it.

We headed out for a 30 minute run which included a boulevard full of high end shopping outlets (Hoxha would have been spinning his grave), a lovely park with a large lake where we saw fellow runners and on the way back we came across a crowd of about 400 local football supporters who were walking to their local stadium for a match.

They lit flares and they were chanting and all were dressed in the Club colours. They were



the same time they were being filmed by the local Feds...

The last time I was in a stadium surrounded by ultras was the Stadio Olimpico in Rome to watch Lazio and the amount of flares set off would have kept the fire brigade busy for a week.

We decided however to get some grub. We had bought our third fridge magnet in as many days. I'd sampled the local Albanian brew - time to move on!

Stats for Albania - Currency = Lek; Capital is Tirana; Population 8 million.

Interesting Fact - Mother Teresa was born here.

## Day 4 - Destination Macedonia

We awoke in Tirana, Albania before 6:00, got a quick taxi down to the International Bus Station where we asked about the time of the next bus to Skopje which was our next destination. We were

told the bus would be at 2 o'clock then 12 o'clock.

This would mean a waste of many hours but Robert the Bruce taught me to keep trying so I asked in another booth and was told that there would be a bus leaving at 9:00 - and it was only 20 Euros for an 8 hour journey.

We went across the street for a quick coffee and croissant and boarded our Albanian bus which was a bit like me, its best days were long behind it.

We grabbed some seats near the back and settled down for the long haul.

Three hours later we approached the border.

I was disappointed we hadn't seen any of President Hoxha's famous concrete bunkers.

He built them to withstand an invasion basically from the West and they could repel a tank stopping.

The fun was only beginning though when we hit the frontier, our passports were removed from the bus and 30 minutes later a hardnosed customs / security guy came on and gave us the hard stares. 30 minutes later our entire bus was sent into a separate siding.

We were ordered off with our luggage while a snarling Alsatian dog on a choke chain went bananas sniffing our bags.

The police didn't like the cut of our jib. One nervous backpacking passenger had a bag of white powder removed from his rucksack.

It turned out it was washing powder to clean his socks with but it was a sticky couple of minutes...

After 90 minutes we were allowed back on the bus and this was all because we wanted to leave the country!

We still had to enter Macedonia! That the border however was a positive doddle at traffic only 30 minutes.

and at Macedonia owed us big time.

The bus then climbed up huge mountain passes where we gazed at spectacular scenery.

The driver didn't seem too concerned if he arrived with the same number of passengers that he started with - I was nearly left behind at one stop.

Mind you at another stop I boarded what I thought was our bus to join 50 worried looking Japanese tourists who suddenly had a foreigner in their midst.

I left before there was an international incident...

Even though we were now in Macedonia there were lots of red and black double eagle Albanian flags.

Even though the Balkan war of the early nineties was a distant memory it was obvious that there was still lots of ethnic tension bubbling just underneath the surface.

Join me next week to see if I can run in 7 countries in 7 days.

