



3 Done - 4 To Go!

I WAS in the Balkans with my good friend Mark Kinkaid and we were attempting to travel through and run or swim in 7 different countries in 7 days.

We were on the Albanian/Macedonian border and eventually we were allowed in after a tense two hours. The more we drove into Macedonia the more mosques we saw. The gleaming spires of the minarets thrust up and pierced the blue Balkan sky. Eventually after 9 hours – and it felt like 90 – we entered the home town of Alexander the Great (apparently) i.e. Skopje. There were statues galore both to him and Philip the II. We stumbled off the bus with great relief and met our host for the evening who took us to our Air B & B. This had been booked by Sharon the night before as until then we had no idea where we would be.

Our host gave us a map and a quick history lesson but what a day to arrive! The day after, there would be a vote in a referendum which asked, “Do you want to join the EEC and NATO and change the name of your country?” Macedonia was changing its name to Northern Macedonia after a long dispute with Greece (which has a province called Macedonia and which also claims to be the birthplace of the Great Alexander....) The Macedonian Prime Minister agreed with the name change – but the Macedonian President didn’t, and it was up to the punters to decide.

We weren’t just here to be political junkies though. We went straight out for a run before we atrophied and covered quite a bit of ground jogging beside the river Vardar, over bridges, up to the Kale Fortress, through the Turkish bazaar where we grabbed a kebab but no beer obviously as it was the Muslim quarter. I learnt that the word for beer is the same as in Bulgarian – Pivo. In the square, the fountains were in full flow as was an orchestrated street party where a stage had been assembled, possibly to address the voters before the big day tomorrow. There was an air of tension, and possible change in the air. We had had less than a day in the country and it may even change its name during our stay!

Country: Macedonia. Currency: the ‘denar’. Capital: Skopje. Population: 2.2 million. Interesting fact, it also claims to be the birth place of Mother Teresa of Calcutta...

Day 5 - Destination, Kosovo.

Our breakfast consisted of a bread roll with egg

which was somehow suffused through the middle of it. I bought it in a train station and we ate it aboard the 8.00 a.m. minibus. We were heading to Pristina in Kosovo, Europe’s newest country, founded only 10 years ago. For once, the border was no big issue but as usual, the border guards in Macedonia had to have a look at your passport and even a more desultory look at your rucksack before the Kosovo border appeared 100 yards later and they did the same.

We were pleased to get our passports stamped, the first stamp since we landed in Croatia which now seemed a long time ago. We discovered that we may have trouble further on down the line when we attempt to enter Serbia. If the Serbian authorities see that you entered Kosovo either from Macedonia, Montenegro or Albania they wouldn’t let you in as they consider Kosovo to be an illegal state. In fact, even if they do allow us in, they will cancel our Kosovo stamp – sounds a bit petty to me!

Our bus journey only took two hours and we got a taxi in from the bus station into the middle of the city of Pristina. We ticked off a cathedral which was holding a service. It was being protected by armed Italian Police in case there was an attack on the building and the roads around it had even been closed. We again saw lots of Albanian flags i.e. the doubled eagled red and black flags. You could buy all sorts of Albanian souvenirs (fridge magnets, shirts etc.) even though we weren’t in Albania. It turns out that Kosovo was a province of Serbia but then broke away after a painful process and most of the citizens of Kosovo identify either with Albania, where most of them are Muslim but the minority orthodox Christian ethnic group identify with Serbia, so who exactly was a Kosovan?

We had a tour of the museum which had pictures of the famous bread protest in 1998. One year later, President Bill Clinton came to town and he now has a statue and a boulevard named after him. In one of the other cities we were in on our travels, there was a President Bush Avenue as well.

