

RICHARD'S B3P TREK LOG 2014
PEJA - GJERAVICA - PLAV - GRBAJE - LËPUSHË - NIKÇ - THETHI
July 9th to 22nd 2014

The group:

5 members of the Fell and Rock Climbing Club: Richard and Jane, Paul and Cath Exley (who had been on the 2012 trek) and Hatty Harris, with Jane's longstanding friend from Oxford, Mary Gregory

The purpose:

To show Jane two of the most beautiful walks from the 2012 trek, complete with their wonderful flowers, to take in new territory, i.e. Gjeravica 2656m, Kosova's highest peak, and Pavlin's suggestion of a three day walk from Montenegro to Thethi via Lëpushë and Nikç. The journey was also designed to be less demanding than previous ones, with rest days or easier days between longer ones. And, of course, we looked forward to meeting old friends in the three B3P countries and making new ones.

AS IT HAPPENED!

Day 1 July 9 Wednesday

Flew by Austrian Airways, Heathrow (at 0600!) to Pristina (1155) with a transfer in Vienna. Met with minibus for drive to Peja. B&B with Sapka and Xjeko, neighbours of Lendita who organized everything for us wonderfully in Kosova. Richard and Jane met Dritan Shala for a coffee in the afternoon and to catch up on his life. Supper with Lendita at the Art&Design restaurant.



Lendita

Day 2 July 10 Thursday

Morning in Peja. Visit to old restored Kulla where the architect/restorer ??? has his office. He had also worked on Haxhi's Mill where ERA is now based. Then visit to the Peč Patriarchate, the 13th Century Serbian Orthodox Monastery, by the Lumbardi river just outside the town. Sister ?????



rationed us to one delicious mulberry each from the trees which are as old as the monastery itself. Ellen Frank (US, working for ERA in Peja since 2003) joined us for a qevap lunch before Fatos Lajci, longstanding friend and character, drove us to Junik and up the 'exciting' forest road to Bjeshka Berishës, summer alpine village, below Gjeravica. Stayed in Mili and Mehri's farm guesthouse, complete with home-built hydro-electric power and lovely family.



Day 3 July 11 Friday



Walked up Gjeravica with Fatos as guide. 3 hours up, 2½ down, a beautiful walk with flowers all the way but with cold rain and even sleet/snow on top. Returned to Peja after a visit to the Deçan monastery, Serbian Orthodox like Peč, but run by monks not nuns. An 'oasis' atmosphere with added agriculture business from its own extended farmland. Supper again with Lendita at a college restaurant, menu choice arranged for us in advance. Excellent! Second night at Sapka and Xjeko's B&B.

Day 4 July 12 Saturday



Gentle morning in Peja, feeling like our home town, with visit to ERA's Haxji Mill conversion, opened for us by Ellen and 4yr old Lek. Lunch and goodbye to Lendita before visit to family of Xjaved and Teuta whose older son Korab, 23, is sadly quadriplegic after a swimming accident 4 years ago. Mountain mad

before, he still dreams of mountains. A special cabin for him is being built by Xjaved and Fatos under Hajla Peak above the Rugova Valley. Drive with Fatos up the Rugova Gorge to the ERA waterfall trail and then on foot to Mustafa's warm welcome at his farm guesthouse in Reka Allages 1300m. Big supper, all home-produce.



Mustafa

Day 5 July 13 Sunday

Missed the PoB 'Peaks of the Balkans' trail waymarks for the steep walk up through forest and meadow to the Italians' (Trentino Association) shelter on their Green Path Rugova trail, 1900m. Then up an open flower-strewn alp to the Kosova-Montenegro border ridge leading airily and delightfully to Hajla Peak, 2403m, in 3½hrs. Down to find the key for Fatos' new cabin, one of 12 cabins he has built on or above the treeline all around Rugova. This is the site for ERA's mountain environmental programmes for young people from Kosova and other countries. Then on down 1 hr to the village of Pepaj



Jane and flowers on Hajla ridge

to meet Fatos there to take us to the Tre Ligenat café/chalets above Kuçiste for the night. Not the same warm atmosphere as we had had in family accommodation so far.

