

Walking to Find Byzantium

I have waited until now to catch-up on the walk I have just completed with a group from the Via Egnatia Foundation. I thought I needed time to reflect before putting finger to keyboard. Did I find Byzantium? Read on!

We met in Durres on the Albanian coast on the Adriatic. The coming together was a trickle at first but somehow a group of about twenty six of us found our way across Europe from all directions to meet at the old Venetian fortress tower on the esplanade in Durres which was known to the Romans as Dyrrachium. The sky reminded me very much of England; grey clouds with the sun occasionally making short appearances before disappearing and leaving us wondering if that dismal long range weather forecast might be right.

Some came in groups, others on their own but as we listened to welcoming speeches and presentations from the noted Albanian archaeologist Mr Neritan Ceka, and the Albanian Minister of Tourism, we started to mingle and buy each other strong coffees and the odd beer. The presentations put our whole endeavour into perspective and for me the anticipation grew of walking along the road used by some of history's greatest heroes and villains, Constantine the Great, Caesar, Mark Antony, Pompey the Great, Brutus and Cassius, and the selfish and dishonourable Norman, Bohemond. It was also a route for common people to move freely around the Roman and Ottoman Empires – no passports required using one common currency – to trade and to seek better lives for themselves. Some of the latter travelled from Illyria to Byzantium and became Emperors.

Our route started in the modern city of Pequin which has some claim to be the ancient city of Claudiana. After negotiating for donkeys to carry our bags on the Caravan we set off in the direction of Elbasan, a junction on the Via Egnatia of the routes coming from Durres and Apollonia (to the South West). We started with quite heavy rain following the valley of the Shkumbin River – which would dominate our route whilst in Albania – along genuine stretches of Roman road and crossing original bridges.

Albania was a revelation. It is incredibly green and fertile, with the first part of the route rising gently on the huge coastal plain which is essentially surrounded by mountains to the North, West and South. We could see the mountains that were our destination to the East, and soon learned that our local climate was dominated by two particularly high, snow capped peaks on the Martenesh mountain range. Afternoon thunderstorms would build up in the mountains fairly predictably and we soon became expert in anticipating their arrival and taking shelter wherever we could find it, often in one of the 70,000 concrete defensive bunkers that Enver Hoja built to defend his poor, strategically unimportant country from invasion by the myriad of enemies conjured up in his clearly fertile imagination.

Our first night in the village of Broshka was a joy. The sky cleared, the tents went up quickly and the beer was poured at the adjacent village bar just as rapidly. We instantly became objects of curiosity from the local people (true wherever we went but they don't often see twenty odd foreigners with donkeys in tow in Albania – or Basingstoke for that matter) who were without fail always very friendly and most hospitable. It was mostly men and young boys who surrounded us but groups of girls often found the courage to come and stand nearby. We sang together, singing songs from Slovenia, Holland, America, Ireland and Albania. A village elder joined us and sang moving songs that

seemed to speak of lost love, and perhaps dreams of better days ahead. He told us that as a boy his father used to tell him of the caravans that passed through the village following the Via Egnatia. They had donkeys, horses and even camels, carrying goods across the former Ottoman Empire. The last caravan he recalled passed through in 1935. We were truly on the right path.

In pleasant Elbasan we refreshed ourselves. It has a wide palm lined boulevard and off of this is a busy market selling everything from fresh and sweet smelling fruit and vegetables, to fish, clothing and live fowl. Like your chicken fresh Sir? Well take it home and kill it yourself! The old walled city lies at Elbasan's heart. The Orthodox Church there was saved from the Communist bulldozers as the streets were too narrow for them. In the afternoon we met in the boulevard and brought out our long canvas, which we call the Via Egnatia Tapestry, encouraging the people, and particularly the children of each place we stayed in, to add a section. Elbasan marked the end of our walking on the plain. We now faced a climb up to where the Romans liked to be, high, away from ambush and landslide, taking the best gradient to keep their roads as straight as possible.

