

## BALKANS PEACE PARK PROJECT

Richard's REPORT on the  
"MULTI-ACTIVITY, BORDERS-CROSSING TRIP FROM PLAV"  
11<sup>th</sup> - 27<sup>th</sup> July 2007-08-16

### 1. Participants:

- 4 UK mountaineers
- 3 cyclists (2 UK, 1 US)
- 1 Albanian - Ndrëçim Çiroka from Shkodra was with us, on foot, for parts of the Albanian and Kosovan sections

### 2. Objectives:

- a) to promote the BPPP through sustainable mountain activities and 4 'unofficial' border crossings
- b) to include local people in the activities
- c) to have energetic fun in the mountains and valleys of the 3 countries

### 3. Objectives achieved?

- a) YES! We completed a 4 day trek on foot into Albania, starting and finishing at the Zastan hut in the Ropojana valley above Vusanje in Montenegro, having cycled to the hut from Plav. This trek involved 2 'unofficial' border crossings:
  - from Ropojana valley past the Jezerca Lakes to Qafa e Pejës and Okol/Theth
  - Qafa Valbona between Valbona and the Zastan hut

A smaller group of 3 people completed the 5 day mountain bike ride from Plav (Montenegro) into Kosovo/a via the Čakor Pass and back by Qafa Boguquës.

We also climbed one mountain in each country:

- Maja Arapit 2217m in Albania, on the walk from Ropojana to Theth
- Ochnyak 2185m above the Grabaje valley in Prokletije, Montenegro
- Hajla 2400m in Kosovo/a. Actually, Hajla is on the very border between Kosovo/a and Montenegro and Montenegrin friends from Rozaje claim it as theirs. However, since we climbed it from the Kosovan side we are happy to say that it was in Kosovo/a on this occasion!
- AND, on the last day, while cycling down from Qafa Boguquës to Plav, we walked to the 'Tripoint', the little peak about 2300m where the 3 countries meet. **This is the symbolic 'epicentre' of the whole Balkans Peace Park Project**, so we were very glad to include it in the trip.

- b) NOT AS MUCH AS WE'D HAVE LIKED! We were delighted to have Nçimi from Shkodra with us for 2 legs of the Albanian trek and then accompanying us in the jeep 'support vehicle' during our cycling in Kosovo/a, but the dream of having participants from the 3 BPPP countries in all our activities did not materialise.

- c) Energetic fun? YES, VERY! It was a physically demanding trip in hot weather (record high temperatures in Podgorica), especially since only one of the UK/US participants was under 60. The longest day was 13 hours, the walk from Zastan to Okol with a 4 hour diversion up Maja Arapit. The other days in Albania also took longer than expected. However, the unsurpassed mountain scenery ("Yosemite doesn't bear a candle to this," said one voice) and the sharing in family life in the homes in the Albanian valleys provided an experience which is probably unique in Europe. The day's cycling from Plav over the Çakor Pass to Drelaj in the Rugova valley in Kosovo/a came to 60km with 1000m of ascent, hard work but memorably beautiful.

#### **4. Routes**

An attempt to show the routes of our activities on a map is attached. You will need a magnifying glass or a zoom facility on screen to see the detail. The black line is the Albanian border. The Kosovan border is not shown because the map dates from 1966, when such a border was insignificant in the days of Tito's Yugoslavia, and its exact line is not known to us. (I might redraw this map and put in the Kosovan border as best I can.)

- The 4 border crossings are in faint purple rings
- The green lines show routes walked on foot
- The orange lines show routes cycled
- The epicentre of the trip was Plav and its lake, seen in blue in the middle of the map

#### **5. Coincidental trek and feast**

To coincide with our little expedition into Albania, Antonia Young coordinated a 2 day cross-border trek from Okol, at the head of the Shala valley in Albania, to Zastan in Montenegro and back the same way. 23 people of various nationalities and varied walking experience signed up for this. I had promised to meet them at the border above the Jezerca Lakes (they are totally dry, by the way!) and guide them to the Zastan hut, where food and water would have been brought up by truck from Plav. We were able to go up to meet them at 3.00pm on July 14<sup>th</sup>, as arranged. Food and water was available at the hut, but, alas, no pans or kettle with which to cook or warm it. They had been asked for but failed to appear. The setting of the hut, a very substantial ex-military and police building, is magnificent but the conditions are squalid. It was also very crowded that night, with a group of 35 Montenegrins returning from their ascent of Maja Jezerca, Albania's second highest peak at 2696m.

