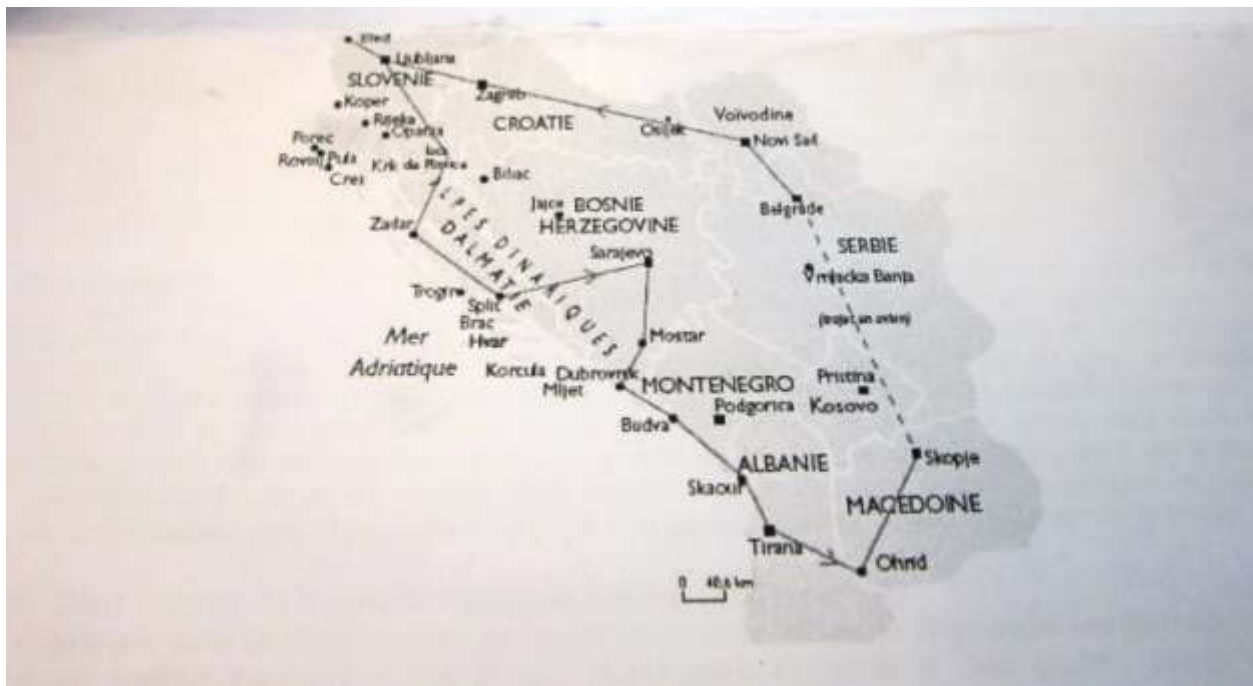


July 2013

Dear Friends and Family,

Seven countries in 14 days is definitely a whirlwind and not my normal travel style! But that is what I and 36 others accomplished with Nouvelles Frontières in a very comfortable bus through six of the seven countries that used to be Yugoslavia, plus Albania. Before this trip I could not have named those countries. I can now – Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo. Slovenia is part of the EU, and now as of July 1 so is Croatia. Each country has its own currency except Montenegro. Because its currency was the Deutschmark which when it became the Euro Montenegro was given tacit permission to use the Euro, even though it is neither in the EU nor the Euro zone (but they are an EU candidate). Slovenia is in the Euro zone. Some countries write using both Cyrillic and Latin letters, others one or the other.



Map

The Balkans peninsula is one of the most ethnically, linguistically and religiously complex regions in the world. Its geographic position made it the meeting point of clashing empires, from pre-Roman to modern times. The common thread through the history of this area is war. The pre-Roman, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Venetian, and Bulgarian empires divided, annexed, divided again, re-annexed again these mountainous countries. There have been three periods when there was a “Yugoslavia”. The Kingdom of the Serbs, Slovenes and Croats formed in 1918 which was re-named Yugoslavia in 1929, then after WWII held together by Tito. After his death in 1980 they disintegrated into their earlier nation-states with wars in the 1990’s and, briefly a third Yugoslavia consisted of what are now Serbia and Montenegro until Montenegro became its own country in 2006. People continue to identify themselves by their ethnicity (although generally speaking all are of South Slav origin) and there remain hundreds of thousands of people who are still refugees because they fled their homes during the

wars of the 90's and 2000's and have been unable to return. The status of building ownership and occupancy is a major problem throughout the countries with many buildings occupied by squatters, others constructed without permits now standing empty, and still others never reconstructed after the various wars.