Day 6 July 14 Monday



Second 'unguided' day, towards Montenegro on the PoB trail: past the popular Kuçiste lakes, flickering with bright blue damsel flies, up the valley in a riot of flowers to Qafa (col) Jelenak at 2272m, along



the border, the tree-lined Jelenak ridge for about 6km at 2000m to crossing point into Montenegro at Ravno Brdo 2100m where Admir Lalić met us to guide us steeply down alp and meadow to his car at Babino Polje. Drove to the Kula Damjanova Hotel beside Lake Plav for a pampered hotel night, built in 2007 as Komneno Ethnic Village, all mock old in log cabin and country park style. Main rucksacks had been transported from Kuçiste down to Peja to be put on the daily 2pm bus to Plav and Gusinje, via Rozaje, Berane and Andrijevica, before being collected from Plav bus station at 5pm. In Yugoslav days there was a mere 70km bus route between Plav and Peja over the Čakor pass. If and when Montenegro and Kosova can agree to put the border back on top of the pass, instead of 12km down in Rugova, the bus can come that way with great opportunity for tourist development. Meanwhile it's for fit cyclists only!

Day 7 July 15 Tuesday

'Rest' morning. Hatty and Jane stayed in the hotel grounds to paint, read and rest while the others walked 15 minutes in and out of rain along the road to Plav. Richard wondered how much effort he ought to put into finding a police station/bank/post office in order to pay the border permission fee of 10 euros which the Montenegro border police are now charging, illegally. Everything closed for Independence Day so this item left for Admir to sort out later. A knock on the door of the closed Tourist Office prompted Emir Feratović to open it specially for us. He was wonderful, giving up much of his day off to take us to the old Kulla tower in the town, now filled with traditional clothing and artifacts from the collection of a remarkable antiquarian who came out of his own house opposite to take us round that too, stuffed full of bric-a-brac and interesting objects. Emir then phoned Professor Pra ščević, a friend who had set up the Plav Botanical Garden to display collections of flowers from the mountains of Prokletije. Taken there and given an enthusiastic guided tour, though most of the flowers had finished blooming by now. Finally, Emir took us back into town to his recommended Ćevap café for lunch. He is a great asset; speaks English, very helpful and contributed a lot to aid Sylvia in promoting the forthcoming Summer Programme in the Plav 'eco village' in August. If only someone would set up a bike hire business in Plav! It's an ideal location for cycling at different levels.

At 3pm Admir came to the hotel to take us to his Karanfili Club mountain hut in the spectacular Grbaje Valley. Slept comfortably in the 'rabbit hutches' and dined hugely on

his and his wife's cooking, but weather too cool to sit outside amongst fireflies and glowworms as in 2012.



Expecting Pavlin to walk over from Lëpushë to join us before guiding us on the 3 day walk to Thethi. He did come, but in a car with Luigi from the Alpini guesthouse in Lëpushë. He had been unwell, exhausted, and his doctor in Shkodra had firmly told him to rest. So he came to rearrange the guiding scheme for us. Instead of walking from the head of the Grbaje valley with us up to the

border at the Vajushes meadow 1600m where a horse from Lëpushë would be waiting to carry our packs to the Alpini, Admir would send the packs round by road via Vermosh and take us up to the Volušnica 'katun' (old summer shepherd's hut) to meet a guide who would come from Lëpushë.



Pavlin, Luigi, Richard

Day 8 July 16 Wednesday

Persuaded to be up at 6am for a 6.30am breakfast. Left at 7.30am. Admir, now with a new job for the Prokletije National Park, education and setting up a visitor centre in Gusinje, had to get to Podgorica in the morning. At the 'katun' by 9am, the Lëpushë guide eventually visible on the ridge above. Admir left us. Made our way up to the ridge to meet very cold Lician, Luigi's 16yr old son. All this ground was familiar to us from 2012 and from Jane and my walk there in 2008. Over the top of Talianka 2059m (Maja Vajushes in Albanian),



briefly along the ridge and then sharply downhill into Albania to Qafa Dobkut, on through beautiful Lëpushë valley to the main Vermosh road at Qafa Bordoleci and the Alpini guesthouse by 1pm. Lunch there, then visit to the B3P Summer Programme English class in the school by the football ground. Gina the volunteer teacher was from Leeds.

Before supper, Pavlin took us down the rough 15km road to Vermosh to a café in the square to find Tom Phillips, coordinator of the Lëpushë and Vermosh Summer Programmes. Soon a cheerful gathering of international English teaching volunteers and Albanian interpreters/helpers and environmental awareness teachers. A great occasion, meeting so many young, enthusiastic and committed people from different countries coming to help young people in this region of Albania. Sadly, as Tom reported to the UK B3P AGM last year, a majority of the young men/older boys are determined to use their English to get away from Vermosh to America. The population of Vermosh has declined from 1000 to 200 over the last 5 years.