On July 16<sup>th</sup> a big feast was laid on in Theth by BPPP for people to meet Robin Hanbury-Tenison, a British explorer and film maker, who is to do a horse ride the length of Albania, starting from Theth on September 1<sup>st</sup>. About 50 or more people came together outside Gjon Gjeca's house in the evening to eat a full meal laid out on the grass, plus two spit-roasted lambs, to the accompaniment of traditional music on çifteli and lahuta, then dancing to music of a more modern kind.

## 6. LESSONS LEARNED - and pointers for the future

### 6.1 Promoting the Peace Park

It was clear that, apart from the NGOs and individuals already involved, very few people in the region had heard about the BPPP. We felt acutely the lack of any information to give out.

**\*\* We need, urgently, simple 2-sided leaflets, in Montenegrin, Albanian and English, in large quantities, which can be given out liberally to people in the area.\*\***

This ties in with the need expressed at the UNEP/BPPP conference in Plav in June for local stakeholders to be involved at an early stage.

We did spend an evening, by arrangement, with a journalist from the newspaper Vijesti. This was Edin, who is also a member of TRITON NGO in Plav. He would write a piece for the paper and would arrange to come up to meet and photograph us as we cycled down from Qafa Boguquës to Plav on our last day. That didn't happen and I don't yet know if an article appeared in Vijesti.

### 6.2 Information Centres

A useful visit was made to the Rugova Experience/Tourist Promotion Office in Peja/Peć. Syzana Baja is Manager of the project, which now seems to be more of a not-for-profit organization supported by 'Tavolo Trentino con il Kosovo' in northern Italy. She was very interested in the idea of developing the office as a BPP Information Centre - Kosovo/a; she will discuss it with her Trentino sponsors. I have now sent her an initial draft of proposed activities for such a centre and a draft agreement.

**\*\* If this idea develops in Kosovo/a, alongside Petrit Imeraj's BPP Information Centre in Shkodra or another one there or in Tirana, it leaves only Plav to fill the gap! There is no doubt that such centres are urgently needed. Currently, all arrangements for visits and activities in the BPP area are made on a friendship basis with individuals; for the future there should be professional organizations to make arrangements for visitors.\*\***

### 6.3 Mountain bikes

Prior to the trip we had bought 5 Chinese-made mountain bikes in Podgoriça, for 90 euros each, and transported them to Plav. There is no cycle shop of any kind in Plav. These bikes were remarkably sturdy, if a bit heavy by UK standards, and stood up well to use on some very rough tracks. We realized that Plav is an excellent centre for cycling; the 25km circuit of the lake makes a very enjoyable ride and more energy can be expended on rides up and down the valleys, Ropojana, Grabaje or Babine Polje and Hrid Lake. At the end of the trip we left the bikes in the care of the Aqua Hotel, for use by visitors there and members of TRITON, HRID mountaineering club, Alpët-Shqiptarë and other organizations.

### 6.4 Permission to cross borders in unofficial places

Being able to move relatively freely between the 3 countries is the essence of the proposed inter-national Peace Park. However, it is both sensible and courteous to inform

the border police of these countries of one's intentions in advance. Although the buzzword is invariably 'no problem' there were procedures to follow:

**Albania:**

A list of participants with passport names and numbers was submitted through Vildan and Ngimi to:

**General Directorate of Police Albania**

**Directorate of Border Police and Migration**

It included a request to cross borders at specified places on specified dates and the reasons for wanting to cross at these borders, i.e. promoting the BPPP and benefiting local people through the trekking activity.

**Montenegro:**

A similar list and request for permission had to be submitted via HRID in Plav, but Enko (Enes Dreskovic) then had to go in person to Podgorica to talk to the chief of police. When we saw Enko on our first day in Plav he had what appeared to be an e-mail giving permission but demanding to know exactly what time, within half an hour, we would be at the borders on each of the four occasions. Nightmare! I gave him some quick guesses and he presumably sent those in.

We heard, not through HRID, that the Mountaineering Association of Montenegro had also been in touch with the police in Podgorica and were supporting us and a similar trek into Albania being organized for a few days after us by Angelika Temper of the Austria-Montenegro Partnership.

**Kosovo/a:**

We did not submit a request to the Kosovan authorities. We had been told initially that Podgorica 'would be in touch with their counterparts in Albania and Kosovo/a.