The most unusual government structure is in Bosnia Herzegovina where there is a three person presidency (one Bosniak, i.e. Muslim, one Serb, one Croat directly elected by their respective ethnic constituencies) the chairmanship of which rotates every 8 months. Very little power is vested in the national government, however, and the country functions more as a loose federation of local cantons.

To a certain extent the cities tend to intermingle in my memory since many are still encircled by their ancient walls (often re-built after earthquakes) with red tile roofs and either Austro-Hungarian or Venetian architecture depending on which was the most recent prevailing empire in the area. Oddly enough despite most of ex-Yugoslavia (except Dubrovnik, Montenegro and parts of coastal Dalmatia in Croatia) having been part of the Ottoman Empire for as long as 500 years, there is very little remaining of that architecture. However, most of the mosques have minarets topped by the typically Turkish round, tapering, pointed top.

For this trip I have done a lot of reading, both before and after. Fortunately the American Library in Paris has an extensive European History collection. Five books especially stand out: High Albania by Edith Durham, 1890's; Black Lamb and Grey Falcon by Rebecca West, all of Yugoslavia just prior to WWII; The Cellist of Sarajevo by Steven Galloway – Sarajevo during the siege of 1992-95; The Hemingway Book Club of Kosovo by Paula Huntley – Pristina in 2000 just after the “end” of the war; With Their Backs to the World Portraits from Serbia by Asne Seierstad (author of the Bookseller of Kabul); plus all of the writings of the Albanian author Ismail Kadare.

We had a local (French-speaking) guide in almost every city and they were quite candid and willingly answered questions. Aside from that, however, given the pace of the itinerary there was very little chance to spend time with local citizens. Our overall guide is a Croatian who lived 25 of her 35 years in France and our driver is Macedonian. In general I found that people's ethnicities are very important to them and despite all the languages, except Albanian, being of the same Southern Slav origin, people largely socialize with others of their own ethnicity. As an outsider I could not tell any difference since people all dressed in current European clothing (except an occasional old peasant woman in the countryside), the Muslim women do not wear scarves and everyone was generally of the same complexion. Food in the areas northeast (i.e. near Hungary) used more paprika, in the south west (i.e. near Greece) more olives and, other than grated raw there were actually almost no dishes based on cabbage! Wine is produced almost everywhere and of generally good quality.

There follows a “taste of the trip” in the chronological order it occurred which means we crossed into and out of Croatia four times due to its crescent shape. I apologize in advance for fuzzy photos taken from the bus window! We started in Belgrade (Serbia) which from post WWII was the capital of Yugoslavia. Residents of the other five ‘states’ complained that there was too much control from Belgrade and that all the members of the military were Serbs. Belgrade is at the confluence of the Sava



and Danube rivers, here as seen from the Fort in Kalemogdan park. We were there on a Sunday and everyone was out and about,



in the park and cafés .



There is a statue in the park honoring France's assistance to the Kingdom in WWI and the carving on one side is of Mother Sorbonne educating youth. Billboards are prevalent.



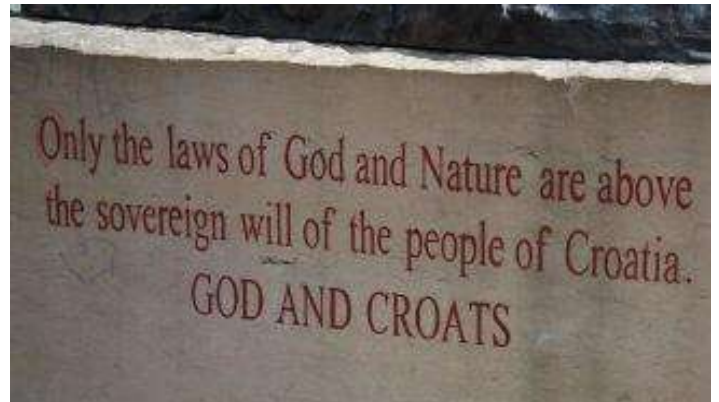
From Belgrade we traveled through the semi-autonomous region of Voivodine with its lush agriculture, roman-era fortress overlooking the Danube and its capital of Novi Sad.



