

Date: 11/03/2011 Place: Thessaloniki Kms walked: 2224 (nearly 1400 miles!)

At long last I am on my way again despite various delays and hiccups. At the end of the last Postcard (16th February) I was expecting to pick up my rucksack and be off the next day. But again my plans were thwarted, I was unable to collect my rucksack that evening and I had to spend yet another night in Athens. Finally on Friday 18th I caught the night bus to Pogradec in Albania. I had been told the bus would arrive at 5:00 but there would be no problem getting a taxi from there, round the lake to Ohrid town even at that time of the morning. In any case I hoped the bus might be a bit late arriving and that there might be a café open where I could have a coffee til about 6:00. However

The bus left on time. I was surprised to find there was no on-board loo but I assumed bus would stop several times to give people a chance to stretch their legs. This it did. After quite reasonable temperatures in Athens the weather turned foul and the journey was punctuated with thunder & lightening and heavy downpours. I then discovered that not only was there no loo, but the bus was not watertight either and I could hear water pouring in somewhere and could see a rivulet of water running down the centre aisle!

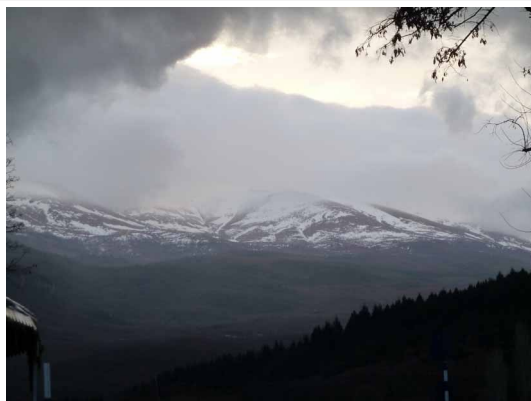
Nonetheless I slept fitfully and at least I had saved the cost of a night's accommodation. I also hoped the inclement weather would improve the chances of the bus arriving late. Not a bit of it! The bus actually arrived at 4:00 not 5:00 (I had obviously been quoted Greek not local time) but amazingly there was a café open and there were taxis around. Unfortunately it transpired that these could not cross the border into Macedonia as the drivers did not have passports. I gratefully had a very welcome, warm coffee & sat for a while. The woman there could speak no English, I no Albanian but we still managed to communicate with gestures etc.

I thought I would kill time by walking to the border as I had done in December last year and hoped that by the time I arrived there would be taxis waiting there as I had encountered last year. In the end a taxi driver came in and the woman running the café explained to him where I was going and she urged me to go by taxi. She seemed genuinely concerned and wanting to help. I felt it would have been churlish to refuse so in the end I agreed. As I suspected he could only take me to the border and it was still too early for the cross-border taxis to be there. The driver got out & spoke to the Customs official and in the end was allowed to drive me across "no man's land" to within sight of the Macedonian border post. The 2 border posts are about 0.5kms or more apart.

Luckily the official at the Macedonian post could speak a little English, enough to say there were no taxis but there was a bus from Sv Naum, the next village, at 7:00. So off I went, crossing into Macedonia for the second time. It was now shortly after 5:00. It took about an hour to reach Sv Naum by which time it was light. There was a café (alas closed) just by the bus stop where I could shelter and wait for the bus which duly appeared shortly after 7:00 and by 8:00 I was in Ohrid. It was a bit early to go to my accommodation so I whiled the time away in the bus station café and when I did arrive at the guest-house, although still rather early, I was able to check in OK and rest.



Crossing into Macedonia again



..... and daylight comes with ominous skies

But the delays were not yet over.

My cunning plan to avoid the cold weather by sheltering in Naxos backfired! It was freezing cold in Ohrid and although it was sunny now, there was snow predicted. I decided to wait out the weather for a few days. Ohrid is almost 700m high and I knew I had to cross a pass much higher and had no desire to be doing so in the middle of a blizzard. Also I was not sure of accommodation availability (it was way too cold to camp wild as I had originally planned) so I decided to walk in stages to Bitola (the last main town before the border with Greece), returning to Ohrid each evening by bus.

This I did and was glad I had waited out the weather because the day I crossed the pass it was bitterly cold with low-lying cloud though no rain or snow. Soon I found myself in the snow line and by the time I reached the top of the pass I felt as though I was in a Christmas card!



Another Christmas card?



Pause for prayer at the top of the pass

Another plus about being in Ohrid was that there is a Catholic Church there with a Mass daily which I was able to get to on several occasions. The town is very picturesquely located on the edge of Lake Ohrid and has a long history, being strategically placed on the Via Egnatia, the main trading route between Istanbul and Rome. It was not without regret that I finally said goodbye and made for Bitola. Here I found there was also a Church with daily Mass and I arrived in time to attend it. Talking to the Priest afterwards I was surprised to find there were only 3 Catholic Churches in Macedonia and ironically 2 of them lay on my route, the Via Egnatia. He also told me I would not find another Catholic Church until Thessaloniki, the best part of 200kms away.



Traditional items on sale in Ohrid



Interesting mosaic on the wall in the hotel at Bitola

Leaving Bitola the weather had worsened, colder and it was snowing lightly. I had no map of the route between Bitola and Greece so I rather hoped I was going in the right direction (remember how good I am at taking the 'scenic route'!).



