

BALKANS MOUNTAIN MINSTRELS 2018

June 11th - 22nd 2018

Our aim: to sing and play our way on a mountain journey from Peja and Rugova in Kosova, through Babino Polje and Vusanje in Montenegro, to Thethi in Albania with a finale in the main pedestrian street in Shkodra.

TREK LOG

5 participants: Richard (ukulele and flute) and Jane, Lindsay Wilkinson (ukulele) from Ulverston, Richard Lindley and Errollyn Bruce from Keighley. Originally there were 8 participants, including two more ukulele player singers from Ulverston and another mountain singer, but medical emergencies had reduced us to five.

LOGISTICS

All arrangements, for travel, baggage transfer, accommodation, police permission to cross the borders and the guide Enis Shehu from Tirana, were made for us by Lendita Hyseni at her outdoor travel company Kosova Outdoor in Peja. She also arranged the venues for us to play in Peja. Lendita is a lovely person as well as a highly efficient and professional organizer.

ITINERARY AND ACTIVITIES

Day 1

Monday June 11th. Flights with Austrian Airways, Manchester to Pristina via Vienna. Arrived 22.45. Minibus transport to Peja for night stay at house of Lendita and Adnan. During 4 hour stopover in Vienna airport we rehearsed our prepared repertoire of songs and tunes. (See list at the end.)

Day 2

Tuesday June 12th. 'Concert' in Haxhi Mill, ERA's centre. ERA = Environmentally Responsible Action, run by Fatos Lajçi and Ellen Frank-Lajçi. A great venue, nice acoustics for the flute! Audience of 25 - 30, ERA volunteers and friends. Afternoon walkabouts before Lendita's "Slow Food" delicious supper. She is an important figure in the Slow Food movement in Kosova and beyond.



Day 3

Wednesday June 13th. At 11am played/sang to large group of young children in Qendra Elohim English Language school in Peja. Great fun! Afternoon visit to the Patriarchate, 13th century Serbian Orthodox monastery, before drive up Rugova valley and one hour walk up to Reka Allages village and guesthouse of Mustafa Ariu. Baggage taken there by transport. Sang/played outside to other visitors from America and Germany on the PoB (Peaks of the Balkans Trail). Also played/sang to Mustafa and Fetja and friends who came in after supper. Our rendering of "Lule Borë" went down very well! Rain, thunder and lightning all night.



Day 4

Thursday June 14th. Cloudy walk up Hajla Peak 2403m, 3½ hours from Mustafa's.



Remarkable flora on grassy slope up and along the summit ridge. *Gentians*, yellow orchids, primula, mountain avens, edelweiss, etc. Down in rain to Fatos' Hajla Cabin at 2000m for night stay. Lindsay had an exciting ride up to the cabin in Fatos' jeep. She had had a skiing accident in February which damaged a knee



and severely affected her ability to walk in the mountains. Throughout the trip we arranged for her to ride in the baggage transfer vehicle.

Day 5



Friday June 15th. Solid rain all morning but put to good use. Set up a "Recording Studio" in the end room of the cabin for Fatos and Enis to take still and video images of four of our songs. We are to send Fatos some photos of our walk up Hajla Peak for him to put together a short film. Rain cleared in the afternoon for the 3 hour walk down to a night stay at Shqiponja guesthouse and, of course, another music session.



Day 6

Saturday June 16th. Transport from Drelaj village to the Gur i Kuq café at Kuçiste at the head of Rugova valley to begin the classic walk over to Montenegro, 8½ hours. Some mist and rain but glorious flowers up the valley to Qafa Jelenak 2272m and on the descent to Babino Polje. Terrific welcome for night at Agron Alia's "Triangle-Woodhouse", triangle because it is quite close to the Tri-point peak where the 3 countries of B3P actually meet. Another music session after supper and raki. (Photo: *Lilium Albanicum* near Liqeni i Madhe early on Day 6)