The first border crossing was into Croatia, its region of Slavonia (not to be confused with the country of Slovenia) with beautiful agriculture and its capital of Osijek where we saw the first evidence of war since



Belgrade. In Osijek this language on a statue of a war hero says it all.



Next stop was Vukovar, the site of one of the major offensives of the Serbo-Croat war of 1991.



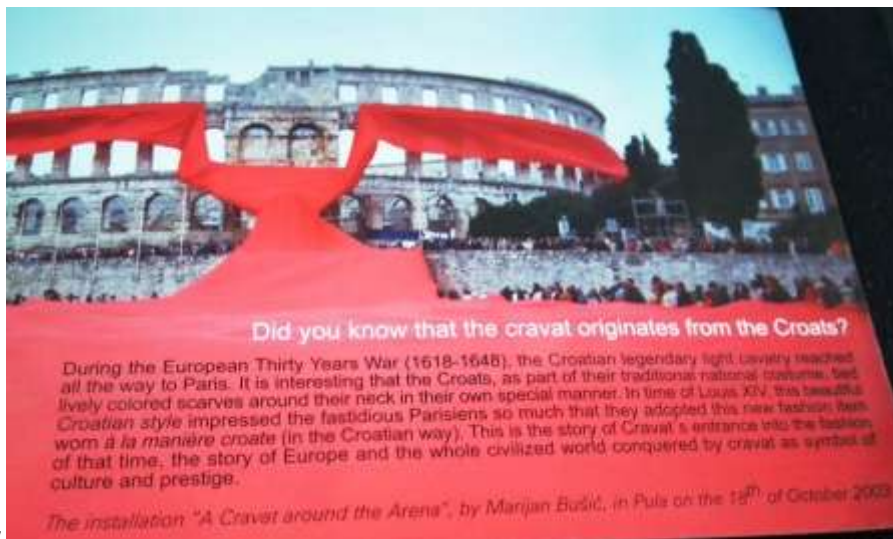
Also in Vukovar is a very moving cemetery with beautiful gravestones of the soldiers who died (we saw many fathers and sons) plus the crosses honoring the townspeople who died and were mostly interred in mass graves.



Zagreb is the capital of Croatia and is quite vivacious with a large fruit and vegetable market and the distinctive St Mark's church with its beautiful tile roof.



By the way, the origin of the tie (cravat because Croatia in Croatian language is HRVATIA pronounced somewhat similarly) was the scarf that Croatian soldiers used to wear.



Here is a view over the city and the Roman Catholic Cathedral which is continuously under reparation. These bas reliefs by the

famous Croatian sculptor Ivan Mestrovic are on the central square in Zagreb.



Next we crossed into Slovenia with more beautiful farmland along the route and visited its lovely capital



Ljubljana (by the way j is pronounced like y) with the required fortress on the hill. Ljubljana is a small (population 200,000) but lively University town that was in the midst of a three week summer music festival so there was live music literally on almost every street corner.





This fountain symbolizes that Ljubljana has always been a cross roads among Vienna, Trieste and Venice, and Ljubljana's main street was a road in Roman times.

The doors on St Nicholas church were created to commemorate the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1996 and the church has a beautiful baroque interior.

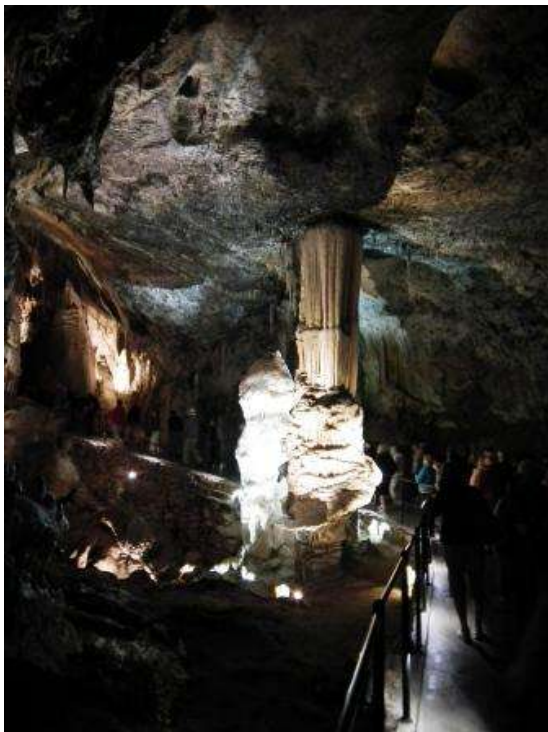


Then we entered the Julian Alps, some parts of which still contained snow fields (in June). We spent a night at Bled and in the morning we were rowed to an island in Lake Bled with a charming church while enjoying views of the mountains, fortress (of course) and local church .