We saw the national football stadium and visited our third mosque in two days. The mosques are normally guarded by UN peace keepers and the state is basically bank rolled by the EEC. There were huge new infrastructure and road projects being built to speed up travel. If you want to



Big brother is watching you...

impress people, build new roads and they can come and visit and even spend some tourist dollars. There was a nice colourful “New Born” sign in three-metre-high letters, to signify the birth of the new state only a decade ago and that was about it for Pristina, Kosovo. As we had no access to a shower we decided not to have a run but it looked as if it would be seven countries but only six runs, but it would be eight borders. We boarded a bus at 7p.m. to get us back to Podgorica in Montenegro where we hoped our car still was. We proved that you can do three countries in three days via public transport but we were looking forward to being masters of our own destiny again. The journey was scheduled to take eight hours and took only two minutes longer! We met some Japanese guys in the back of the bus who were

visiting 50 countries in about three months, albeit very briefly. The road was all up or down or through tunnels which barrelled through the mountainous countryside. Eventually, we came to the border where again we had to fight for the right to leave the country. I calculated that we had spent 23 hours on a coach from Friday to Sunday. We were delighted to be back in Podgorica bus station and even more delighted to find our car was still in one piece. Now all we had to do was find our Air B & B on the other side of the town....

Country: Kosovo. Capital: Pristina. Population: 1.8 million. Currency: Euro. Interesting fact, Kosovo is recognised by 112 counties – but not by Serbia.



The bridge at Mostar, Bosnia



Command bunker, Tirana, Albania.

Day 6 - Destination - Serbia.

Serbia for me would not be a new country – I had a crossed into it with my son Mark last year when we were climbing the mountains of Bulgaria. I had a grilled sausage there that I still talk about it, it was so good! But it was still part of the “7 in 7” deal.

We had our early morning run in the warm sunshine and checked out of our fabulous apartment (39 euros for the night) and hit the road north, confronting many of the same roads our bus driver had navigated the night before. I was glad the brakes on the Ford Focus were working well as we had a lot of switch backs on high mountain roads to deal with. We stopped to admire the view at a layby and we looked over the side of the cliff, where 200 feet below us lay a wrecked car which had obviously not made a tight corner – a sobering view!

We had absolutely no problems in dealing with the customs to enter Serbia and contrary to what was in our guide book, the Kosovo stamp wasn't extinguished – maybe Serbia was getting a bad press? At one stage after about 4 hours on the road we decided to stop at a huge lake, where we plunged into icy cold waters and swam out and round a moored yacht and enjoyed hot chocolate on the veranda of the local hotel. About one hour later, we were finally in the city of our destination for the evening, Ucinz. We met up with our Air B & B landlady and explored the town which included a fortress and huge cliffs guarding the valley below. It even had a city beach where they managed to have a high diving competition in the summer. By accident we stumbled into an Irish pub where we downed a pint of the local brew, Lav, it wasn't much of an Irish bar though, it had no Guinness! But it did have lots of Liverpool memorabilia which made Mark very happy. We mused as to where our new Japanese friends would be and whether they were experiencing any of the joys and delights of the countries they were visiting. We were only doing 7 in 7! Our city was in the Tara Natural Park area. The Park was a star even if the city was ordinary.

Country: Serbia. Capital: Belgrade. Population: 7 million. Currency: Serbian Dinar. Interesting fact: their tennis star Djokovic got a lot of bad press in Serbia when he congratulated Croatia on reaching the World Cup final!

Day - Seven - Bosnia and Herzegovina

We stumbled out for a run about 8 into the first rain of our trip. Our journey took us beside the river, up steps, through a tunnel then into a fantastic natural park where we gazed in awe at a 25-metre waterfall, the most splendid I have seen since Gullfos in Iceland. There were gorgeous gorges and great sights before we turned back to begin our trip to our last country, Bosnia. We tried to get rid of our Serbian currency and wandered into a bar, just 4 kilometres across from the border where the owner was drinking schnapps at 10.00 in the morning. There were three old blokes in the corner looking as if they had been there all night – and most of their lives. I had a fabulous Turkish coffee and advanced to the border where we had the smoothest border crossing of the whole lot. What could possibly go wrong?

