

From Benevanagh to the Balkans!

DID you ever have breakfast in Ireland, lunch in Serbia and dinner in Bulgaria? Well that's what happened Mark Jack and I on our seven day trip to the mountains of Bulgaria.

We were travelling with the best travel company on the planet – Adventure Alternative of Portstewart who have guided me to the top of mountains in Tanzania (Kilimanjaro), Morocco (Toubkal), Borneo (Kinabalu), Nepal (Kala Pathar), Kenya (Mount Kenya) and Russia (Mount Elbrus) – and the latest plan was to enjoy their “Summits and Ridges of Bulgaria” tour.

We had an early start from Dublin on the 8.35 am red eye with Ryanair to Sofia (pronounced not as in the girl's name but as in So-fia) where we were met by the smiling Stoyen.

I knew as soon as I shook this guy's hand that we were going to be well looked after. The guides whom Adventure Alternative use are all experienced, friendly, bilingual, enthusiastic and also thankfully problem solvers – ‘cause I usually bring a lot of problems with me!

Stoyen, would prove to be a font of knowledge but he wore his knowledge lightly.

He has been at the top of many mountains in the Caucasus in Bulgaria and in the Alps and is both a technical mountaineer as well as a mere hiker like myself.

We walked out of the airport straight into 30 degrees heat. We had exchanged the grey skies of Ireland for the blue skies of the Balkans.

Mark and I were both a bit frazzled.

Mark had been on a lads' weekend in Liverpool and I had been doing MC for 2000 triathletes in Castle Howard in North Yorkshire.

We both could have done a lot more sleep, but before we knew it we had met our expert driver, Nikkolai and off we went to catch a quick glimpse of the Alexander Novski Cathedral in the middle of Sofia.

This cathedral was built only 100 years ago to celebrate the country's liberation from 450 years of Ottoman rule.

A few years later the First World War erupted, two decades after that Hitler eventually got round to invading Bulgaria.

The Bulgarians managed to ensure however that not one single Jew was transported to the death camps and it was noticeable in Sofia that the Mosque, the Synagogue, the Orthodox Cathedral and the Christian Cathedral all existed cheek by jowl, very peacefully.

I had asked Adventure Alternative if we could have a quick side trip to Serbia. It was only 60K away and it would be my 59th country.

Nikkolai and Stoyen said that it would be no problem. We showed our passports to the Bulgarian officials and for the next 200 metres we were in no man's land before being granted permission to enter the territory of the tennis player, Novak Djokovic.

Serbia is a non EU

country and thousands of migrants have tried to enter the EU into Austria through the porous northern border.

After a fabulous lunch of salad and several sizzling Serbian sausages and a well-received beer, we queued up to re-enter the EU.

A sign told us we were on the main road for Athens and Istanbul and thankfully also Sofia!

We had a rain storm that would have done justice to the phrase “Biblical downpour” and we exchanged the red white and blue flag of Serbia for the red, green and white flag of our host Country.

We drove on the ring road of the nation's capital, Sofia, which hosts two million residents, a quarter of the country's total.

We were already at over 1,000 metres and our base of Samokov reminded me of the gateway town at the foothills of the Caucasus in Russia before our assault on Elbrus.

That summit was 9.5 out of 10 of my physical exertion capabilities. I was hoping that the beautiful Balkans would be much more benign.....

Day 1
Woke at 1,200 metres, we drove to 1,220 metres, climbed to 2,729 and back down to 1,300. We were looking forward to spending very little time in a car or a bus or a plane and a bit more time on our feet and Stoyen promised us up to eight hours of walking, so we had better get our act in gear!

I was to discover over the course of the day that you can be swim fit, run fit, bike fit and even gym fit, (and I am not necessarily any of those) but that doesn't

make you hill fit or dare I say it, mountain fit.

Hill climbing uses a different muscle group, especially on the way down when your quads get a bashing. No amount of posing in a gym is going to prepare you for that.

Mark had at least been up and down our very own Binevenagh and Errigal a few times. Meanwhile I had spent the last 6 months avoiding the remotest incline when I was running or biking. I even have an aversion to stairs!

After a hearty breakfast of feta like cheese, French toast and a coffee which would have put hairs on your chest, we had a 10 minute ride with Nikkolai where we disgorged, sun creamed and ready for the ups and downs of the day.

The pace was very relentless from the get go. We had risen at UK time of 5.15 and 75 minutes later, slightly punch drunk (This was of course my fault as we had a 4 hour detour to Serbia).