From here we went to the Caves of Postojna, considered the largest in Europe. The interior stretches for 22 kilometers and you take a train for 2 km inside before reaching the areas through which you tour.

The cave was discovered in 1819 and opened to visitors soon after. Since the limestone grows ~ 1 km every 100 years these caves have been millions of years in formation.



Next we re-cross into Croatia to the Plitvice Lakes National Park, a beautiful series of 16 lakes with waterfalls. En route, before turning inland we had our first views of the stunning Adriatic Sea.



on to lunch and a very brief visit to Zadar.

We spent the morning enjoying trails along the lakes then



Zadar is a one street town with two harbors. The port side gate is reminiscent of the time it was ruled by



Venice.





Heading south along the Adriatic we have the Dalmatian Alps on our left and the Adriatic on the right. The boxes you see in the water are oyster and mussel farms. Our next stop was Split where the highlight was Diocletian's Palace built ~300 AD. This "retirement" palace for Emperor Diocletian was a self-contained community with the Royal apartments as well as the military, workers, churches and government buildings. It is built

of white stone from the island of Brača in the Adriatic which is also the source of the stone from which the White House and Sacre Coeur are built. Hopefully they will last as long! The palace is today a busy community with ~3000 residents, (about the same number who lived there in 300 AD) shopping, restaurants (no need for air conditioning as the temperature stays comfortable from the stone all year).



The black onyx sphinx was brought from Egypt and dates to 15 BC.



After Split we left the Adriatic coast and followed the Neretva River through the mountains of Bosnia Herzegovina to Sarajevo. Here there was more “feel” of Ottoman historic presence with Caravanseries (the buildings that used to house traders and their horses overnight during their travels) and lots of Turkish coffee.



In one Orthodox Church we were surprised to see the Iconostasis open exposing the altar and the market felt like a small Istanbul



Grand Bazaar.

We then re-traced our steps to Mostar where there is even more evidence of the wars. It is famous for its single arch stone bridge which was destroyed in 1993 during the Balkan wars. When it was rebuilt in 2004 stone masons were imported from Turkey who knew how to use horsehair and wax in the mortar mix to reconstruct the stone work in its historically correct manner. This World Heritage Site has been beautifully restored with contributions from many countries around the world.



En route from Mostar to Dubrovnik we overlooked a fascinating area of canals and citrus orchards



and, of course, more typical old fortifications.

To continue to Dubrovnik one actually crosses into Croatia, then back into Bosnia Herzegovina at its one outlet to the Adriatic, and then back into Croatia. By the way, the border crossings varied widely in how long they took, not only due to how many others were waiting (not very many most of the time) but whether or not they were computerized, or both border officials in the same building or separate, or

whether it was coffee break time or ????
Don't forget that many people choose
cruising as the way to take in this
magnificent Adriatic coast.

Dubrovnik, simply said, has something for
everyone. Kayaking, "beaches" (including
nude beach and gay beach on Lokrum
island just offshore).



People live here (about 45,000 of them) and
there are no vehicles allowed within the walls.





The statue of Roland, who symbolizes a free state and whose forearm length (51.1 cm) was a standard of linear measure for the Republic of Ragusa (Dubrovnik's former name), stands in front of the Church of St. Blaise who is the patron saint of Dubrovnik. Seeing the city from the water you really understand the walls.



I particularly liked the bell tower which has two bronze statues who hammer out the hours on the bell.



The circumference walk of the ramparts is 2 km long with beautiful views over the old city.

Leaving Dubrovnik behind (hey we still have three countries to go!) we follow a long waterway, sometimes referred to as the southernmost fjord of Europe, to Kotor in Montenegro. The population of Montenegro is about 630,000 people and its name means black mountain which is what most of the

country is, plus forests.



Kotor was largely destroyed by an earthquake in 1979 so what one sees in the World Heritage Site are reconstructions. Each building is labeled with a banner telling which family and to what

centuries it belonged. Some buildings display a fleur de lys which means that family had diplomats or clerics or others who were granted the right to use it by the King of France.



Onwards to Budva which has a large sports fishing industry. A town of 20,000 people, it often swells to 100,000 in peak summer months with attendant shortage of potable water and electricity. Budva has lots of churches and can be seen in its entirety from the south. Its old town, on the small peninsula was

also destroyed by the 1979 earthquake and rebuilt.