We had been meandering beside the beautiful river Drina which was 400 metres wide. Mark was driving today. He decided to leave the main road for a short cut. The road got smaller and rougher but eventually we came across the town of Kalanick. We should have realised something was amiss when we saw a poster of Slobodan Milosevic, the notorious leader of the Serbian Government and who led the campaign of genocide and mass murder which split the Balkans apart. (he died whilst on trial for his war crimes at the Hague). We tiptoed through the town, but then saw a police car which turned around to follow us and stop us.

At first the policeman seemed to be helpful. Then, after inspecting all our documents, he said that Mark needed an International driving licence (he didn't), that we needed a sticker of Bosnia on the back of the car (we didn't) that there was something wrong with the fire extinguisher (there wasn't) and there were no spare bulbs for our lights (there were). The price of all our transgressions – €110.00, we knew what was going on, this was a scam. He knew it, we knew it, he knew that we knew but he didn't care. We were in his territory in the middle of nowhere. His colleague stood on the other side of the road smoking and watching the familiar shake down take place. Mark provided €50 euros and £40 sterling that seemed to pacify him. I asked him for a receipt, “no receipt” he replied as he looked at me in a menacing manner. We got our documents back and drove off still shaking from the whole incident. The only good news was that the £40 that Mark had given him were two Ulster Bank notes from Belfast – good luck with that pal! Mark told me to write down the Policeman's name, he had memorised it from his badge. There are two letters now being sent to the Bosnian Embassy in Dublin!

By this stage, we just wanted to get away from that dreadful place and we certainly weren't going to turn around and face another “fine”. The road

soon turned into a dirt track which turned into a rutted path. On my side of the car, there was drop of 100 metres, there was no barrier, the road was about big enough for one vehicle. After 30 kilometres of horrendous road and death defying drops we made it to a thing called tarmac, our car looked as if had been involved in a world rally championship event and we didn't look much better. We checked into our hotel in Mostar to shake the dust off ourselves – and tried to look forward, not back. We talked to a local who told us that the Eastern half of Bosnia and Herzegovina is run as a separate Republic and they basically bear allegiance to Serbia, (they have red and white flags everywhere) including on the Policeman's uniform. We were told of the corruption that is endemic, – we didn't need to be told that having witnessed it at first hand!

We sauntered into Mostar to buy the ubiquitous fridge magnet, just our 6th as we couldn't find one in Serbia! We had a great meal in the forecourt of a Moroccan restaurant. We then toured the genocide museum where we learned of the madness of the Balkan war – 35,000 people killed in three years with 8,000 bodies still missing. Genocide is mass murder with hate being the motivating inspiration. Normally in a Civil War, there were two combatants. In the Balkan war there were at least three (Serbs, Croats, Bosnians and some mixtures as well). Mostar was a symbol of the madness where Bosnians and Serbs and Croats all happily killed each other. Our hotel was in Bulevar which was the front line as both sides shelled each other whilst the snipers took out people who were out foraging for bread. Many buildings were still in ruins and many were pot marked with bullets and shells. The museum was eerily quiet even though it was busy as we all absorbed the facts that this war was the last European war – and it was only 27 years ago. Many of the war criminals ended up behind bars and some are still being prosecuted. The first World War also started here after the Archbishop Ferdinand was assassinated in 1918, just 100 kilometres up the road in Sarajevo, this place has been a powder keg – and still is.

We found a bar under the shadow of the Stari Most (the Old Bridge) and it was hard to believe that this restored bridge, (the original had been obliterated by tank shells) with tourists merrily walking over it on their way to buy souvenirs, was the scene of such destruction and mayhem.