## **IN THE EVENT**

### **Montenegro/Albania**

There was no sign of any border above the Jezerça Lakes, nor any police supervision there or at the Qafa Valbona crossing. There is a border police post in Vusanje at the bottom of the Ropojana valley and as we passed it on our way to and from Albania we stopped and showed our passports. They did not stamp them but recorded the names - inaccurately, as it happened. There appeared to be complete freedom of movement over this border. The day before Antonia's trek group came across from Okol two of us went up above Jezerça Lakes to find the route up to the notional border and to work out where to meet the group the next day. We happened to meet 3 members of the Karanfili Mountaineering Club from Gusinje who were out for a day's walk in the area. This was a fortuitous meeting because they led us down the old zig-zag track through the beech forest which we had missed on the way up.

### **Montenegro/Kosovo/a**

This border, we learned, is much more actively patrolled. The police at the top of the Çakor Pass were expecting us and they even took our rucksacks in their own vehicle down the 14km on the other side to the actual border. The packs had been brought up to the pass in our cycling support vehicle. We never saw any Kosovan police, though plenty of Italian soldiers at checkpoints.

At Qafa Boguquës there was a debate whether Fatos and the other 4 'supporters' could accompany us 3 cyclists as we walked to the Tripoint. We had visions of an

appropriate 'ceremony' there, being filmed by Fatos. However, from a nearby hilltop they had seen a police vehicle in the area and since they had no documents/passports with them they decided not to cross into Montenegro with us. A wise decision, as it turned out. The 3 of us left them on the col, awaiting the support vehicle coming up from Plav to collect our packs, rode 2km down the track, another old Yugoslav military road, then left our bikes beside the track and enjoyed an hour's pleasant fell walk to the Tripoint. It should have been a fantastic viewpoint but the day was murky and viewless, partly caused by extensive forest fires in the valleys on either side. We'd met 2 policemen, fully armed but affable, as we walked up, but when we got back to the bikes there were 3 police there, much more agitated. It turned out that a local shepherd had seen us on the Tripoint and had reported to the police that there were 3 'bandits' up there. The police had commandeered our cycling support jeep and come up to arrest us, only to find that we were just the 3 crazy cyclists they were expecting to meet, coming over from Kosovo/a. They said that this border is patrolled 24 hours a day to counteract smuggling, people trafficking and theft from the shepherd families in the high summer pastures. So Fatos and co would not have been popular!

## CONCLUSION

1. We have the beginnings of a process for getting police permission in advance to cross borders in unofficial places but it needs developing, probably by more personal contact at high level. I think it is unlikely that they would ever give us written permission, because that could be open to abuse. We will continue to need the backing of local organizations and to translate our requests into Albanian/Montenegrin.
2. We do **not** know the procedure if we enter, say, Albania at an unofficial crossing and leave by an official one where they will query why there is no entry stamp in our passports. I've learned recently that 3 backpackers from Antonia's trekking group, who continued into Montenegro, had considerable trouble with the police in Plav because they had entered Montenegro 'illegally'.

## 6.5 Guides

We only employed guides for two legs of our trek: Theth to Qafa Valbona and Valbona (more precisely Fjusa e Gjesi) to the other Qafa Valbona above Zastan. I had suggested to Mario (our ever helpful 'fixer' from Shkodra) that it would be good to use boys from Theth, if they knew the way, so they could be introduced to the idea of guiding visitors in the mountains, with a possibility of future training. Two 15 yr olds, Anton and Fatmir, started off confidently enough but they missed the route in a meadow below the beech forest. This led to a diversion and mobile phone calls to their dad to tell them where to go, which cost us up to 2 hours. On the col we paid them 10 euros each and asked them if they were going to continue to live in Theth and would be interested in professional training as guides for visitors. Both said yes, but Anton thought he was likely to seek his fortune in Australia. Fatmir, who had nobly carried the heaviest of our packs without complaint, indicated that he would be staying in Theth. He has a good temperament and we should have him on a list of potential guide trainees.

Personally, I think we need to establish contact with the Montenegro Mountaineering Association, which runs training courses at Lovćen, with a view to providing training for young people like Fatmir and Anton. I know that Fatos in Kosovo/a is keen to bring on a new generation of trained guides.

