

The Via Egnatia: a cultural route in its fullest sense

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“A road is a way of transferring and connecting people, tradesware, art and ideas,” reads the first line on the Via Egnatia Foundation’s (VEF) website.

This ambitious project is about more than reviving the old Roman road from Albania to Byzantium: It also embraces the cultural aspects of what a route can mean. Marietta van Attekum, the foundation’s coordinator, tells us how the project came about, how Turkey is involved and about the Turkish leg of the walking trail from the Greek border to İstanbul.

Revitalizing a trans-Balkan highway

The cultural route is based around the Via Egnatia, which was originally a Roman military road, built in 3 B.C. as an extension of the Via Appia. It connected the Roman Empire west to east, and went from Durres in Albania through the Balkans to Byzantium. For over 2,000 years, it was a vibrant highway and was used by soldiers, crusaders, preachers, bandits, merchants and peasants, tax collectors and caravans with up to 200 mules and donkeys. Many different people have also used the route throughout history, including the Greeks, the Vlachs, the Pomaks, the Ottomans, the Venetians, the Jews, the Egyptians and the Roma, as well as modern migrants such as the Evros Greeks in the 1960s. The Via Egnatia, with breaks due to political or geographical upheavals, has been a trans-Balkan highway for centuries.

In keeping with the spirit of the route, in 2007 Marietta started the VEF with a group of friends, their common denominator being longstanding involvement with Balkan countries because of their studies or a commitment to Balkan history, languages or music. “It’s much more than a physical route, as we’d like to see the Via Egnatia become a way to connect people again

through contact and exchange of knowledge and culture,” Marietta says. “The focus is on both helping develop the Via Egnatia into a cross-border hiking trail and also stimulating cooperation and exchange between people, organizations and experts involved in the project. There’s a common focus to everything the VEF undertakes: to further social and economic development of the regions along the Via Egnatia, and ultimately also friendship and peace by connecting people from many countries. Economic independence is also important to the VEF -- all our work is voluntary -- as that means we can remain independent. The VEF does welcome private donations and sponsors for the implementation of the actual hiking path and various other activities.”

So what’s the reaction been to the project in countries along the route? “In Albania people are enthusiastic and willing to contribute, both on a government and local level,” Marietta points out. “In the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia the Dutch embassy is very encouraging and we’re working with academics and local tourism organizations. In Greece people from all walks of life are enthusiastic and want to be involved. In Turkey we have contacts at many levels and the Turkish people in our network are interested in starting projects with organizations and people from other countries.”

Making things happen

Common goals and goodwill are the impetus behind this ambitious academic project and the VEF has achieved a great deal since it started three years ago, including publishing a book and being involved in the renovation of a school in Albania.

So how does Turkey fit in? İstanbul Bilgi University, Boğaziçi University, Koç University, İstanbul University and İstanbul Technical University are all very committed to the VEF’s many projects, for example. “One project we’re working on is cross-border scientific research, and part of that is to organize conferences,” Marietta says. Following the short seminar that took place on July 11 at the İstanbul Archaeological Museum at which academics from Turkish universities and abroad gave lectures on Via Egnatia’s history and monuments, there are plans for “an international conference titled ‘Myths on the Other’ next year for academics from countries along the route, including Turkey. We’re also involved in setting up working groups of people from along the Via Egnatia. For example, one is working on the issue of illegal migration between the countries along the Via Egnatia and another is involved in cultural history, collecting the life histories of people living along it,” explains Marietta.

Art and music are a powerful way to develop consciousness of a common history and future and so the VEF is also busy with cultural projects. “On all stages of VEF’s Caravan Walk along the Via Egnatia, children from the different countries have painted pictures on a large canvas

which, when finished, will probably be about 40 meters long,” she explains, adding: “We’re also planning an international concert tour of musicians from along the Via Egnatia in the cities along the route, coupled with music camps and master classes for young and older international participants. We’re also organizing a travelling exhibition about the Via Egnatia. Artifacts related to the route from museums along the route, such as the museum in Tekirdağ, will travel from museum to museum, probably in 2012.”

Youth and education projects are a way to put young people along the Via Egnatia in contact with each other and to stimulate knowledge and the exchange of common history. The VEF has plans to organize student exchanges between schools in countries along the Via Egnatia and Western Europe. “In Turkey, people at Boğaziçi University’s peace education center are collaborating on research into and training on the subject with their Greek counterparts,” she goes on to say and adds, “We’re exploring the possibility of developing a project to see how applicable this could be in other countries.

“Turkish NGOs and authorities, such as universities in İstanbul, the İstanbul Archaeological Museum, the İstanbul Tourist Board, the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Dutch Consulate are supporting us during our Caravan Walk from the Greek border to İstanbul.”

Caravan Walk in Turkey

The VEF is also developing a cross-border walking trail along what remains of the old Roman road. Their first “Caravan Walk” was last year, from Durres in Albania through the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to the Greek border. The second started in May in Greece and crossed the Turkish border on June 28. It ended in İstanbul on July 10.

The 20-kilometer-a-day walk offered a challenge even to those who were prepared for an adventurous journey.

After crossing the Greek border into Turkey at İpsala, the Turkey stage of the walk began south of Keşan and from there into İstanbul on foot. Following a couple of days walking the Koru Mountains, south of the old Via Egnatia, the trekkers went from village to village. A bus trip to Tekirdağ was followed by a visit to the museum, which has the greatest collection of artifacts on the Via Egnatia in Turkey.

The second part of the journey started in Silivri. After admiring a bridge built by Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan and the ruins of an old Byzantine castle, “we continued west of İstanbul along what remains of the little-known Anastasian Wall, built by the Byzantines as a defense against attacks from the West. This took us to the northern branch of the Via Egnatia, towards the Black Sea,” explains Marietta. After Thrace, they reached the Black Sea coast and visited

the chapel of St. George. Then they travelled inland to Çatalca, visiting the monastery of St. Nicholas on the way. Finally reaching Büyükçekmece, where they walked from the Ottoman bridge to the restored caravanserai, both built by Mimar Sinan, they ended their journey on July 10.

What does she envisage for the future of the route?

“The book of our first conference with archaeologists, anthropologists and musicologists is called ‘Via Egnatia: Common Past, Common Future.’* For most of its history the Via Egnatia connected an undivided territory, in the sense of one cultural space, as is still visible. The road was in many senses an artery of life in this cultural space. We hope it can be that again but in a new way: by enlivening the hiking path, by exchanging ideas and culture and by developing an infrastructure, to make that possible,” she says.

*“*Via Egnatia: Common Past, Common Future*” is available from www.viaegnatiafoundation.eu.