Day 7

Sunday June 17th. Montenegro day, also last day of 3 day post-Ramadan Eid Mubarak holiday. Not many people about. Agron drove us into Plav, coffee stop in Timms café where we had stayed in 2017. Few people around so decided not to play/sing in Plav. Drove to Grbaje valley. Agron kindly waited 2 hours in a café while we walked along flat valley floor to meadow in grand mountain cirque at the end. Spied a handsome boulder, complete with footpaths signpost, on which to balance and sing. Enis and Jane recorded on I-phone, tablet and camera respectively while we sang Side By Side, Into the Sun, El Condor Pasa and Wild Rover, and Richard fluted Ashokan's Farewell, Londonderry Air and Harvest Home tunes. A Belgian couple taking photos in the area observed that "Only the English would do a thing like that"! Ran back in rain to Agron and a coffee before driving on to the Kulla Rosi guesthouse in Vusanje/Vuthaj. Quick walk up through the village to the Grylla waterfall and then the Blue Eye (Skakovica Oko) pool. Remarkably, a



considerable waterfall was feeding into the pool which is normally the first source of water if you walk the 6 or 7km down the Ropojana valley. After good supper, Geti and Mann, guesthouse owners, recorded another music session for their publicity.

Day 8

Monday June 18th. While Lindsay went on the long drive round to Thethi with the baggage and ukuleles in a taxi via Vermosh, Tamarë and Koplik, the foursome had transport up the Ropojana track till it became impassable. Shame, really one should walk up it to appreciate the splendour of the valley, but transport does save 2 hours on what is still an 8 hour walk to Thethi. The usually dry lake Liqeni Geshtares, where the path crosses the Albanian border, was full, tempting but too early in the day for a swim! Never seen it like that in previous 7 visits. Via the flower-filled Runicës meadow (too early in the season for the shepherds), then a snow-filled gully where the next water point lies, past the remains of two Enver Hoxha "concrete mushroom" machine gun bunkers and on to Qafa Pejës 1707m, the pass before the descent to the Shala Valley and the 1½ hour walk down the valley to Thethi village. Arriving at Butjina Polia, Pavlin's rebuilt house in its fine setting by the church, we were disappointed to learn that because of over-booking we were being sent to neighbouring houses for the night. Both Lindsay and Richard + Errollyn were happy with their rooms for all 3 nights in Thethi but Richard + Jane were relieved to move into a good room in Pavlin's next morning. In a music session before the excellent supper an Englishman came up to join in the singing; he turned out to be Orlando Gough, musician and composer of operas and large scale choral works, now about to set out next morning for Valbona on the PoB trail having been inspired by an article in the Financial Times. He loves Balkans music!



Day 9

Tuesday June 19th. Rest day for music around Thethi. At the kulla tower we did our own tour



inside before beginning to sing/play over coffee in the café, soon joined by Jovelin and his leaf/lips tunes and his daughter



(Maria 10?) enchanting us with her deft çifteli playing. Our Lule Borë again brought in everyone around. Also played outside the church, mostly to 4 horses, then at the new Tourist Information Centre, to a herd of sheep and a sleeping dog but also to Claudia, the enthusiastic manager, B3P supporter and "graduate" of early Summer Programmes in Thethi.

Day 10



Wednesday June 20th. A more energetic day. On her first real walk since the skiing problem Lindsay walked to the waterfall, where she was invited to sit on one of the 4 horses being washed there after hearing our music the day before. The rest of us did the 3hr walk up to the beautiful alpine grazing meadow Fjusha Denellit 1776m. No shepherds there yet. In the evening Pavlin recorded a music session for his publicity.

Sadly, we were

reduced to just one uke because Lindsay's broke a string and its tuning mechanism. Moral: always have a spare string or two on a trip. Lindsay borrowed Richard's uke for the rest of the trip though she also managed to use the guitar from Pavlin's dining room. Here Pavlin and some staff join us in singing Lule Borë.



Day 11

Thursday June 21st. Fond farewells to Vlora and family before 10am Landrover ride to Shkodra. No news yet of development of the very rough road from Thethi till it meets the tarmac on Qafa Thorës. At photo stop at the Edith Durham memorial our congenial driver asked to stand with us during our impromptu "Into the Sun". In Skodra we based ourselves



at Mi Casa Es Tu Casa, backpackers hostel, colourful and friendly, run by Alma and her daughter Ani. Met up with Pavlin returning from Tirana to choose a spot in the main pedestrian street Rruga Kole Idromeno at 7.30pm to enough to listen to the end of our half hour 'performance', ending of course with Lule Borë. "That was pure art", said a delighted 15yr old boy. Then to a delicious, multi-course supper at La Elita restaurant nearby with Pavlin as our guest, 15 euros a head.