## 6.6 Horses

Experience on the walk from Theth to Valbona made us determined to find horses to carry our packs on the last leg of the Albania trek, back over to Zastan and Vusanje. Our host and guide in Valbona, Lazer Cedarku (who is also the village schoolmaster), laid on 2 horses via a friend at 35 euros each. This was a godsend and not only did the horsemen take them up to the col but also a fair distance down into Montenegro towards Zastan. There were complications over the route through steep ground after we had left the horses and had to carry our packs again. Antonia's group also had a horse for baggage between Okol and Jezerca Lakes, in both directions. ***\*\*For backpacking groups on multi-day treks in Albania horses are available, which makes the walking even more enjoyable. Lazer's friend offers to take his horses to meet a group in Theth and accompany them over to Valbona.\*\****

## 6.7 Cycling support vehicles

I had arranged beforehand, through Mirza and Enko of HRID in Plav and Fatos in Kosovo/a, that on all the main cycling days there would be a vehicle to take our packs, because mountain bike riding on difficult tracks carrying panniers or rucksacks is NOT FUN. This worked well and we never had to carry anything except a light day sack. Ideally such 'support vehicles' would be available all day, not just taking the packs to the day's destination but available to help in cases of trouble with bikes or cyclist exhaustion. This need was reinforced on the last day when David's US folding bike suffered a major failure in the sophisticated hub gear system, which made it impossible to ride or even wheel. Luckily, the support jeep was not far below and we were able to send it back up the track to rescue him.

## 6.8 Comments on the routes

- a) Walking trek: Vusanje - Zastan - Qafa e Pejës - Okol - Theth - Valbona - Zastan - Vusanje. 4 days, allowing a full day (2 nights) in Theth.

This is a truly wonderful walk, through mountains as spectacular and unspoiled as you could wish. For experienced walkers the terrain is not difficult but less experienced people can find the loose gravel paths across steep ground a bit alarming and there are long stretches without water, notably over Qafa Valbona to Zastan and Vusanje where there is no water until the river in the Ropojana valley emerges at Savina Boda near Vusanje. You can save your legs by cycling or getting transport for the 8km from Vusanje up to the Zastan/Jezerca Lakes track junction.

No leg of this walk should take longer than 8 hours if you go by the UK Naismith rule: 3mph and add 1 hr for every 1000 feet of ascent. However, groups invariably take longer. Slower or less experienced walkers + carrying packs + heat + lack of water = much longer time needed. It is still galling to see local inhabitants skipping so lightly over the terrain in no more than town shoes with smooth or decaying leather soles! This comment leads to ***\*\*a word of warning\*\**** for anyone organizing such treks in the future. Trekking through Albanian mountains is not a walk in the park! People signing up for a trek should:

- Know and understand that an 8 hour day - at least- through dry, rugged mountains is a serious business

- **Not come** if they do not have proper footwear and clothing and their own emergency food and water
- Be prepared for the unexpected. With the best will in the world, things arranged beforehand don't always happen, so the expected transport, or food, or horses, or guides, or even the routes themselves may not materialise. You have to have the energy and temperament to be able to cope with the unexpected and not put an extra burden on your fellow trekkers.

On the descent to Valbona from Theth there is a long, tedious stretch of some 8 - 10km along the dry river bed, but the mountain scenery above is still awe-inspiring.

HRID mountaineering club in Plav are considering waymarking the route from Zastan to Qafa Valbona, which is good news. I have also urged them to waymark the route from Jezerça Lakes up through the beech forest to the border on the edge of the Buni I Runicë summer pasture.

#### b) Walks from Plav

You need transport, bus, taxi or bike, to get to good walking routes from Plav and we have already stressed the joys and advantages of having bikes in Plav. The Karanfili club have produced two handsome small maps showing waymarked routes from the Grabaje valley and up Maja e Kollatës from Vusanje. To obtain these maps, which are in Serbian only, you need personal contact with their designer, Rifat Mulic, who in the summer lives in the Karanfili Club hut in Grabaje.

Ochnyak 2815m, 'The Fang', is one of the waymarked routes, up the impressive spike of a mountain on the left as you enter Grabaje. The top is a most spectacular viewpoint, but the route is steep, over vegetation and slabby rock then up a rather exposed rocky ridge with vintage wire cables to guide or help you. The rock is very loose. Not a place for the inexperienced.

Visitor 2210m, rising directly up from the lake on the north west side, is probably the most accessible of the mountains round Plav. Tracks up to the Visitor Lakes and then the top start from the Morino road.