Day 9 July 17 Thursday



Comfortable night back in a family atmosphere, then Luigi guided us for the first part of the walk to Nikç. Another glorious walk up through beech woods, out onto open alp meadows among summer 'katuns', or 'stans' in Albanian, up to a col, Qafa e Koprishtit 1895m on the ridge of Maja Berizhdolit, over the top at 1979m and down to another deep cut col, the Gropa e Berizhdolit. Here Luigi said goodbye and bid us head down to the valley to a nameless 'stan' where the owner of the guest

house in Nikç would meet us. He didn't but the way was clear, a friendly woman from the family in the stan rushed to accompany us as she was heading for Tamarë, the village a long way down on the Vermosh road where she lived. As we left the high meadowland in the valley and started down a rough stony track through shrubs and trees a man on a white horse came up behind us, got off the horse and walked behind us all the long way down to the village of Nikç total descent from 1800 to 620m. In a pause by the church in Nikç the man with the horse gestured a direction for us. He was actually Gjon Turkaj, owner of the guesthouse we were heading for and the guide who had come to meet us! Pavlin had driven round with our packs and would do the same next day when we walked over to Thethi. Slow cooked lamb for supper, the best meat on the trip. Not much veggie food on offer in the Balkans but plenty of peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers and, of course, home-brewed cheese, yoghurt and butter with everything. Well off most trekking routes and up a side valley from the main Vermosh road Gjon gets about 50 visitors a year, so we were made to feel a bit special.



Day 10 July 18 Friday

The big one. Always known this would be the longest day, 9 hours or thereabouts. Gjon, carrying a hand axe to clear the way, led us steeply up through forest on a faint track till a rest by an ingenious water point where 3 hollowed out tree trunks in a tier held water coming direct out of a spring on the rock face and via a hose which Gjon had to reshape with his axe. 3½ hours after leaving Nikç and above the high and well occupied stan of Dobraçen we met the Thethi guide Marash coming to meet us. He had been the horseman when we walked to Thethi from Ropojana in 2012. For the next 2 hours or so we walked through a desert-like landscape in a huge bowl of karst limestone but with flowers, especially blue gentians, peeping out of almost every slit in the bare rock. Shepherds and sheep could be heard and occasionally seen in this weird but fantastic wilderness. I had been worried that Pavlin would want to take us down very steep ground to the west of Maja Arapit 2217m instead of the much longer but easier way to the east and down by the familiar Qafa e Pejës path. He persuaded me that he had taken groups down the western route and it was used by horses, so that is the way Marash took us, over a series of cols in



a narrow defile between Arapit on the left and unnamed craggy peaks on the right. I would not have liked to find our own way from the highest point at about 1800m but the path was



vaguely waymarked and it zig-zagged appropriately down well away from the huge 900m face of Arapit. Lower down, where Marash signalled that he saw what we would call a chamois, we met the site of the external base camp of a Bulgarian caving group who had been exploring the huge cave under Arapit for several years. Their internal base camp is 3½ hours inside. As we passed Okol at the head of the valley a jeep met us, sent by

Pavlin to take us to his house near the church in Thethi. Saved us about an hour's walk. We had been out for 10 hours, more than the expected 9 hours but we did spend a lot of time stopping to photograph the flowers and to gawp at the astonishing limestone wilderness north and west of Maja Arapit.

Day 11 July 19 Saturday

3 nights at Pavlin's, with 2 days for rest and recuperation if needed. Thethi is changing rapidly from its kind of Shangri-La status when we first knew it. Guesthouses are being raised to 2 or more storeys, bars and cafes abound and at least one new building is grossly out of scale. What will the fully tarmac road bring when it is complete all the way to Thethi in a year or two's time? It should be tarmac up to Qafa Thores from Boga by the end of this summer. It is, however, still a heavenly place. The Kulla and church were visited obviously and some of us asked 15yr old Samuel from the café by the Kulla, articulate and quite fluent graduate of the B3P Summer Programmes, to give us a guided tour in the afternoon, but he resisted taking us into the old group of houses behind the museum as we had asked. Quite an entrepreneur, he has his own flock of goats and intends to become a mountain guide. When I slipped him a bit of pocket money after buying him a drink at the end of the tour he was audibly unimpressed; I had dimly thought we were doing him a favour by inviting him to use his English to inform and question us, whereas he saw it as a commercial transaction. Lesson learned. At supper that night, a group of what looked like night club bouncers from Tirana, the last of 40 people eating at Pavlin's, were entertained by a man from Nderlysj playing the 2-stringed Çifteli which hung from the ceiling in the dining room. A remarkable display. I preferred his instrumental playing to the rather long and mournful songs which he also performed with çifteli accompaniment.

