

Ann Kennards's report on the 2006 "Peace Walk in Thethi National Park, with overnight in Abat Kulla"

July 2006

At 7 a.m. on Friday 7th, Mario picked up Penny, Signe and me at the Kaduku Hotel in Shkodra, in order to find a car which was going to Thethi; no problem, we all moved ourselves and our luggage into Dritan's car, as he was travelling up to take stores – we stopped several times to pick up bread, potatoes – and eggs! His friend got those 4 dozen eggs unbroken all the way to Thethi!

We had a wonderful drive up to Thethi, stopped at one stage by another 4x4 which had run out of fuel – the solution was to siphon 10-15 litres off from our vehicle into a CocaCola bottle – hoping both vehicles would still make it to Thethi! The next obstruction was a series of piles of earth, which turned out to be waiting to be flattened by a bulldozer, in order to try to reduce the bumpiness of the road.

When we arrived, we met Antonia, who proceeded to direct people into their accommodation. I stayed with Valbona and family in a lovely house (with a shower!), together with Agnes and her son Roger from the U.S. who were also coming to Abat with the group. Antonia kindly took Signe and me on a little tour of the village proper in the afternoon (see below for the various buildings we passed) and we were constantly stopped and invited in for drinks, walnuts etc. by old friends, delighted to see Antonia again. We managed a lift back from a lorry, followed by a 4x4. The group as a whole met in the evening to watch the film of the original Peace Walk of 2003, which we all found very impressive, beautiful and quite moving.



On Saturday we left for Abat once Mario had arrived and we had two vehicles for the 11 trekkers and others travelling – some travelling with the luggage in the open back of the second vehicle, which was a pick-up truck. We started the trek by walking down into the village, which not all had been able to do previously, and visited the flour mill, saw it working, and the little woodworker's building next door, where beehives are made. The school in Thethi is an imposing building, though now rather dilapidated: it used to have 600 children, but now has only 20, and is only habitable downstairs. We then walked through a spectacular gorge on the other side of Thethi, not far from the Kulla, and up to the Shala Valley Project archaeological site. Jessie Quinn, an American student (Colgate University, NY) on the project, gave us a very interesting talk on the site, which is very flat, seemingly arranged in rooms/buildings, very geometrical. They think it is a fortified settlement, but



against whom? Pottery has been found which may be from the Bronze age. After this, most of the group went up to see the waterfall and some swam.

We started the drive to Abat, up the increasingly perilous roads, arriving at an open area above the Shala Gate, where there was a shop. We left the cars there, collected our luggage (except Arvio the footballer, and Mario, who walked in city clothes with beautiful leather shoes, and no luggage at all!) and started to climb. The walk was quite hard for some of us, without always having a discernible path, but the views were beautiful and there was always lots to see. We stopped at a lovely church, next to which was a house, ruined at one end, where Edith Durham is said to have stayed. Further on we stopped for a rest and a chat with a family, who also had a small shop, and we were all offered, and some accepted (free), raki from the usual plastic bottle.

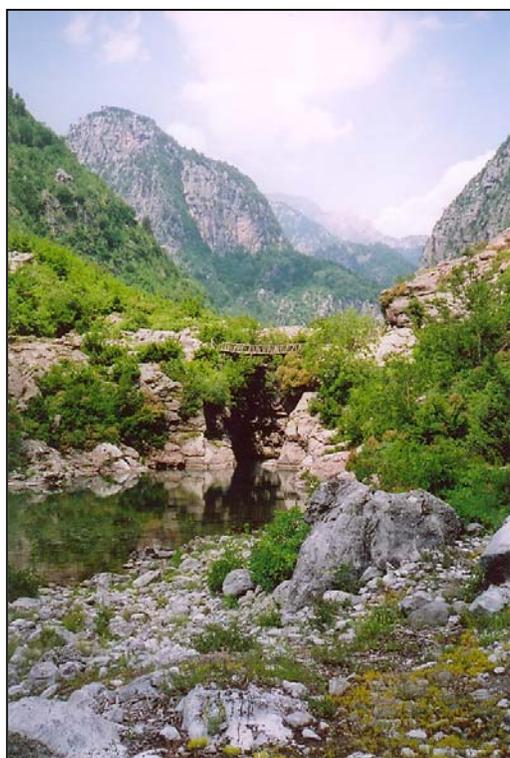


After something like 2 hours (1 hour was promised by Mario) we arrived exhausted and hot, but none the worse, at the Kulla, where we greeted our hosts, drank lots of water which was emerging plentifully from various rubber pipes, and ate lots of white mulberries massed on the trees beside the Kulla. The Kulla, which was burned down three times, was last used only 7 years ago; its current owner was in fact getting married in Shkodra the day we arrived. Our host family had cleaned and swept the Kulla, and were about to put in bedding for us. Before this happened, Mario was very keen for us to continue walking to the village of Pecaj where he was born and had lived until about 8 years ago. So 30 minutes or so later we arrived at a now almost deserted village, visited his lovely house, locked, but with salt and pepper still visible on the table inside. After another raki and local cheese stop with a family who received us all most graciously en route back to the Kulla, we found it now beautifully ready with mattresses, sheets and blankets – what luxury! And we all collapsed for an hour's rest before dinner.

When called for dinner, we found that there had been no electricity, and so this mountain of wonderful food we found had been cooked outside and in various ways, without the aid of electricity – and it was also dark by then! We ate sausage, cheese, chips, various vegetables, salad – and drank beer and more raki!

Almost all slept well, up 6.30 for a hurried breakfast of boiled milk, bread and cheese, to leave by 7.30, intending to go to Mass at the church at Breg Lumit. BUT – after a much quicker journey down, with an interesting stop with the family again, where the grandfather of 90, Qerim Fusha, told us fascinating things about the history of the region (ably translated by

Naim). One point of particular interest was that he actually remembered (at about age 5) seeing the kulla set on fire as part of King Zog's programme of eradicating this symbol of bloodfeuds. We arrived back at the shop to find that Mario's car had a flat tyre! So we abandoned the church idea, the men set to, to repair/change the wheel, and in the meantime an elderly couple appeared – the lady with a heart problem – needing a lift to Thethi – we were 'an answer to her prayer' the lady said! The cars were pretty full already, but we persuaded the drivers that we could not leave the old couple behind (the drivers were worried about overloading the cars on the mountain roads, understandably!), so we fitted the couple in somehow, and the numbers sitting and standing in the back of the pick-up truck simply increased! Some people chose to walk the first part of the way while the wheel was being changed.



We stopped on the way back to Thethi at Nderlysa, a very beautiful part of the river with a huge waterfall and high bridge, with a grotto at one end – had lunch there and some swam also. It was very hot by then. We had dropped the old couple on the road in case anyone else came past – but when we returned there they still were, so they got back in – and we gave them any food which we still had.

Back in Thethi, we walked into the village via the Kulla and the church: the church is being renovated with US-Albanian money, and in the meantime Mass is said under a clump of trees where a rectangle of stones has been placed. We then went back in the cars to our accommodation. Some of us then left for Shkodra that night, others stayed behind – to watch the World Cup Final!



All the images from this document, and more from the Abat trek, are available to view at:
<http://www.balkanspacepark.org/photoarch.php>

If you would like to get in touch with the author of this article please send an e-mail marked for the attention of 'Ann Kennard' to: info@balkanspacepark.org