*"The Mountains of Montenegro - a walker's and trekker's guide"*

This new guidebook, by Rudolf Abraham, was published by Cicerone Press [www.cicerone.co.uk](http://www.cicerone.co.uk) in June 2007. It covers the seven main mountain areas of Montenegro, including Prokletje, describing mostly waymarked walking routes, and is a very handsome, handy book. The BPPP also gets honourable mention, more than once.

Cycle tour to Kosovo/a: Morino - Çakor Pass - Rugova valley - Peja/Peć

- c) - Decan - Decan valley past the monastery - cabins at Bjesjka Belegit - Qafa Bogiquës - Babina Polje - Plav. 4 nights, 5 days. About 150km.

This is a splendid round, through terrific scenery, with people welcoming us warmly everywhere. It is only suitable for mountain bikes; much of the route is on unsurfaced roads or jeep tracks. Crossing the two passes is hard work, with over 1000m of ascent for each of them, but the descent from Qafa Bogiquës to Plav is sensational: 1200m and 26km down through summer pastures and 'katuns', then an

unsurfaced road down the Babina Polje valley before about 8km on potholed tarmac into Plav. A wonderful finish to the whole trip.

## 7. PIECES OF THE JIGSAW

This trip enabled me to fit two more pieces into the jigsaw of my dreams for two major cross-border 'expeditions' through the Peace Park:

### a) Through trek on foot from Peja/Peć

to Theth, then Shkodra or Bajram Curraj. I didn't know previously how to get from Vusanje to Theth. That was a 'missing link' and now I know it - and want to walk it again and again! The next thing to work out is a really good route from Peja through Rugova to Montenegro, without slogging up the valley road. Fatos told me of a route he is designing, what he calls an 'under Hajla' trek, through the high villages and meadows above Rugova.

b) Major cycle tour. In 2004 I took part in Howard Boyd's Balkans cycle tour, starting and finishing in Podgorica. I loved that, even though we had to put the bikes into vans or trucks for several sections of the route. The Decan to Plav section over Qafa Bogiquës was the missing link which I was able to fill in this year and my 'dream route' can now be: Podgorica - Kolasin - Andrijevic - Morino - Çakor Pass - Rugova - Peja - Decan - Qafa Bogiquës - Plav - Vermosh - Tamarë - Koplik - Boga - Theth - Shala Valley - Kir - Shkodra - round Shkodra Lake to Virpazar - Podgorica. About 600km.? Any takers?!

## 8. THANKS

As you will have realized if you have read this far, this is not an account or a description of the trip. It is a more formal, objective report for the UK BPPP Committee and anyone else interested who is involved in the dream. But even in a report like this I want to add a subjective comment - it was a fantastic experience, *mrekullueshem* in Albanian - and to thank a lot of people who enabled it to happen or whom we met and whose company we enjoyed. So many, many thanks to:

- All those who came with me from the UK and the US
- Nçimi from Shkodra
- Admir and Pedro and all the staff at the Aqua Hotel
- Mensur, who helped me with the bikes and many other arrangements beforehand
- Mirza and Enko of HRID Mountaineering Club in Plav for all their help with transport and police negotiations
- Skender of Alpët-Shqiptarë in Plav
- Angelika Temper and Goiko Cimbalevic of the Austria-Montenegro Partnership
- Edin, journalist for Vijesti and member of TRITON
- Prek Harusha and his family and Lazer Cedarku and his family who welcomed us to their homes in Theth and Valbona
- Dritan and his sister Adriana who welcomed us to their Peace House in Drelaj
- Fatos, incomparable 'mountain man', who used his jeep and so much of his time and company for us in Kosovo/a, and especially for the wonderful supper at his house in Pepaj
- Gjaved and his family who welcomed us for a memorable hour to their home in Peja

- Jana from Czech Republic who was helping Fatos and ERA, on vacation from Colgate University in the USA
- Hysen from Peja
- Sokol of QMV (Environmental Centre, Valbona) for our arrangements in Valbona and for meeting us with his car and 3 beautiful girls at Rogam to help with our packs and the weariest walkers!
- Anis, our taxi driver from Plav from and to Dubrovnik
- Semir from Rozaje and his friend from Bosnia who waited for us for 2 hours on the top of Hajla and then ran like a graceful gazelle down the mountain to Fatos' house in Pepaj
- Rifat and his friends from Karanfili Club who showed us the way down from Buni i Runicë to the Jezerca Lakes

THANK YOU ALL!

Richard Hargreaves  
August 19<sup>th</sup> 2007