



# The summits and ridges of Bulgaria

LAST week Mark, Jack and I had started our odyssey in the mountains of Bulgaria.

It's the third day of the week long journey and we set off with our faithful driver Nikkolai at the helm to transport us up a rocky road/path/slope. Eventually when the car could go no further, we set off.

I felt good for the first three hours as we pushed up from 1,200 metres above sea level to the Macedonia Hut at 2,200 where we saw the first people that we had witnessed all day.

We ate our lunch outside in the sun but when I went inside, it was the same scene in mountain huts all over the world, people trying to keep warm, hunching over a bowl of hot soup or playing cards to wile away the hours, all the time waiting before making a further push back up the mountain.

The scene is the same in Nepal as it is in Morocco as it is the Balkans. I withdrew reluctantly from the warm fog and we started up hill once more.

Stoyen pushed at such a pace that I thought he had left the oven on back home. After 30 more breathless minutes, we were at another ridge at 2,400 metres with a big valley sloping down beneath us.

How did he know where to go? Well, every 100 metres or so if you looked closely, there was the reassuring white and blue stripes on a rock to confirm you were still going in the right direction.

Besides, Stoyen has been an expert mountain guide for over 15 years and has hiked here hundreds of times.

The sun got up and stayed up and baked us all the way as we stepped and slithered our way down until we were in a meadow beside a stream.

I had an Ulster wash - face and oxters only - in a cooling stream before we headed for the last painful 90 minutes until we emerged onto what passed for a road and there was Nikkolai who had battled his way up through pot holes and rutted streams to collect us.

We descended to the local town of Dobarsho (famous for the 'Jesus in a Spaceship' painting from the 17th Century) then onto our final destination of Banksho, the only tourist resort we had encountered.

This place is the biggest ski destination in the country and there were plenty of souvenir shops for me to obtain a must have for the house - a fridge magnet.

At dinner, I decided to go native and try the local fire water, ie, rakia. This is at least 40 per cent proof, is made by everybody in their homes and you are meant to consume it while you eat your nightly salad - salad has never tasted so good!

Our room in a local comfy hostel gave us stunning views of Mount Vehren which towered up nearly three kilometres in the sky. A crescent moon was on the wane above us. The sunset was bursting orange in the East and it all looked beautiful, but how on earth were we, in our already tired state, meant to summit this leviathan of a peak in only 12 hours time?

My feet were on fire and Mark's knee meant

it was sore for him going down the stairs, never mind up and down a mountain.

We retired for the night hoping for the convalescent power of sleep...

## Day 4

Started at 1,200 metres, climbed to 2,914 after driving to 1,940 and finished at 1,950. Today was the big one.

This was the whole raison d'être. The plan was to conquer Mount Vehren, the second highest in the Balkans and nearly as high as Mount Olympus in Greece.

I woke early worried about Mark's knee and my lower back as my L5 and L6 had decided, just for old time's sake, to start to rub together again.

No guts, no glory, but as Hannah Shields says, you never conquer mountains, you just hope to be able to quietly stand on top for a few brief moments. You need a lot of hard work, mental and physical and you also need a bit of luck.

At 9.30 am Nikkaoli left us to our own devices as we exited his car in a really busy car park where everybody seemed to be dressed if not to kill, then at least to hike.

There were some serious climbers here. As usual, there was no easy introduction. Stoyen had us straight up the nearest hill with the pulse at max - wham bam, thank you Stoyen!

We had two breaks at the two cauldrons, ie, patches of open terrain, where there was a slither of flat ground.

We drank our water,

but Stoyen told us to "rationalise it" as there were no streams up above us. After several more hours, we were confronted with a wall of marble.

Stoyen told us to place our feet exactly where he put his to avoid the really shiny and slippery marble which had been polished by the bottom of thousands of soles of feet over the decades.

It was so steep that the authorities had banged in iron posts and chains to help give you more purchase as there was practically a sheer drop beneath us.

This reminded me of both Mt Kinabalu in Borneo and also Mount Kenya and when you see these via Ferrata type structures, you know things are getting fairly serious.

Usually on the way up the mountain, there are a few false summits, ie when you think you are there, you are not.

But for this mountain, oh thank you, we climbed over one last escarpment and there was the summit straight in front of us.

I gave Mark a hug and told him how proud I was of him. Mark has already been to the top of Mt. Fuji which is a lot higher but this was a far more arduous climb.

I hi-fived Stoyen and we drank in the panoramic 360 Degree views of the entire range. When I was on top of Mount Elbrus a couple of years ago at 5642 metres, I was literally too exhausted to enjoy the view of the entire Caucasus.

Here however, I could revel in our achievement. Some 30 minutes later, we saddled up the proverbial pony and started the painful two hour trek down. I was slow enough going uphill but even slower going downhill.

How does Alan Bogle, the famous fell runner from Eglinton, do it? Apparently the secret is to look 10 metres ahead, not one metre.