By now our group had started to develop some real character. Roles started to develop; there was the Slovenian Angel Choir who sang as we walked; the paparazzi photographers snapping everything that did or did not move; the muleteers and their willing assistants from the group leading and encouraging the donkeys; the route masters, constantly checking maps and GPS to not only find the route but to plot it for those who would follow on; and there were those who were quite satisfied just walking and doing what they came to do: discover the Via Egnatia.

None were disappointed. The route in the hills was often very clearly defined for long stretches. Sure it had been repaired or upgraded by the Ottomans, but the point was we were keeping to the spirit of Consul Egnatius' road. The scenery became spell binding with clear views for miles. Green hills were sharply torn by terraced fields, dark brown from recent ploughing. Small villages clung to the side of hills or nestled comfortably on more level plateaus. As we walked towards the hilltop village of Dardhe in the clear evening air the views of the snow capped peaks provided a dark and looming contrast to the green fields full of meadow flowers that were tinged with a touch of gold from the setting sun. And then there was the water; it was everywhere. Albania is a green land. Not as I thought it might be like stony, sun whipped southern Greece. Clear, drinkable water flowed down streams, sometimes in raging torrents, and from small silent springs beside the road. The villagers create small dams and plug in their long blue hose pipes which meander down the hillside criss-crossing with others to their homes, to provide water on tap.

Dardhe was my Epiphany. It was a pretty place full of fit Albanian people of all ages. The village is essentially a cluster of sixty or so houses ranged on a hillside with a bar and school at what you might call its centre. There are many children and they are handsome, fit and healthy looking. After ensuring the fridge in the bar was well stocked with beer I invited our muleteers for a drink and we sat toasting each other and nodding and smiling as people do when they have good things in common but they do not speak each other's language. Then the children arrived at the door and a young girl stepped forward clutching her Level 5 English text book. I guess she had probably not met anyone from Anglia before. Her name was Amera. She was thirteen and wore a crucifix, a rare enough sight in a country that while only nominally Muslim seems to encourage the women and the girls to remain apart. That was not the case at Dardhe as we shall see.

Amera and I worked through parts of her book and of course we could communicate! It was fun for us both. She had a ready, broad smile and we gave our names and talked about where we lived and the size of our families. I might have been hard on correcting the pronunciation, but it would not have been worthwhile if I had not. By this time we had a small crowd of boisterous children offering their best English phrases. All around us my fellow Caravaneers were talking amongst themselves or with people from the village. Food appeared; a rough pate more akin to those I have found before in France, sheep's cheese and more beer.

Outside it was by now dark and the crowd inside and outside the bar had swollen. Somehow they had a set of flashing party lights and one young man had a laptop which was plugged into the sound system. Before we knew it we had a party. Our Slavic members were amongst the first to start to dance as the Albanian music filled the small bar hall along with the smoke from dozens of cigarettes. Then the tempo of the music increased. It became much wilder. A man in his farm work clothing and wearing wellington boots held up a white handkerchief and took the hand of the closest person and soon we had a trail of Caravaneers, villagers, men, women and children dancing around the central table. The dance steps were all measured and deliberate. Try as we might most of us failed to get them right but what we lacked in method we made up for in enthusiasm. As the music turned up another notch the music became even more wild, so basic, the pipes recognisable from Aberdeen to Nepal, were playing furiously, the dance rhythm increased, still lead by a man with a white handkerchief. The walking boots and wellington boots certainly flew that night! It was so impromptu, so real, full of energy and mutual enjoyment. An evening that cannot be repeated.

And then came the dawn. We had been accommodated in the school which we were told had no light bulbs. However, in the cold morning light I discovered that it had wiring, and a transformer was right next door but no one had bothered to fix the electricity. The toilets were damp and filthy squats with tiles falling from the wall, and doors hanging from one hinge. For a village that had so much water it did not know what to do with it, there was no provision for flushing the toilets, and no running water for washing hands. The whole two storey stone building was damp on the ground floor because some stupid builders had built a school on a wet hillside without a damp proof course. I had come to look for Byzantium and maybe I had found it; not 21st Century but 11th Century squalor. Was this the other side of the romantic ideal of Byzantium? I wondered what the men of the village were doing about this; could they not help themselves or were they constrained by 'Byzantine' Albanian bureaucracy?