Day 12 July 20 Sunday

Pavlin offered to take us down the valley to Nderlysj for a walk to the 'Blue Eye', with lunch at the café by the car park so that Vlora would not have to make a picnic. The Blue Eye pool, a 45 minute walk, very inviting but I knew how cold it would be with the waterfall coming direct out of the hillside so I saved my swim for the beautiful pool in the river below the café. The guy with the çifteli whom we had heard at Pavlin's the night before was also playing at the café till the Tirana bouncers left noisily in their grotesque US Hummer vehicle. Jane had stayed behind in Thethi to savour the atmosphere. We asked Pavlin to drop us off at the canyon on the way back, from where we could walk home by way of the waterfall and the splendid bank of butterwort beside it. I then lingered by the

disused mill in its grove by the river and warbled tunes on my piccolo, a kind of response to the çifteli playing I had heard.

The family atmosphere at Pavlin's is intriguing and a joy to see. It is worth trying to put it all together, as I understand it.

- Pavlin and Vlora (originally from Kosova) have the two children, Ere now 4 and Tom 2
- Pavlin's uncle and aunt, Tomar and Maria, live in the wooden shed alongside the house
- The 'staff' in red t-shirts with 'Staff' on the front and Pavlin's web address on the back are:

Lezshe (Pavlin's cousin) and her daughter Leonida (curly hair)

Sylvana, with long black hair, who lives in the house next door

Ulrike from Germany. She spent the winter with the family in Thethi in 2012 and has returned many times

Lucy, one of Pavlin's 4 sisters who all live in the US. Liliana was the sister here last year. Do they take it in turns to come each year?!

- Pavlin's brother Nardi

Ere and Tom are being brought up in a wide extended family where everyone looks after them, cuddles them, talks to them. Lucky them! But no one reads books to them.



Day 13 July 21 Monday

Left Thethi for Shkodra in a convoy of 2 4x4s, a friend driving us in one vehicle and Pavlin taking all his family in the other for a break away from Thethi and beside the sea. Road up out of Thethi far rougher even than I remember it. Increased traffic and winter weather have eroded it badly. I recall cycling happily down it 10 years ago. It would demand fierce concentration to stay on a



bike now as it bumps

down over exposed bedrock instead of the rough gravel surface there used to be. At the photo-stop for the the splendid panorama of the head of the Shala valley, Maja Arapit and the jagged Prokletije peaks towards Montenegro behind, there is a monument to Edith Durham, "Queen of the high mountains". When was that put up by "the people of Thethi"?



Booked into the Tradita Hotel, then by taxi to the Shqiponja restaurant by the Buna river for a fine trout lunch, followed by a visit up to Rozafa Castle to enjoy the terrific view in all directions.

Supper at the San Francisco restaurant where we were joined by Endrit Shima who made a special effort to come and meet me and the group. We'd had lots of e-mail contact but not actually met. As well as talking about the Montenegro fee charging problem, PoB issues, Doberdol, where B3P had given some money for improvements last autumn, and a possible tour in southern Albania next April/May, Endrit helped to arrange a succession of traditional dishes which covered the table and defeated our appetites. A good evening.

Day 14 July 22 Tuesday

11am Pavlin came to say goodbye as we boarded the minibus he had arranged to take us to Rinas airport, Tirana. Comfortable journey, including picking up roadside passengers, a mother and daughter who was on her way back to Tirana university for the second year of her Infomatics degree course to be followed by a Master's degree in probably Germany. Interesting discussion.

1505 Austrian Airways to London via $\frac{1}{2}$ hour transfer in rainy Vienna. Goodbye to Hatty at Heathrow while the rest of us caught the bus to Oxford and Mary and Norman's house and supper provided by Norman.

We found ourselves back in a UK heatwave, warmer and drier than our Balkans weather this year!



Endrit Shima

Richard
August 2014