I hope this is saying "Greece, straight on"



Fortunately it was – I am now in Greece!

It was quite a tough day, my first with a full rucksack, my longest day since restarting and don't forget I had had a break of 2 months. My fitness level had plummeted. By the time I was able to take my rucksack and boots off and lie down in my hotel room my body ached all over and my feet were complaining in no uncertain terms! The next day was no better, despite only walking half the distance and with only a daysack. The following day was just as bad. The weather continued very cold and to exacerbate matters there tended not to be somewhere to rest and have a coffee during the day. No matter how tired I was I could not rest for more than about 10 minutes at a time as I got too cold.

And another thing. The dogs. In Greece there are a lot of stray dogs and in the Florina area (just over the border from Macedonia) there were packs of them. The day I crossed into Greece there was a pack loose in a field. I couldn't see any livestock so didn't think they were sheepdogs. "Surely crops don't need to be herded" I thought to myself. As I approached they started barking and came towards me. I just kept going, ignoring them as I normally do. It was somewhat unnerving. Next day the same thing happened except the dogs were in a field on the other side of the road and several started to cross the road but for once I was relieved there was so much traffic as this prevented the dogs from crossing. The tiredness, the cold, the lack of facilities en route, the dogs, the long distances and other issues conspired to leave me quite down-hearted.

After the high mountain pass I described earlier, the countryside was a sort of flat plateau bordered by higher peaks. The Florina area has the 3rd highest mountain peak in Greece. I was travelling south and eastwards and away from the mountainous area towards a lower plain and the coast at Thessaloniki. As I left the mountains it did start to be warmer. I left the town of Arnissa in beautiful sunlight and had no need of my wind-proof rain jacket for the first time.



Countryside continues flat with mountains around the edge of the plateau



..... and as I leave the mountains behind & descend it gets warmer or so I thought!

But as I approached Edessa the temperature definitely dropped and as I arrived it was down at 4 degrees. I found a hotel and within the hour snow was falling, big, thick flakes, the sort that don't melt. Later that evening when I looked out of my window, another Christmas card scene greeted me. Was I relieved I was in a lovely, warm, snug room.



I was glad to be snug inside the hotel room



Dawn over snowy Edessa

Next day dawned with beautiful clear blue skies and sun. I had had a good rest and slowly my fitness was returning. Although I had descended to Edessa, on the other side of the town was another descent. It was definitely warming up and now I did not need my thermal 'long-johns'. Next day I walked without my thermal top and the day after with my top but no jacket and finally coming into Thessaloniki I had bare arms! Yippee! It seemed the long, dark, cold winter was finally drawing to a close, like the melting of the snows in Narnia. In fact as I mentioned earlier, it had been 4 degrees as I arrived in Edessa, but now only 4 days later, it was 20 degrees as I arrived in Thessaloniki.



This was a cheerful sight on my way out of Giannitsa and no, I didn't stop and buy one!



A brief respite from the tarmac road

But it wasn't just the weather that cheered my spirits and pulled me through. As has so often happened in the past, just when I start feeling really weary and dispirited and in danger of quitting, aid is sent:

- the 2 people (I think it was a mother and daughter) who stopped and offered me a lift into Florina when I had reached the 'stumbling stage' of tiredness (I returned and walked that stretch the next day!) and drove me round to several hotels, checking prices until we found one with availability that I could afford
- the hotel boss who reduced my bill by 15€ and booked accommodation for me for the next 2 nights, with (I am pretty sure) a reduction in price in one of the hotels
- the guest-house landlady who sent me off with a packed lunch, and her son and her sister-in-law (both of whom spoke very good English) who sympathised with me over the stray dogs problem and gave me good advice on how to deal with it
- the café owner who, seeing how exhausted I was when I finally was able to stop for coffee, would not let me pay and was very moved when I then explained what my journey was
- the friend who said that if necessary they would phone me every night until I got over this 'hump'
- the landlady in Ohrid who kept bringing me cakes and evening meals
- the girl who, after I had asked directions to the town hotel, insisted I was her guest in the café where she worked and told me to leave my rucksack there & she would look after it while I went to the supermarket. She apologised for not being able to give me a bed for the night but she was doing the evening shift at the café so would not be at home
- the emails of encouragement I receive

So I am now in Thessaloniki, well over a third of the way across Greece. I arrived in time for evening Mass and am staying 3 nights. I need a rest! Also there is a Sunday Mass in English so I will be able to go to it. It's strange to think that I am here, a place that St Paul visited and over the next walking days will be heading along (or close to) a route that he would have travelled between Thessaloniki and Amphipolis on his second missionary journey.

I have also had the opportunity to wash my fleece jacket and all of my walking clothes which were beginning to make their presence felt, so am feeling very virtuous. I'm staying in a hostel type place but due to a cancellation have the room to myself. It has a self catering facility so hot meals again are the order of the day. There is a word in Italian, 'aposto', that does not have an English equivalent. It means everything is as it should be, everything is well, in its right place. That is how it feels now.

Take care and God Bless

Ann