By now the children had arrived to go to school. They were smartly dressed and entered the school in pairs by class numbers. There was a real emphasis on discipline and I am sure it was enforced, but these children were the same wild and free spirits who had been dancing with us last night. Discipline enhanced their learning, and certainly did not affect their spirit. Their school work was neat and they were clearly proud of their classrooms and the work they did. But how can they learn properly and reach their full potential if they have no proper heating, if the lights don't work to provide light for the darker mornings and the winter afternoons? It broke my heart, and maybe it should not have done, but when I thought of all the money that is spent on educating children in England, just a small fraction of which could really transform lives in Albania, it brought me to a point of deep emotion. It still does. The Albanians have a potentially vibrant economy, good land, good country. Tourism could thrive. Their manufacturing industry has probably almost disappeared since the collapse of Communism, nevertheless the country has potential, but without education Albania will not be able

to reap the benefits of a service based economy, and will not escape the corruption and vice that people say is endemic.

A traveller must pick up his pack and move on to his next destination. Sometimes he must leave a little of his heart, taking only memories. We too had to move on and maybe I left something there in Dardhe.

We traced our steps steadily back up the hill to rejoin the Via Egnatia, and we said goodbye to the good people of Dardhe. Our donkeys were well loaded and they climbed silently, ever upwards leaving little Dardhe behind us as we approached valley of the twenty nine minarets, so-called due to the many sharp peaks of limestone towering above the road. We were not the only travellers on the road. We passed, or were joined, by numerous young boys and men riding donkeys or horses, or leading animals carrying sacks and bundles. The Via Egnatia does not need rediscovering; it lives!

The walking had become easy for all it seemed. We had a great age range with the eldest over sixty years and the youngest (excluding donkeys) being about twenty-three. There was no apparent difference. If people were out of shape before they started, they all seemed to gain a level of fitness that suited our steady but fairly brisk walk through Albania.

The walking in the higher stretches of the Via Egnatia was always varied, sometimes the road would cross hazardous, rushing torrents where every care had to be taken to ensure Caravaneers and donkeys were not swept away into the Shkumbin far below. On other occasions we walked through lush farmland like one of those plateaus I had seen over on the far side of the valley. Always with us but moving steadily behind us was the looming, sombre Martenesh mountain range to the north. The weather had been good since Elbasan with only the odd afternoon shower, now we left even the showers behind and had warm, pleasant sunshine.

Our last night in Albania was comfortable in the 'always open' Hotel Istanbul in Perrenjas, a truck stop town, the last before the border and dominated by the ubiquitous Lavazh; car washing has to be the biggest employer in rural Albania after farming! Approaching a border on foot, with a large group and donkeys is peculiar. One finds oneself in that no-man's land where there are few people and even fewer houses. It makes you wonder where the people you do see actually live. The Albanian-Macedonian border has the added eeriness of the dozens of bunkers facing east. I glimpsed what I thought was my last donkey grazing in Albania, but then saw an old man leading a donkey laden with firewood. Then just a few hundred yards below me I could see a young looking man, tall and strong, ploughing a small field with his horse, his wife following on behind scattering the seed. What hard lives they must lead.

The Albanian border guards were fascinated by our caravan and after presenting donkey passports we walked the few hundred yards to the Macedonian border with the Dutch Ambassador, Simone Philippi, a tall striking lady with large colourful earrings and equally vibrant Barbie pink walking outfit. Not the typical image of an Ambassador at all! The Macedonians were not so keen to let our donkeys in and whilst we were filmed and interviewed by the local television stations we made plans to send our Albanian donkeys back to our muleteers, and loaded our gear onto four Macedonian donkeys ready for our walk to the lakeside village of Radozda on the stunningly beautiful Lake Ohrid. We had an excellent Macedonian buffet lunch waiting for us, washed down by dry and fruity Macedonian Alexandria wine. Everyone was relaxed as we took in the awesome views across the

lake. As the sun slowly set the clouds were reflected on the still iron grey waters of the lake. Is there a more beautiful place on earth?

