



## The Apples Road

My personal idea of 'growing up' has been somewhat a parallel of an evolution between being a tourist and being a traveler in the journey of life, but in some ways I was victim of some kind of revolutionary propaganda. The difference between a tourist and a traveler is first of all vague, to say the least, but it has a lot to do with the level of involvement of the subject in the universe he has chosen to visit. A large and pot-bellied American sipping beer on a mega-ship cruising the Inside Passage and watching Alaska passing-by from a window falls in the tourist category, while a kayaker paddling up the same channel and pitching a tent at night should be considered a traveler. A Safari lodge in Kenya is a place for tourists, while the Livingstonia mission in nowhere Malawi is a hub for travelers. The latter despises the former as a nuisance the World may well do without, while the first indulges in increasing levels of luxury to compensate a vague sense of adrenalinic inferiority. As a traveler I thought most of the time that what I was doing was 'cool', suffering notwithstanding, while being a tourist generally sucked. Still I must admit that a Spa would have been highly welcomed in those fucking endless rainy days in the Alaskan channels.

After what are now twenty years of moving around the planet, some of them solid, I came to the conclusion that being a traveling hardliner nowadays is always rewarding, but rarely possible and seldom comfortable. The main point is that there is a limit to the quantity of misery and squalor I can feel, perceive or even barely witness. A line needs to be drawn at some point between curiosity and foolishness. My English friends will of course remind me that they discovered this absolute truth with at least a century of advance. In the past I kept arguing that English travelers of the Byron days were adamant in their belief that their culture and civilization was the best, therefore the other people's culture could only be an object of study, certainly not something to be experienced beyond a certain level. A smelly caravanserai was something that could be endured only if there was at least a nail for the tie and the hat. And certainly not if there was a castle nearby.

## Air

Traveling is all about changing ideas: the first enlightening moment on the way to Damascus, on entering the World's eastern lands, is that those bipeds who really insisted on less pollution and greener fuels were not potty lunatics after all. Riding a motorcycle up an Albanian hill behind the black fumes of a faith-maintained old Mercedes is as beneficial to your lungs as building your bedroom on top of a coal-powered-station smokestack. But the nosedive into a murkier air does not start in Albania; the Croatian boundary (read the end of the EU for an eastbound traveler) is probably a convenient point for a biker to man the gas mask. I mean seriously, if I had to pedal my way to Asia, I would not forget one behind. True enough, the experience is not shared by those who stay away from highways, because the quality of the air is otherwise impeccable. Supposing that pollution comes just from smokestacks, the Balkans air should be good for bottling and delivery to space-shuttle crews, because factories cease to exist in Rjeka only to reappear in Istanbul. I clearly remember an old cement factory near Split and a nondescript industrial plant 2 hours south of Tirana, but the drive through four Balkan countries accounted for as much industrial sightseeing as the one offered in the immediate vicinity of a single motorway exit near Milan. On the other side, an industrial archaeologist would delight along the same route, dotting his journey with frequent stops to admire the vestiges of '*experimental socialism*'. Many wide buildings are there for the taking, mostly abandoned, many on the verge of. Few resisted to the brutal logic of competition, a difficult task to achieve when your beloved products are submitted to substantial fusillade on the way between the production point and the market, as it happened during the Balkan wars. I clearly remember I once received at my dealership a Yugo car with a couple of holes on the side, and I doubt those holes could have passed Fiat's quality check, however notoriously flexible the check was. Moreover, also the factories themselves received some shelling, and only in very few cases in history has bombing been an incentive to productivity. Or for showing up at work for the matter. True, the Germans achieved that, but few of the workers survived to collect the trophy. At the end of the story, pollution in the Balkans is concentrated on the very few highways criss-crossing the interesting geography of the place.





