

Date: 17/12/2010 Place: Naxos Island, Greece

Kms walked: 2018

Hello everyone. Well despite various obstacles I have made it to Naxos, just arrived today. Weather on arrival was overcast but mild. The owner of the apartment I am renting met me at the port and walked with me the short distance to it. It is just beautiful, the kitchen area has cupboards with lovely oak doors made by her husband. We had coffee and chatted for ages and I discovered we had a lot in common.

What little I've seen and read of the island so far looks very promising. It is not flat though the terrain does not rise very high, the highest point being Mount Zeus at 1004m. This however is the highest mountain in the Cyclades group of islands. It is though strange to think I will be in one place for such a long time. As soon as I had unpacked and settled in I thought "What on earth am I going to do here for a month?" Then I remembered why I had chosen an island - "I know, I can take my tent and just walk round the island. The guidebook says the coastline is about 148kms, so that's about 8 days. Then I could go across it north/south then east/west. That'll be another few days"..... But actually I am looking forward to the rest.

So the journey up to this point.

Now, do you remember that I gave an exercise in probability theory in my last Postcard? Well here's another.

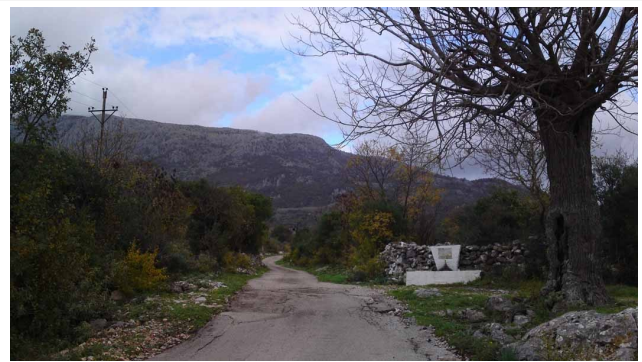
Having calculated the probability of the Swiss couple meeting up with me, now calculate the probability that someone else starting from the Brenner Pass, at a different time to the Swiss couple, should overtake them on the road at a point just 2 days before that person would leave the coastal route. Then calculate the odds that I would get delayed because of bad weather (I had now overtaken the Swiss couple though I did not know it) such that the 'someone else' and I ended up in the same town the night before he headed inland! Well it all came to pass.

Imagine my surprise when I received a txt from this guy telling me he had met the Swiss couple and they had given him my phone number and would I like to meet for coffee. I thought to myself "This is getting ridiculous. Suddenly it's Piccadilly Circus." In fact he was walking to Istanbul. We had a lovely home cooked meal (he cooked!) and lots of chat. Next day our routes diverged & I continued along the coast, he inland to Kosovo.

It was a pleasant walk to Bar after the rains of the day before but unfortunately I was now suffering from the dreaded lurgy! (Sore throat, runny nose, raised temperature etc) so I had yet another rest day in Bar, but at least it allowed me to get to Sunday Mass. I suspected there was no accommodation within walking distance for the following day so I booked another night in Bar and next morning set off intending to walk about 25kms towards the Albanian border and get a bus back. It had been chucking it down all night since late afternoon the previous day but to my relief today was really pleasant, overhead the sky was blue with some cloud, though over the mountains there were some angry looking clouds - I was glad I was not heading in the same direction as Jeremy, my dinner companion of a few days ago. My route inland as it turned out was an initial climb then a lovely easy walk along a plateau.



Initial climb up from Bar which you can see in the distance



Easy walk along a flat plateau

I was now rested and getting over the lurgy so made pretty good progress. I walked about 20kms before stopping. This was partly due to the fact there was no café to stop at but also because I didn't feel the need to stop. In the distance I passed spire after spire. But these were Mosques not Churches. I also passed a good deal of Muslim graveyards. It reminded me of my journey to Medjugorje. There seemed to be too many to attribute to wholly natural causes. I suspect this area too has had a turbulent history.