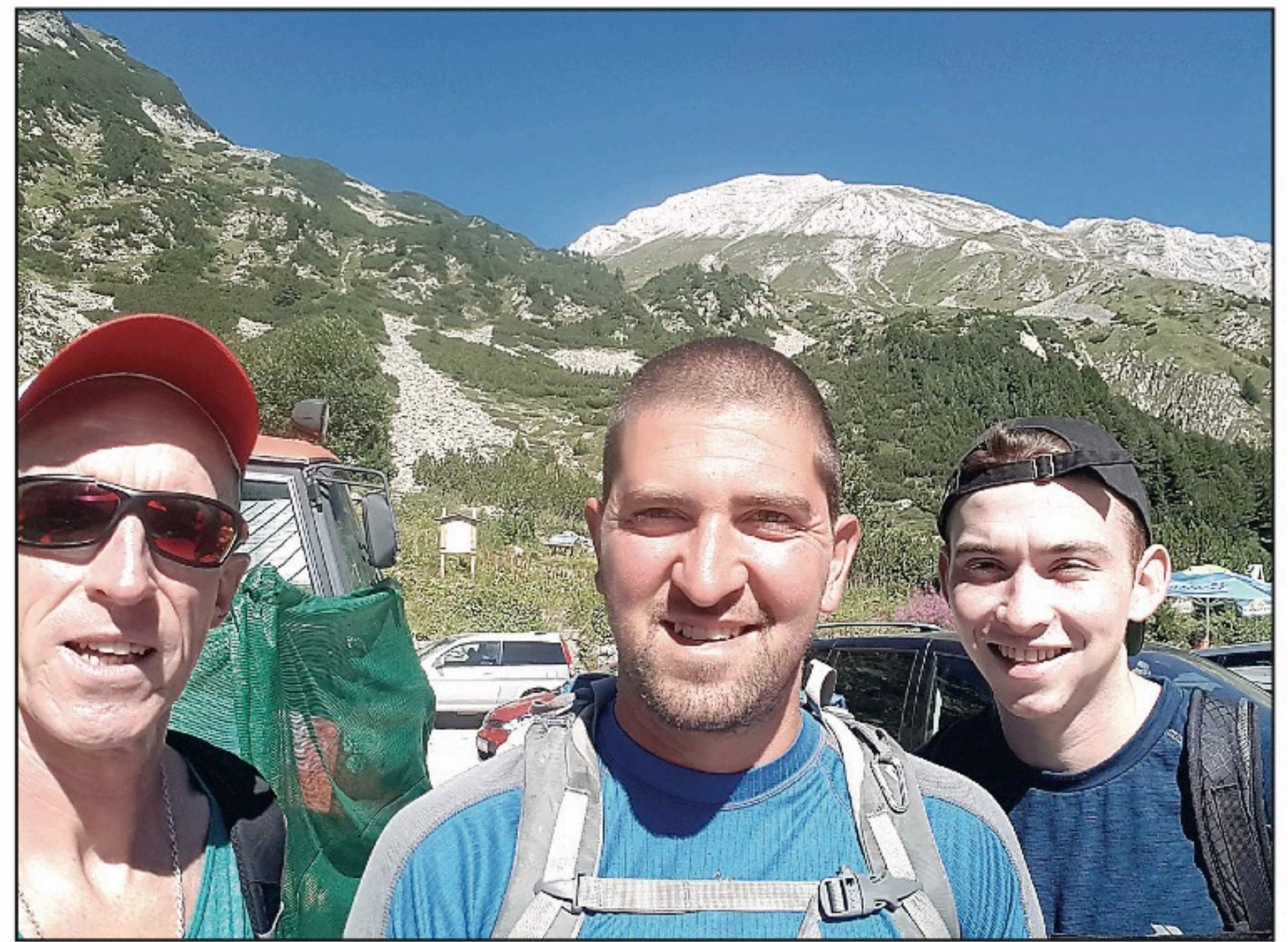
There was the traditional photo at the entrance to the Rila National Park and then we were on the scree slope for the next 50 metres before a welcome cup of caffeine.

The heart rate was already up but it was more than compensated by the views. Stoyen explained that we were in a granite area, which didn't allow water to drain into the soil very well so lakes were formed.

In a few days' time, we are to be in a marble area, which is porous, where water drains into the ground and there are no lakes there. Today we were headed for the Rila lakes, a Unesco World Heritage site.

First of all however, we had a 2,750 metre peak, our first Summit of the week.

