

TREKKING OUT OF THETH

*Theth – Çurraj Eperm – Lekbibaj – Drin Gorge (boat) – Koman – Shkodra (car)
June 2006*

At the end of their week stay in Theth in June 2006, which included days with the SVAP, 3 hours amid the orgy of alpine flowers on top of Qafa e Pejës and, for Richard, an ascent of Mt. Arapit, Richard and Jane Hargreaves returned to Shkodra via what they called 'Petrit's Walk'.

Petrit Imeraj had long urged Richard to visit the 'ecological village' of Çurraj Eperm, so this year he was asked to arrange it, fixing up local guides for the route, accommodation in Çurraj and Lekbibaj and transport at the end of the 4 day trek. He advised that Çurraj merited a two night stay in order to appreciate the uniqueness of the village. Other people claimed the village was now deserted but Petrit said he knew a family still living there. Richard also wanted to see if this route would make a suitable finale to his dream of a through trek from Peja/Peć in Kosovo/a, to Plav, Gusinje and Vusanje in Montenegro, over to Theth in Albania and on to Shkodra. Would walking out from Theth via Çurraj Eperm be more attractive than yet another transport ride via Boga?



In the event, the 4 day trek was a truly memorable experience but rather more than Richard and Jane had bargained for. The route to ÇE from Theth, over the col at 1870m above the summer alpine pasture of Fusha e Dhellit then down to the valley of the Çurraj river, hadn't, it was learned later, been walked for 15 years. There was now no track to follow and the guide, Stake Vukay, a geologist from Shkodra, was unfamiliar with that part of the route. The first day took 15 hours, ending with a night on the floor in a deserted house, and the third day, the walk from Çurraj to Lekbibaj, was another 12 hour day, ending in the dark. However, for those who like to travel on foot through wild, remote landscape of high mountains and deep wooded gorges of roaring rivers this was magnificent, and there was a welcoming family there.

Petrit was right. Çurraj Eperm is unique. It is a village of maybe 200 houses, stone built with wood shingle roofs, a church, a school, a water mill, a hydro-electric plant, two rickety bridges and carefully terraced fields for hay and corn, all spread over a bowl of land about



4km square at a height of 800 metres between two impassable gorges on the Çurraj river. There was never a road to Çurraj; access was on foot or horse from Theth, they say in 8 hours, or from Lekbibaj in 6 or 7 hours. It seems now that only two homes are lived in all year and two or three families return there from the cities for the 'summer', between May and November. Until 5 or 6 years ago here had been a whole but declining community, with their sheep, cows, pigs, hens, horses and bees, living off the land and in harmony with it. It is a stunning location, a hauntingly beautiful but near deserted place, the empty houses still full of furniture, even clothes on their pegs, and all the traditional tools and equipment for growing and cultivating crops, tending bees and making raki.



Questions and answers

- Would this be a good way to finish a Peja to Shkodra trek? No, not until the track from Theth has been remade and waymarked and local guides are available.
- Should Çurraj Eperm be included in the BPPP? If Valbona is to be included, so should this valley system.
- Could and should Çurraj Eperm be preserved in some way, with a heritage status and efforts made to enable more families to live there, for part of the year at least? Ideally, yes, and Petrit should be supported in his desire to achieve this but one can hardly expect it to be within Albania's current priorities. A visionary philanthropic benefactor with a long term commitment and lots of money is needed. Any offers?!

Epilogue

The journey down the Drin gorge is also unique, for its dramatic scenery and the boat itself, literally an old 40 seater coach mounted on a metal barge, with its wheels removed and its engine driving a propeller.