Reaching a village with a café I thankfully stopped and enquired about a bus to Ulcinj. I knew there was no direct bus back to Bar but believed there was one to Ulcinj and from there was a regular bus service to Bar. Imagine my dismay to be told (cheerfully) "Oh no, there is no bus to Ulcinj". I now had less than 2hrs before darkness to cover 13kms, a distance that normally takes me over 3hrs – and that is 3hrs from a fresh start, not after already having done 20kms!

But I had only a day sack on my shoulders, and as it happened the terrain was downhill so off I went, half walking, half jogging and thankfully reached the lit streets of Ulcinj just as twilight gave way to darkness. Amazingly too the bus station was way-marked and after a short wait I was on a bus heading back to Bar. It also gave me the opportunity to check out bus times from Ulcinj to Shkoder in Albania. I planned to take the Shkoder bus to the point at which I had turned back to Ulcinj and continue walking to arrive on foot to Shkoder which was only about 15 kms over the border. My body really ached that night though!

Next day (it's OK I am not doing a day by day account from 25<sup>th</sup> November to 17<sup>th</sup> December) it was again chucking it down, the sort of rain that says "I am not going to stop". For the 1<sup>st</sup> time since leaving my house in Hitchin in June, I took a taxi! I just couldn't face the 500m walk to the bus station during which I would get soaked and then spend the rest of the time shivering on the bus! Must confess did feel like a rather 'lightweight' pilgrim but as I said, I just couldn't face being wet and cold.

Caught the bus to Shkoder OK but the rain persisted and I decided to continue by bus the whole way. The roads were flooded in places and as we went through the Shkoder region I could see evidence of serious flooding – people wading in wellingtons, front gardens under several feet of water etc.



Entering Albania by bus



Flooding in the Shkoder region - sorry about the picture quality

I arrived in Shkoder and it was still teeming down. The bus dropped us in a square & I was not sure where I was but there were several taxis one of whom singled me out and shouted "Taxi?" and I said "Yes, Hotel Kolping please". It then occurred to me I had no Albanian money so I asked if he would take Euros but no it had to be Albanian. So he took me to an exchange place. "Oh no" I thought to myself, "I am going to be stitched up". Oh ye of little faith! Actually it was a better rate than I got later elsewhere. He then tried to go the wrong way down a one way street but gave up as there was too much traffic coming the other way.

We reached the hotel, I paid him and he carried my rucksack to the gate entrance which turned out to be locked. I rang the bell. He could have driven off at that point but my taxi driver friend ran back to the cab and got a large broolly to shelter us both and rejoined me at the gate. Another gate started to open so we made for that. We went round the back of the hotel where there was another entrance. He spoke to the waiter and indicated for me to go in. I thanked the taxi driver warmly. The waiter asked if I had a reservation, I said I had and without bothering to check who I was or look at my passport he gave me a room key. It was one of the most bizarre experiences I have had on this or any other pilgrimage!

As I discovered later the hotel staff could speak Italian so I asked about Mass in the nearby Cathedral. (I had chosen the hotel partly because it was a Kolping establishment but also because it was on the same street as the Catholic Cathedral.) Later I went out to shop for food and visited the Cathedral. Mass had started so I stayed. It was a good welcome!

I stayed 2 nights in Shkoder and did get a bit of sightseeing done the next day during a short respite from the rain. I also sampled local cooking in a small café. It was a bit greasy but tasted good. I also found an allegedly "Irish Pub" but they did not sell Guinness or any other Irish beer, nor were they playing Irish music so I left, a little disappointed and wondering why they called themselves an Irish Bar!.



Sightseeing in Shkoder



No Irish so I sample Albanian beer instead!

Having travelled to Tirana, the capital of Albania I promptly got stuck yet again for several days with torrential rains. In fact the Guardian Angels that had been doing such a good job in helping my journey had excelled themselves because I learned later that just after I left Shkoder roads were flooded to the point of being impassable, bridges had been washed away and buses cancelled. Tirana was a much more interesting place to be although I didn't do that much exploring because of the weather. I stayed in a lovely warm, welcoming hostel, again partly chosen because of its proximity to the Catholic Cathedral. On Sunday I went to a Mass in French though ironically I learned the next day that there is every Sunday at 9:00 a Mass in English. But alas like the Cathedral in Shkoder they do not publish Mass times either in or outside the Church. I only knew about the French Mass as it seemed a new initiative so there was a notice about it in the porch.