I couldn't do anything on the way down except look at the next potential ankle breaker 50 centimetres ahead of my clumsy aching feet.

After a few more ridges and spurs, we spied our destination in the distance, a green roofed hostel which slowly came into bigger view.

Just after 4.00 pm we touched down for a very well earned pint of Zapenko at less than a quid. We thanked Stoyen profusely for expertly guiding us up and down.

It was on terrain like this that I had fallen and broken my finger in China so I was very

thankful to still be in one piece.

Earlier, Stoyen had pointed out to us, in a conspiratorial whisper, a famous low to the ground plant called adelweis. If you are spotted picking it, you can be fined 2,500 euros! I decided to keep my Father Dougal impulsiveness in check and we sped down into town.

I am not sure about you, but I couldn't be content on a seven day beach holiday where you just lie about and sift the warm sand between your toes.

I am at an age where I need to make the days count, not count the days. I need to feel I have seen and done as much as I can in every single precious 24 hours.

Don't tell yourself the world is a small place, that's nonsense, it is however packed with incredible vistas and enticing challenges and great people.

Thanks to Adventure Alternative, I had now bagged a seventh very memorable summit in seven different countries and more importantly, shared some precious moments with my young superstar, Mark.

## Day 5: Altitude Gain - Nil

Today was meant to be a seven hour hike uphill over a spectacular ridge in the Pirin ending up in an isolated mountain hut on the edge of a remote lake.

There would certainly be no mod cons like showers or toilets. We would be away from our creature comforts. Strangely enough, I like doing that once a year because you can look back with renewed appreciation and gratitude at all of the luxuries which we take for granted. This trip had been so full of comforts, unlike other trips. This trip was hiking for people who like their home comforts but I was still looking forward to the solitude of a night under the stars at the foothills of a beautiful mountain with a good book and great company. Instead I ended up sick.

With both orifices in full flow, I was in no mood to go anywhere. We scrapped all talk of even a car journey, I just lay in a heap and looked at the sun changing the colour of the mountain outside our bedroom windows. Six hours later I had just about enough energy to stroll for 500 metres to sit in the shade and manage an ice-cream (lots of calories and easy to consume, perfect recovery food). Mark was bad as

well and he dealt with it in a very stoical fashion. We both just longed for the morning to feel hopefully recovered and raring to go again. That's the great thing about Adventure Alternative, the trip on paper can be rejigged and tailored to suit the health of the trekkers. The adventure has to be alternative but also has to be fun.

## Day 6

Started at the Vehren hut at 1950 and ended at 2300. When you wake up the day after you have been sick, you feel reborn.

It's just a privilege to be feeling 100 per cent again. Your health is your wealth, as they say. The grass seems greener and the air seems cleaner.

I just felt so good that I borrowed a bike from downstairs and had a 40 minute spin around Bansco. Several hours later, we were back at the Vehren Hut, the scene of our finish two days previously.

Our original plan was to be somewhere else but Stoyen was able to go with the flow, so Plan 'B' was a four hour sojourn in the hills.

Thankfully, the legs still remembered how to climb and we saw some spectacular scenery and lakes and at last, I was able to have a wee swim in a refreshing mountain lake surrounded by solitude and serenity.

They say that no one could hear you scream in space, well, it's probably true that no one can see you smile under water in a mountain lake.

Bliss, pure bliss, and we had our lunch on a grassy bank in 25 degrees. Eventually, we had to go and reconnect with civilisation where we had a hot cup of Chai, as the stomach was probably still too delicate for a Komenitsa beer.

Nikkolai drove us all the way down to Melnick, our destination for the night at a mere 230 metres above sea level. Melnick is a spectacular town of 286 lucky souls. It is cut into the middle of a sandstone cliff where the houses cling to the side of the valley. It is purely dedicated to oenophiles, ie, wine lovers.

It has 150 cellars and it produces both red and white. We had a wine tasting with cheese and

salami for only £5.00. The cellar we visited produced only natural wine ie no artificial additives.

The owner told me that if I bought it and took it home I would have to consume it within seven days - the sacrifices I have to make especially for 3.00!

It was 37 degrees outside so 30 minutes in a cave where the temperature was 17 was very welcome. We had our last dinner with Stoyen on the balcony of our hotel, as the sun set behind us.

The big glass of red wine, the pint of beer and the litre of water all cost a massive £1.00 each. Reluctantly, we left this idyllic place to go and pack a week's time of memories into an already filled rucksack for the journey home.

I was mightily impressed with Bulgaria and with Stoyen. If you like alternative adventures, you will love the summits and ridges, the mountains and lakes of the beautiful Balkans in Bulgaria with Adventure Alternative.

I'm looking forward to next year's trip with Adventure Alternative already!



The one and only Stoyen, our main man. NCL33-04s



Peter and his son Mark rocking it at their last summit. NCL33-02s



The Jack boys at 2914 metres - the 'High-light' of the trip. NCL33-03s