The official title of the trip was of course



Peter, with his son Mark and Stoyen on their trip to Bulgaria. NCL32-13s

“The Summits and Ridges of Bulgaria”. We were due to tick off a lot of both.

After three and a half hours we made it to the top of Malyovitsa at 2,729, not bad considering that 30 hours earlier we had been a sea level.

On the way up we passed a memorial to climbers who had passed away on various mountains. It reminded me of the highest graveyard in the world in Nepal. Some of these climbers had died on the Alps, some in the Himalayas – and some in Rila. Fairly sobering stuff.

Whenever Stoyen told us not to go near a ledge, we listened. If going up was hard sometimes, going down is even harder.

We stopped for lunch at a lovely sheltered cove out of the wind then the ridge then took us up past panoramic views of the seven lakes where we encountered other intrepid souls, mostly locals, but some Yanks and western Europeans.

We also saw herds of what we thought were Wild, Wild, (thank you Mick) Horses, but it turns out they weren't Wild, because they had bells around their necks.

There were all sorts of animals in the forests of Bulgaria including Bears, Snakes, wild Cats, Boar, Lynx but they are very smart and they could hear and smell us so they generally kept out of sight.

I could have done with some Lynx myself as I had already been working hard for six hours by this stage...

After another hour's hard work, we were off the granite and into a ski chair lift for a 25 minute ride back down to 1,200 metres with

stunning views over the forests.

We had had a 17K day with over 30,000 steps according to my Garmin. We had a chance to find out something about the history of Bulgaria from Stoyen who was seven when communism had collapsed – just like the Berlin wall, 1,000 kilometres to the North.

It was a bloodless coup, unlike the one next door in Romania where Mr & Mrs Ceausescu met a grizzly fate on Christmas day on 1989.

Stoyen told us that in the 1980's when the communist party was still trying to hold on to power, there were two intrusions into the consciences of the citizens which they couldn't control which told people behind the Iron Curtain of the possibilities of freedom that existed in Western Europe - the pernicious influences were the Beatles and Benny Hill!

I was quietly amazed at the comfort of the hotels we were staying in. Normally when you are “on the hill”, the accommodation is very basic and electricity and the inter-web and wee – fee are absent.

Here we were able to recuperate, read and relax and re-charge the batteries for Day two.

Day 2
We started at 1,300, drove to 1,500 got a chair lift to 2,160 and climbed to 2,690 and descended to 1,186. The forecast for today was not good and if it was bucketing (that's an Ulster word by the way, not Bulgaria,) we would try and find a plan B.

As it was, the rain seemed to fall during most of the night so we were back on schedule.

I made friends with a lovely German Shepherd dog outside the hotel and managed to sneak her some of my breakfast ham and salami. At 9.00 we were back on the ski lift for our trip to the start line.

The legs were a bit stiff but soon remembered their purpose. We had an easy morning, stopping after 50 minutes for views beside one of the Rila lakes, they have names like Tears/Kidneys/Cover/Twins.

Mark and Stoyen talked basket-ball for several hours as they were both huge fans of the NBA and Stoyen used to play professionally.

I was glad they were doing the talking as I had no energy left to do anything else except to plod uphill over rocks and scree.

I came across several more herds of wild horses and a flock of mountain sheep being guarded by huge hybrid dogs. The dogs ignored us after they realised we were not there to steal their farmer's sheep.

On the way up we managed to teach Stoyen some good Ulster words like oxtar, sheugh, footering and the best one of the whole lot, ‘what's the craic?’

We were heading from the Rila Seven lake site to the World Heritage recognised Rila Monastery.

We were at 2,500 metres, we had water, food, waterproofs, rucksacks, energy supplies, and when we were half way there after a plain which would not have been out of place on the Mongolian steppes, we came across a French family of three who had absolutely nothing with them and who

were ill equipped for what lay ahead.

They were heading into the area which later that day would have thunder and lightning and very heavy rain. We on the other hand were heading for the Alpine meadows with marvellous mountain flowers.

It started to lash on us so at least the waterproofs got an outing. We had a three hour descent through a huge forest, there were beech trees here 500 years old and spectacular waterfalls.

Eventually we ended up at the Rila Monastery which is over 1,100 years old and full of sacred relics. You didn't have to be a believer to be impressed by the piety of the monks during their liturgy or by the gold panels on the walls and ceiling.