Day 12

Friday June 22nd. 0030 two taxis for 5 with baggage to Rinas airport, Tirana, for 0425 flight to Manchester via Vienna, no music session this time during the 4hr stopover.

Falmenderit shumë to everyone who welcomed and helped us so much in the Balkans, with special thanks to Lindsay for leading us musically and to our guide and great companion Enis. Here he is "bouldering" in Grbaje!

Richard
26/6/2018



WHAT SONGS DID WE SING?

We had prepared a list of 23 songs from which to choose each time we sang. The list here shows them in descending order, from the ones we sang most often to those sung the least.

1. *Side By Side*. Our theme song, "We're travelling along, singing a song, side by side." American popular song from 1927.
2. *Into the Sun*. Modern English folk song from Yorkshire. Staying together and coming out of the darkness of difficult times "into the sun".
3. *El Condor Pasa*. Spanish, folk tune from Peru. *E sqhiponja fluturon* = The eagle flies in Albanian. Words by Simon and Gafunkel in album "Bridge Over Troubled Water". Richard liked to play the tune to start and finish this song. It suggests the movement of an eagle rising in circles into the sky and looking down in pity on us people tied to the ground below.
4. *The Wild Rover*. Age-old Irish folk song about a man who promises, as he's often promised before, "No nay never no more", to stop his life of travelling and drinking
5. *Eight Days a Week*. The Beatles' song, 1964. After hearing his taxi driver say he works so hard it feels like 8 days a week, Paul McCartney is going to love his girl friend the same way.
6. *Those Were The Days*. Mary Hopkins' 1968 English words to an old Russian folk tune. Looking back to happy days when younger. This was Enis' favourite song, so we had to sing it often!
7. *Lule Borë* (Snowdrop in English). Albanian folk song from 1947, now virtually their national anthem. Richard played it first on the flute to see if the tune was recognizable, then he sang the verse with Lindsay's help on the uke before everyone joined in the chorus. Well worth the effort of learning it. Not easy!
8. *World of Our Own*. Irish boy band song from 1965 but made popular by Australian group The Seekers. Young lovers want to get away to be happy on their own, "away from the bustle and bright city lights". It felt very appropriate to sing this while at Fatos' Hajla cabin.
9. *The Lion Sleeps Tonight*. A 'lullaby' to send children to sleep. Originally a Zulu song from 1920s South Africa about "Mbube", a lion. When heard in America it earned millions of dollars in the music industry but none of that reached the Zulu singer who died in poverty.
10. *Morningtown Ride*. Another lullaby, from The Seekers in Australia. Children go on an imaginary train ride through the night.

11. Sloop John B. Folk-rock hit song by the Beach Boys in 1966. Originally a folk song from the West Indies about a ship which sinks.
12. Fields of Athenry. Modern folk song from Ireland, bad times in history when England ruled Ireland.
13. The Carnival Is Over. A goodbye song by The Seekers in Australia. Originally a Russian folk song with a great tune but violent story.
14. Bye Bye Love. American hit song by the Everly Brothers 1957. The old, old story: love goes wrong, she has gone off with another guy.
15. Drunken Sailor. Old "sea shanty" from England, sung by sailors as they pulled on the ropes to put up the sails on a sailing ship. What to do about a sailor who is too drunk to do any work?
16. Doo Ron Ron. American hit song from The Crystals in 1963. Doo Ron Ron are just nonsense words between verses of a girl meets boy story.
17. All My Loving. Another Beatles song from 1963.
18. Annie's Song. John Denver 1974, America. A love song to his wife after he had just done a difficult ski run and felt happy about it.
19. Rock Medley. 3 classic rock songs from 1961. Pity we couldn't do this more often. When we did it in Peja it got people dancing and doing the "Twist"!
20. When the Saints Go Marching In. Classic American jazz song.
21. Santa Lucia. Italian. A boatman in the Bay of Naples invites people for an evening ride on his boat "Santa Lucia".
22. We Shall Overcome. Political anthem of the Civil Rights movement in the US in the 1960s but still used worldwide on marches and demonstrations for justice. We never did actually sing this one, the only one on the list which missed out.

We took with us some copies of the words of most of the songs in English to give out to audiences or listeners. They are on 2 A4 sheets (4 sides) in small print. I could e-mail copies to anyone who would like one.