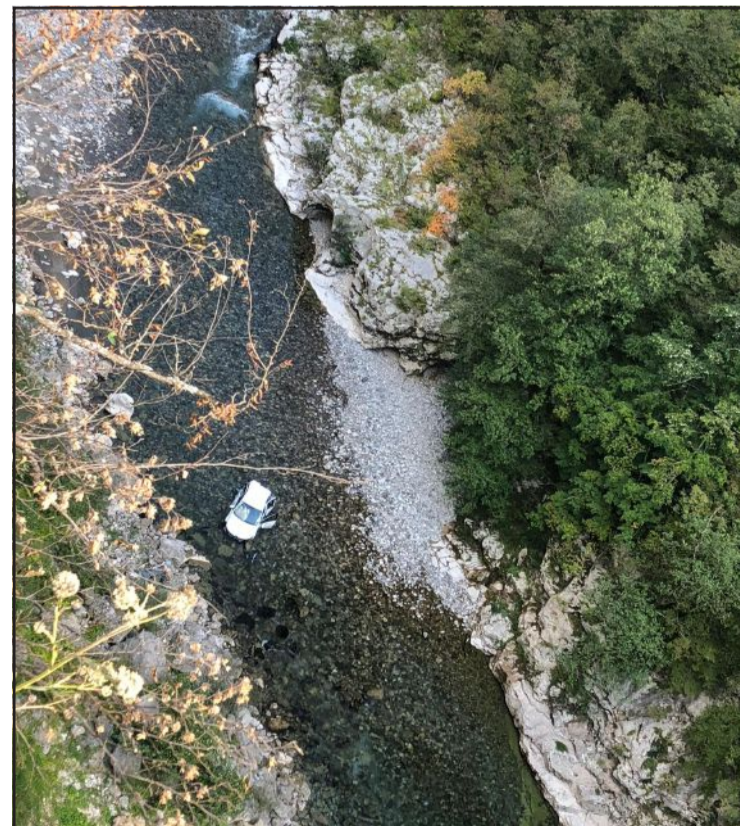
Memories of our troubled day absorbed us on our way back to our hotel, as we realised that a corrupt cop was the least of the problems of this benighted but beautiful land.

Country: Bosnia. Capital: Sarajevo. Currency: Convertible Mark. Interesting fact: there are three countries inside one.

Day 8, Destination, Home.

We were in our running gear before 8.00 a.m. and ran the streets of Mostar where we found a Muslim Cemetery beside the main mosque where 98% of the deceased died in 1993 in the Civil War. We lingered on the bridge conscious of the veil of evil and hatred that it spanned.

On the road, we decided to hit the Kravice waterfalls and ended up going through a town called Medjugorje where apparently there was a vision of the Virgin Mary in 1981, the place was bunged with clouds of religious tourists – it's the



A long way down...