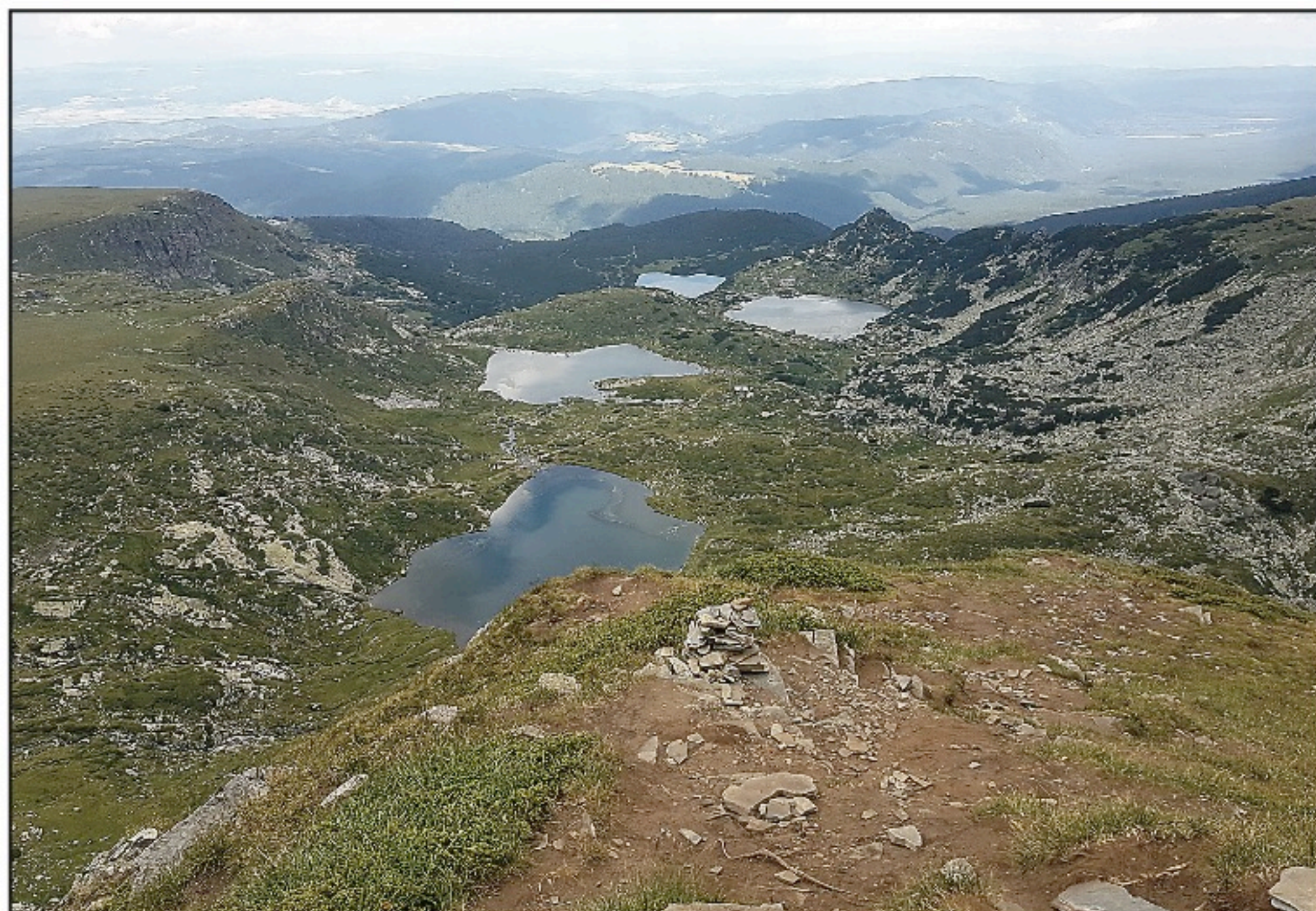
We had learnt a lot about the history of the Balkans which included Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia, Macedonia, Croatia, Kosovo etc. during our trek and now we learnt why this monastery was also so special.

I have been to cathedrals, temples, synagogues and mosques in places like Jerusalem Bethlehem, Rome, Moscow, Agra, New York City and Jaipur but the Rila monastery deserves to be on the same page.

Meanwhile my Garmin told me I had achieved another 30,000 steps and my quads and hamstrings confirmed it.

I am getting too old for this carry on! Still, after a shower and a refreshing beer gazing out from our balcony after the rain, life was good, we were two days into our Balkan odyssey.

Join us next week for the rest of the trip.



An amazing view of the valley Peter and his gang trekked. NCL32-10s