Next day the brave, or foolhardy, amongst us took an early morning swim in the lake, and refreshed we followed the Egnatia around the lake taking in the constantly changing lake views in the morning sunshine, whilst visiting tiny, elaborately decorated, cliffside Orthodox chapels built high into the cliffs by early Christians away from the prying eyes of those Ottomans that wanted to suppress the fledgling church. We passed through the resort town of Struga where the water from Lake Ohrid flows out fast and furiously along a canal as it makes its way to the Shkumbin River and off into Albania. Macedonia is clearly wealthier than Albania although its economy suffered greatly in the long recent Balkan wars. It has reasonable infrastructure and even western chain stores such as Lush the natural cosmetics shop.

Ohrid town itself once had 365 churches although there are now only around twenty five which remain open. Its name means City of Light and it has over 220 days of sunshine each year. The town creeps up the hillside surrounding a central esplanade and harbour dominated by the statue of St Clement, who was the student of Saint Cyril and his brother Methodius. They were the authors of the Cyrillic alphabet (approx 864 AD) which was created by the Byzantines to bring the Slavic nations into the Orthodox Church rather than let them fall under the influence of Rome during the early days of the schism between the two churches which still exists.

Ohrid for me was the end of the road but the wonderful thing was that it was there I found my Byzantium. The influence of the Empire was to be seen everywhere from the statues to the fortress, but principally in the churches and the ancient Basilica. The original church of St Clement was destroyed by the Ottomans who built a mosque on the site which has a clear view of the Lake. Clement's relics were secretly moved by the Christian citizens of Ohrid to the smaller and less important Church of St Mary Psychosostria. Over time this church became known as the Church of St Clement, but the confusion is now ended as in 2000 the Macedonian authorities rebuilt the Church of St Clement on the original site in traditional Byzantine Orthodox style. His relics have been moved back there to rest in peace. The site includes the remains of an original Baptistery, and there are many mosaics all in very good condition.

The Church of St Mary is a wonder. Built in 1295 by the deputy Progon, Zgur who was a relative of the Emperor Andronicus II Palaeologus, it has twenty nine scenes from the life of the Virgin around the walls. These frescoes are in generally excellent condition with little of the wear or defacement one often finds elsewhere. The reason for this is that most of the frescoes were obliterated by soot from candles over the centuries. They were cleaned and restored only since 1960. They have to be seen to be understood. The 'keeper' of the frescoes is an amazing Macedonian lady with long jet black hair, and braided pigtailed; the church and the frescoes are her passion, probably the centre of her life. She has written a large book on the subject, and the frescoes were the subject of her PhD. She says that the fresco of the Virgin that dominates the Apse is painted from lapis lazuli originating in Afghanistan. It would have cost something in the order of one kilogramme of gold (at today's prices that is roughly \$32,000).

Opposite the Church is the national Icon museum of Macedonia with over forty masterpieces. All this within just a few yards of each other! Ohrid was the end of my walk, but the revelation of such a

wonderful town, in a stunning setting, with so many examples of Byzantine art and architecture was a suitable climax to an amazing experience.

Bringing together such an eclectic group of people, acquiring donkeys, and transporting us all across Albania and into Macedonia was a huge achievement for the Marietta van Attekum from the Via Egnatia Foundation who organised the whole event, and who continued trekking on through Macedonia ending at the Greek border. We all came for different reasons, but left with much in common. We saw some of the best of places and people. We also saw some of the worst that life can bring due to poverty and indifference. We were always true to the spirit of the Via Egnatia and I did find Byzantium.

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
- Those dying generations - at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Sailing to Byzantium by William Butler Yeats

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