The Balkans is a place of stark contrasts. Where there should not be any, really. The people, the culture, the food, the beauty of the women, the beer, the geography, the climate, the landscape and the ancient history are almost the same. Cars too. It must be some genetic implant in German cars... when they get old, they disappear from the west and re-materialize in the Balkans. This process is never slow, always mysterious and seldom legal. The average age of cars is well beyond the figures of life expectancy in Burkina Faso. To be born a Jetta, admittedly one of the ugliest cars ever built, and be battered to death on your way to Skopje by several owners, or to see the light as a human in your average African shit-hole - same same. The shiny SUV's with Italian plate speeding around the potholes in Albania should not lead the curious traveler astray. Yes, those might belong to some Albanians living in Italy. Or again yes, there could be an exceedingly wide population of Italian expats hanging around the north of Albania, wealthy Padans who prefer shell-shocked and rubbish-submerged villages to pleasant 18<sup>th</sup> century havens. Some other might be simply happy with the Italian style of the peninsular plates, notoriously shitty for most, rather than switching to those, albeit attractive, wide plates with an impressive red shield and well designed black eagle motifs. And tens of other possibilities might have created such an abundance of Brescia plates in Skoder; be it as it may, I am sure the only skin rash at the sight of all this might come to insurance company stockholders. Oddly enough, none of these cars has been spotted crossing or even close to a border. Albanian plates venturing abroad belong to the well tested Balkan stock of Mercedeses in a perennial state of agony. At this point some doubts about the legality of the west-east transfer process came to the mind of my beloved newlywed wife and travel companion, but I insisted on the innocence of the natives, arguing that hers was a magistrate's phobia of seeing crime everywhere.

At this point the reader might wonder why a couple chooses a place like this for their honeymoon. Riding between the potholes of northern Albania I could clearly see their point. But a honeymoon is a journey where one can splurge in 5-star hotels, affording the best one can get... Where is the point of a spectacular hotel in the Seychelles where basically the product - the palm beach - is the same of a youth hostel? One wants luxury where misery is overwhelming, not where misery is unknown. So a perfect compromise between desire of adventure and crave for comfort was found: we were going to reach Istanbul's poshiest hotel with an old motorcycle, possibly arriving in front of the concierge dripping mud.





## Mostar

Restaurants in Croatia are seldom an intriguing experience to the educated palate, therefore I had to compensate an under-the-average dinner inviting my local colleagues, a challenging trio of competent yacht brokers who, not even into the first beer, had conveniently stated the % of blood from the several Balkan array of choices. Having been in the Balkans already, I could not but appreciate this gesture of supreme Balkan politeness: I was now well informed on the situation and so I did not risk to say something inappropriate against some particular ethnic group.

The 'heritage' (I cannot force myself to call it blood) choice in the Balkans is vast. At some point of history the following areas claimed some level of independence based upon a peculiar heritage: Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Voivodina, Serbian Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Aka Republika Srpska after August 1992, Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Makedonia (that I know of). No wonder the Balkan's main contribution to western civilization has been genocide, or better cousinside. Genocide cannot apply here because all ethnicities are basically the same. Maybe they were not in the dawn of ages, but it's very hard for me to spot the difference nowadays, especially considering that all females tend to be equally stunning.

The locals do not make things easier. In case you ask, say a Makedonian, what is the main difference between them and a Serbian, the most likely answer is '*they are lazy, they do not want to work*'. Every single Balkan group (and I am sure the same can apply if you move closer to the society cells, the families) claims that all the others around are lazy. This sometimes includes the non-Balkan neighbours. In Makedonia the siesta is called '*Turkish-gymnastic*' for example. I did not go deep into these conversation with Greeks, after I made the terrible mistake of telling the Greek concierge that we were '*coming from Makedonia*' and it would have been way better if I had said 'I just slaughtered all your nephews'.

Sometimes just very few kilometers of common boundary are enough to justify a massive amount of judgment: Italians, who are probably the most inoffensive nationality in the Solar System, have the historical misfortune of sharing the heritage of Istria with Croatia and Slovenia, but the saying '*Sons of popes and sons of thieves*' is widely shared by all Balkan populations.