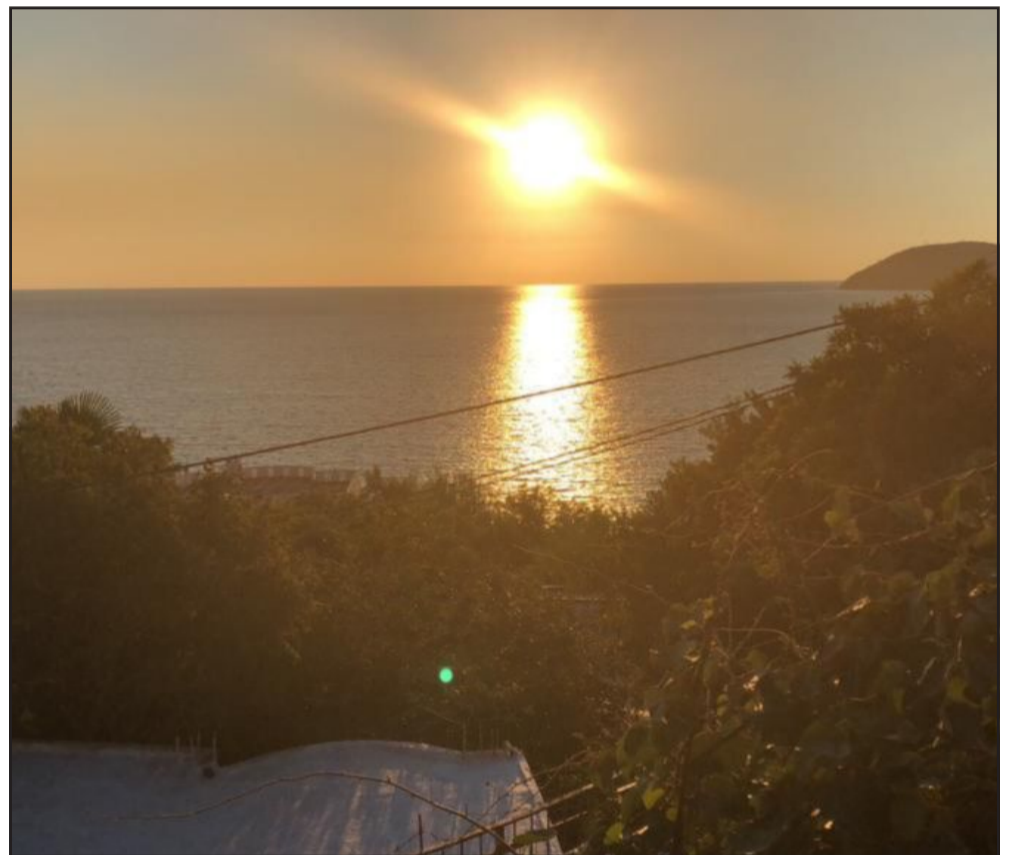
Balkan Lourdes. We arrived at the waterfalls which was as pretty as a postcard and five waterfalls thundered into the crystal-clear waters. We went for another bracing but exhilarating swim. It reminded me of a swim in Borneo where the water washed away the humidity and the leeches. This place was just stunning in its natural beauty and wasn't crowded as it was off season. It was even free to visit! We enjoyed a relaxing coffee from a veranda and then eventually decided it was time to go. We crossed into Croatia and we had a straight road down the coast towards Dubrovnik and home. Strangely however, we then entered Bosnia again which had been allocated about 15 kilometres of coastline in the Balkan peace deal brokered in 1995. We showed our passport to enter Bosnia and 15 kilometres later we showed our passport to leave Bosnia and then into Croatia.... I hope this is not of a preview of what is to happen between Derry and Donegal in March 2019.

I simply could now remember how many times we had shown our passport. We have some fantastic coast line in Northern Ireland and some of the best in the world, but so does Croatia and Bosnia and Montenegro. We gazed in wonder at some of the 1,244 islands dotted off shore blinking in the sunshine – it was still 24 degrees in October. We pulled into a layby and ended up helping four Canadians who had put the wrong petrol into their car – as I had done this two weeks ago myself, I could sympathise with their predicament... Our last mission was to visit the cable car in

Dubrovnik. We didn't follow the guide book but followed our noses to the top of a mountain, parked and hiked for 15 minutes up to a restaurant with possibly the best view in the Mediterranean. I took the cable car 470 metres down the side of the mountains to gaze at the walls of the city where our adventure started a week ago or was it a month ago?

We had seen so much, spent 43 hours in a car, 23 hours on a bus, countless hours at border crossing, had wild swims, walked the legs off ourselves, sampled more national dishes than would be contained in your average cook book, experimented with different beers and wines and had been exploited by a cop, nearly fallen off a cliff and had several history lessons, visited a political rally, a genocide museum, defied death, met some amazing people, paused by Mother Teresa statues in several countries, visited a country (Kosovo, where nobody wanted to call themselves Kosovans) been surprised by Skopje, amazed by Albania; observed Islam and Orthodox churches; navigated by way of a beach towel - what a blast! All this including car hire and petrol and accommodation cost us £35.00 a day.

The final count was 10 border crossings, seven countries, six runs and one completely packed week! Thanks to Sharon for booking the accommodation. Thanks to Mark for joining in the madness and thanks to the people of the Balkans for being so hospitable – with the exception of one particular Bosnian Cop who was a disgrace to his uniform.



Montegrin sunset



We can be heroes....just for one day