

## Teaching among the peaks

There isn't a road to Vermosh. There's a rocky track hacked through the mountains. It took six slow, bumpy hours to get there from Shkodra, most of them spent trying not to look down and hoping the minibus wouldn't blow a tyre or meet oncoming traffic. The views were spectacular - as were the drops into deep, arid valleys below.

We weren't travelling through the Himalayas or the Andes, though. Vermosh is in Europe, in northern Albania, just inside the border with Montenegro, and without the six-hour motorised yomp through the mountains it wouldn't be much more than four hours from the UK.



I was heading there with my children - Lydia, 19, and Sam, 13 - as part of a group of 16 English, American and Albanian volunteers with the Balkans Peace Park Project (B3P), and we were about to spend a fortnight teaching English in one of Albania's northernmost and Europe's remotest communities.

Founded in 2001, B3P aims to establish an international park covering 3,000 square kilometres of Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo, simultaneously protecting a unique but fragile natural environment, promoting cross-border cooperation and encouraging sustainable tourism.

En route to this, it has been running a six-week summer programme of teaching and environmental activities in the Albanian village of Thethi since 2008. This year, for the first time, it extended that programme to Vermosh.

Like most of our small but eclectic group, we were there by chance. Back in January, I happened to perform a one-man show, *I Went To Albania*, during Bristol Old Vic's Ferment fortnight. B3P's chair, Ann Kennard, was in the audience and left an email address at the box office.

Soon after we were invited to Yorkshire to meet the charity's founders, anthropologist Antonia Young and her husband Nigel, and before I knew it we were signing up for the summer programme.

Although we'd visited Albania as a family twice before, we'd never been into the northern alps and we didn't know what to expect. Vermosh is in the heart of the chillingly named Accursed Mountains, where long-running blood feuds are said to claim dozens of lives every year.

The village itself couldn't have looked less 'accursed'. As we rolled off the end of the mountain track onto a short stretch of tarmac, we arrived in a broad, green valley dotted with farms and orchards, waited while sheep and cows ambled across the road, and then pulled into a dusty square with a red-roofed church, two shops, two bars, and the village school which would become our HQ.

Forests covered the lower slopes, while a seemingly endless chain of towering peaks stretched into the distance. Our hosts, Flamur and Manushaqe Nacaj, lived on the far side of a wide dry riverbed in a traditional stone farmhouse surrounded by cherry trees. They were almost entirely self-sufficient.

They were also bountifully hospitable, treating us as members of the family and feeding us gargantuan meals.

Needless to say, everything put on the table couldn't have been more locally sourced or organic: huge dishes of roast chicken or lamb, slabs of white cheese, creamy butter, plum jam and abundant salads.

When Flamur asked me to help prepare lunch one day, I wasn't entirely surprised to find that 'lunch' was still very much alive, bleating in a field. Thankfully, my job amounted to raking charcoal under the spit and drinking dangerous amounts of his home-distilled raki - which tasted like nectar but punched like Muhammad Ali.

On the face of it, life in Vermosh was idyllic. It was certainly easy to believe that whilst sitting in a high mountain pasture overlooking the patchwork farms or sharing a beer outside one of the village bars as a full moon rose above the forest.

Adjectives like 'hectic' or 'stressed' don't apply - and with no mobile signal and only very intermittent access to the internet, the rest of the world seemed a very long way away.

There's a strong community spirit, too. Blood feuds haven't blighted this particular valley for decades, and when a man fell ill last winter and the village was snowed in, the heads of all the local families got together and carried him to Shkodra over the mountains on foot.

That said, it's equally easy to romanticise. Life in Vermosh can be hard. Those winter snows keep the village cut off for up to five months, and last year the Nacaj family were effectively trapped on their farm when the unbridged and unbridgeable river flooded back into their part of the valley.

This kind of mixed, low-tech, subsistence farming is a 24/7 business, and making ends meet is becoming increasingly difficult. Many people have already left to seek jobs elsewhere - all but two of Flamur's 10 siblings live in the USA or Greece - and in the last 20 years the population has fallen dramatically.

Most of the young people we met hoped to migrate to the States in the very near future.

Tourism at least offers a means of bringing much-needed income into the valley. Several guesthouses have already opened, but visitors are scarce and the biggest group of tourists we encountered were some German off-road enthusiasts in 4x4s who roared across the border from Montenegro and disappeared up the track to Shkodra in a cloud of dust.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the chance to learn English - which, for whatever reason, has become the lingua franca of international tourism, especially in south-east Europe - proved popular.

Such was the demand, in fact, that we opened a second school in the neighbouring village of Lëpushë - and between us taught some 70 children and adults a day.

In Vermosh, Lydia and I took a dozen-strong class of teenagers in a schoolroom which was unusual in having a blackboard, chalk and an occasional electric light.

Although theatre isn't on the curriculum in rural Albanian schools, the class liked the idea of putting on a play. Being teens, they chose to dramatise two blood-thirsty local folk tales: in one, a young woman was promised in marriage to an Ottoman pasha and stabbed him on their wedding night because she couldn't love him; in the other, a young wife and mother agreed to be buried in the wall of Shkodra castle to stop it falling down, but only if she could still breastfeed her baby through a hole.

Two weeks later, they made their debut in front of the village, performing both tales in English and in paper costumes.

Although unfamiliar with the language, the audience recognised the stories and went wild - albeit not quite as wild as for the adult class singing *My Heart Will Go On* against a backdrop of granite-purple mountains.

That weekend, the tables turned and we became the audience. The annual Miss Bjeshka festival in Lëpushë attracts thousands from across Albania and beyond. A dozen women compete, not to be the most attractive, most cosmetically enhanced beauty, but to best represent their traditions and community via extraordinarily intricate costumes, dancing and crafts. It was hard to tell but we were probably the only non-Albanians there. Dance troupes from Kosovo and poets with extravagant moustaches told traditional stories, backed by lutes or çifteli. After the spectacle, the regional chief of police invited us to join him for lamb and raki, but our ride back to Vermosh arrived and we had to leave, bouncing through the mountains on the back of a flatbed truck. It took the best part of the next day to cross the border into Montenegro and come anywhere close to a railway line or airport.