The next part of my journey entailed travelling on a furgon. This is the 1<sup>st</sup> time I have met this mode of transport – of course why would I, usually I am walking!. It is a minibus/people carrier that does not set off until it is full. Also furgons do not leave from one central point such as a bus station. They go from the road that is most most convenient for their destination. So you have to know the departure point. The people who ran the hostel I was staying in could not have been more helpful and they told me where I could get the furgon to Pogradeci, my next destination. I turned up at the appointed place and was immediately approached by a guy saying “Pogradeci?”. I said “Yes” and he took me to his vehicle and loaded my rucksack into the boot. There were already 5 other people in the car which had a capacity for 8 people. So we waited. Luckily we did not wait for very long and were soon on our way.



Pause for prayer at Tirana Cathedral

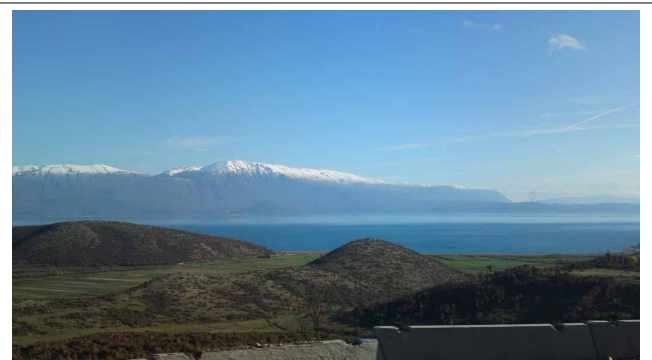


Furgon to Pogradeci

The route climbed up and up and then levelled out, snaking along first one side, then the other of the mountains. Then we came onto a narrow plateau with a sheer drop on each side and my heart was in my mouth! It seemed that about 50% of the time we were driving on the wrong side of the road as well. Descending at long last we arrived at Elbason in the valley where some people got out and we picked up another passenger. The road climbed again though not as high and eventually gave stunning views over Lake Ohrid which has the town of Pogradeci at its southern tip and through which the border between Albania and Macedonia runs.



High mountain crossing



First views of Lake Ohrid

Next day I resumed my normal mode of transport, Shank's pony, and crossed into Macedonia. Weather had now changed back to sunny and warm and I had a lovely walk around the lake, at times actually at the lakeside. I managed only another 3 days of walking when the weather started to change again but this time temperatures were predicted to plummet in a few days and snow was forecast. I had to cross some (not very high) mountains and had no desire to be walking in a blizzard.

Enquiring about a bus from Ohrid to Athens, I was told there were none but there was a weekly bus to Thessaloniki in a couple of days time. A gut feeling prompted me to buy a ticket. The next day I received an email from my Embassy in Athens (where I needed to pick up my new passport, another long story!) to warn me that there was a general strike in Greece on the day I had originally planned to make my way to Athens and that travel would be very difficult if not impossible. So I had been guided round a potential obstacle. The bus to Thessaloniki arrived in good time to allow me to continue on to Athens the same day. Then while I was in Athens I saw pictures of Florina, the first town in Greece on the route from Macedonia. It was covered in snow which had been falling on about the same day as I would have been walking there. The Swiss couple arrived in Ohrid the day I left and would have caught up with me had I continued to walk. I had an email from them to say they had been caught in a snow storm and had gratefully accepted a lift to their destination, returning the next day to walk the missing stretch. So I had avoided yet another obstacle. Unfortunately I was unable to avoid the transport strike in Athens and had to walk to the port for the ferry to Naxos, but it was only 9kms.

So here I am, the sky is blue and the sun is warm, the temperature is in the high teens/low 20's so it doesn't really feel like Christmas. But I did find a few not too expensive decorations and a very thoughtful friend sent me a "Red Cross Parcel" that I collected from the post office. I had bought some crib figures and thought "if I could just find a box to use as a crib" and my friend's box fitted the bill perfectly, and the brown wrapping paper made apt stable walls as you can see. I thought I would take a picture to use as a Christmas Card.



Take care and God Bless

Ann