We continued on to Cetinje, a small town that was the capital of the Kingdom of Montenegro and still has buildings that were purpose-built for the 11 countries which had diplomatic representation there. The wings of the eagle on the Montenegrin flag turn up to symbolize that it was never part of the Ottoman Empire (nor were Dubrovnik and part of northern Dalmatian Coast). Montenegro was the only country which lost its status as an independent nation after WWI when it was added to Yugoslavia and didn't regain its independent status again until 2006 (the last of the seven to do so other than Kosovo).



More mountains en route to Albania and along Lake Scutari which forms the border with Albania.





Our first stop in Albania is Shkodra where a modern mosque, the largest in the Balkans, has been built with Saudi Arabian and Egyptian funds. There are also Roman Catholic and Orthodox Cathedrals all within a 5 minute walk of one another. The Communist regime that took control of Albania after World War II persecuted and suppressed religious observance and institutions and entirely banned religion to the point where Albania was officially declared to be the world's first Atheist



state. Religious freedom has returned to Albania since the regime's change in 1992.

Despite being part of the Ottoman Empire for 400 years Albania did not lose its language or on the double-headed eagle on its flag. However, I immediately feel that I am in a less Europeanized country, particularly vendors selling all manner of goods

Empire for 400 years culture (but the wings of the flag also turn up!). am in a less Europeanized country with the sidewalk throughout the city.

There is a lovely pedestrian core where the building facades have been restored, but not necessarily the spaces behind. We had lunch at San Francisco Bar and Restaurant whose owner studied at SFO State University and has decorated his traditional restaurant with paintings and photos of the city he loves. The food was outstanding with a whole baked sea bass each. Albania has a population of 3 million in the country of whom 1 million are in the capital, Tirana, and three million Albanians in other countries (many contiguous such as Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia and especially Greece). The Orthodox Church here is overseen by the Greek Orthodox Church. Albania is considered the second poorest country in Europe after Moldova. They currently lack the legal and financial infrastructure to attract



foreign investment.



We move on to the capital, Tirana where we spend most of our time with a local guide in the History Museum which is a thorough documentation of Albania from pre-history to the present. Just off the main square is a beautiful small mosque Ethem Bey, built from 1794 to 1821 which fortunately (due to its artistic value) was spared destruction during the Atheist period. The colorful public buildings around Skanderbeg Square date from the period of Italian domination/occupation early in the 20th century and



remind me somewhat of similar buildings in Ethiopia dating from the same period.

We are now en route to Macedonia (our final country!). During the communist years Albania was completely surrounded by a 6 meter high fence and there were underground military bunkers along the border,



including at Lake Ohrid, some of which are still visible.



Crossing the border, an immediate contrast that I note is that the hay stacks in Albania are hand-created while those in Macedonia are baled mechanically.



There are mosques here despite Macedonia being a majority Greek Orthodox country. Relations with Greece are still somewhat fragile as the ancient geographic area of Macedonia includes a portion of Greece as well as Bulgaria and although Alexander the Great was born in the Greek part of Macedonia, Macedonia has named both its airport and principal highway after him! We cross into Macedonia at Lake Ohrid which forms the border. This is another UNESCO World Heritage site, built on steep hills overlooking the lake and with ancient basilicas, monasteries, and medieval churches



watched over by its fortress. The narrow medieval streets with white building facades, brown window casings and half timbers had some of the feel of towns I visited in western Bulgaria.



En route to Skopje, capital of Macedonia and our final stop we visited the archeological site at Heraclea dating from the 4th C BC. A highlight is the mosaic floor that has been uncovered.



We had lunch in Bitola which



has a nice pedestrian downtown with restored facades and a central plaza with a fountain and mosques.



Skopje is the most bizarre city of the entire trip. The old city remains with the university, a mosque and an ancient caravanserie as reminders.



But the new city with government buildings, cultural institutions, shopping malls, stairs for diving into



t the river, and statues, statues, statues surrounding the 6th C Stone Bridge is really strange! I think there must be more pounds in statuary per capita than in any other capital city I have visited. And to make the contrast even worse, this is the birthplace of Mother Theresa which is memorialized only with a plaque and brass

inserts in the pavement marking the corners of her former house.



I hope you have enjoyed the trip and until the next one, stay well. Now for summer sales and swimming.