This trip through the Balkans, combined with the several experiences I had before in the northern areas, where I met families from the Serbian and Voivodina area, could not but increase the level of my incredulity at all this. The concept of feud, always present everywhere on the planet but usually watered down to more civil levels of decency by the simple realization that both parties will perish against modern day mass slaughter weaponry, here is embedded in the individual genetic code. A couple of seconds after birth, the only moment when really every single human of this area is exactly the same, every Balkan is implanted with the various data, i.e. the blood quotas, that the subject will always consider as a wealth to defend (whatever the quotas). The skeptic might notice that all this is rather normal so far. But here is the real Balkan trick: while mostly everywhere the family becomes a defense, providing a solid group to the individual, here our growing Slav will discover soon that enemies hide where you less expect them hiding. Family feuds in the Balkans are the national sport: no matter how close one's relationship with another member of the family are, the chances of this relation to be rotten are high. I am not talking about your basic in-laws hatred, but I really mean direct relation disasters such as fathers who haven't seen their daughters since few months after birth and brothers who do not speak to each other and plan to keep strictly to the same policy happily ever after.

Mostar has been the capital of human imbecility for most of the nineties and, considering the number of political parties presently involved in the administration, it still is - less the bloodbath, at long last. With various degrees of guilt - everything around here is shaded in gray - most ethnic groups of Christian heritage shared a common target, sniping and shelling the locals, who happened to be mostly Muslims, with democratic persistence. Croats, Serbs, Montenegrins and Bosnians all practiced sniping with equal galore from the hills around the small town, achieving two main durable results. First of all a substantial decimation of the population. The old town is now surrounded by a relevant

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number of cemeteries and the years engraved on most white stones are 1993 and 1994. Most of those kids were born between 1967 and 1974, so basically all my generation is gone.

When one considers the number of the graves and the size of the town, one wonders which of the cases is true: either every single young man was slaughtered or someone from other areas joined the desperate effort. But there are so many other questions... Why the locals did not surrender? Probably they would have been killed anyway? And why did the siege lasted so long? It really is a small town, most of the damage is concentrated in an area which is barely 2 kilometers wide, and could have been destroyed much faster. All the questions really lead to the same answer: the assailants really liked what they were doing, and doing it slowly and precisely, to spread more hatred and more horror. And the defendants fought back until death rather than surrendering. I mean, they were shelled for months, for Christ sake... If some very determined group of Bosnians starts shooting at my window, I would fly out with all white sheets flying after 10 minutes!

The questions one asks after a visit to Mostar are so many that I decided to have a deep wiki search on both, the town and the Bosnian war. Guess what? I did not come out wiser. The history of the town is certainly deserving more interest and dates back to centuries ago. The town acquired a certain relevance under the Ottoman rule and this importance was strengthened in the centuries under the Austrians. It has basically always been on the boundary between the Muslim and the Christian Worlds, and this did not help in the least. Then came the Bosnian War:

*'Mostar was surrounded by the Croat forces for nine months, and much of its historic city was severely damaged in shelling including the famous Stari Most bridge.[19] Mostar was divided into a Western part, which was dominated by the Croat forces and an Eastern part where the Army of Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina was largely concentrated.*

*However, the Bosnian Army had its headquarters in West Mostar in the basement of a building complex referred to as Vranica. In the early hours of May 9, 1993, the Croatian Defence Council attacked Mostar using artillery, mortars, heavy weapons and small arms. The HVO controlled all roads leading into Mostar and international organisations were denied access. Radio Mostar announced that all Bosniaks should hang out a white flag from their windows. The HVO attack had been well prepared and planned.[17] The Croats took over the west side of the city and expelled thousands[19] of Bosniaks from the west side into the east side of the city. The HVO shelling reduced much of the east side of Mostar to rubble. The JNA (Yugoslav Army) demolished Carinski Bridge, Titov Bridge and Lucki Bridge over the river excluding the Stari Most. HVO forces (and its smaller divisions) engaged in a mass execution, ethnic cleansing and rape on the Bosniak people of the West Mostar and its surroundings and a fierce siege and shelling campaign on the Bosnian Government run East Mostar. HVO campaign resulted in thousands of injured and killed. [19] Bosnian Army launched an operation known as Neretva 93 against the Croatian Defence Council and Croatian Army in September 1993 to end the siege of Mostar, and recapture areas of Herzegovina that were included in the self-proclaimed Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia.*

Rather aseptic, what? Now, you would think that after all this mess they came out a little bit wiser, right? Check it out:

*'The political control of the ethnically divided city is shared between Croats and Bosniaks. Most of the Mostar's Serbs have been forced from the town during the war, while very few remained. Since the end of the war, the city has been governed under a carefully elaborated policy of national equality. The Croat and Bosniak ethnic communities live predominantly on the opposite sides of the city and even support for the local football clubs, Velež and Zrinjski, are divided along ethnic lines'. The City of Mostar has the status of a municipality. The City Council is composed of 35 representatives, coming from the following political parties: Croatian Coalition 13, Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), United Croatian Party of Rights (UHSP), Croatian Party of Rights (HSP), Croatian Christian Democratic Union (HKDU), Croatian, People's Union (HNZ), Party of Democratic Action (SDA) 10, Social Democratic Party (SDP) 4, Party for Bosnia and Herzegovina 4, People's Party Work for Betterment 1, Croatian Coalition 1, Croatian Party of Rights (HSP), Croatian Pure Party of Rights (HČSP), Independent 2.*

I did not make this up! To squeeze 15 different parties in 20000 inhabitants is something even Italians would not be able to achieve. Anyway the result is a





rather odd town. On entering Mostar you are welcomed by a rather developed and somewhat standard new area of car dealerships and supermarkets. Then you meet a disemboweled ring of destruction surrounding the town centre, mostly concentrated in the eastern side, where peaceful and abundant cemeteries break the space between exploded buildings. Inside this ring you have two separated town centres: the tourist nut around the bridge, a small but somewhat fake jewel of beautifully restored stone houses, mosques and bridges with the standard paraphernalia of restaurants, gift shops and Coca Cola signs; and the actual living centre with restaurant for the locals, banks and that unique Slavic-standard-grabby atmosphere that has that rare capability of offending, slightly but evenly, most senses. The sight falls unhappily on unfinished buildings and general abandon, the smell does not rejoice at the imperfect vicinity of a pork-and-cabbage-based Slavic diet to the Muslim boundaries of taste, and the poor ear is dramatically offended by the music, that once the Italian border is crossed falls into such frightful abyss that deserves a chapter apart. Our best Mostar was certainly enclosed in the walls of our ancient mansion, where an old family is trying to preserve the stylish Ottomanic heritage combining modern B&B services with an impromptu museum.

I finally refused to go much deeper in the mess that the name Mostar implies. If one stops believing in the existence of common sense, one loses hope and stops traveling. So I decided that my favourite image from Mostar is neither the cosy cobbled street and new bridge, nor the photogenic bombed houses, but a couple of girls playing cards under the interested watch of a boy who, we hope, is not wondering about the blood composition of the chicks.

After this trip East I seriously began to question the sense of studying history: it's scientifically proven that men do not learn from their mistake, and in the same time while we all remember very well the pain we are subject of, we are champions to forget the ones we inflicted... Let's burn all history books...



Memory is something we can do without at times.

### **Montenegro**

There might be days when the sun shines over this minuscule country and the Black Mountain towering over one of the best havens of the Mediterranean sparkles in bright greens, and when the islands in the bay float in a sea of light, but we surely were not there then. Still I do not complain, because there are places where gray has its reasons. Few corners of the World would stand a chance after a Dubrovnik drenched in a bright Indian Summer, a hotel with a chef actually capable of dishing out perfect eggs Benedict, and a road that you'd never want to end to keep splurging in its scenery. But after the border the clouds gathered and the road entered a couple of towns where you start challenging your own road plan. Until one is in Europe one keeps waiting for those villages and towns we are justly proud of, and delusion comes when these fail to materialize, and modern obscenities take their place. We'd just desire a purified





continent where all towns race for 'best village of the year' and red geraniums overflow from tiny terraces and windows with lace curtains, and stone alleys and the lot, and every belching factory has been moved to China. Actually, the plan is working in many places where my generation inherited crumbling stables and transformed them into 5 stars spas. But competition is very high and most villages in the Black Mountain state will probably miss the train. There are indeed ghastly towns around and the attention of the tourist board was concentrated on just 3 towns: Kotor, Sveti Stefan and Perast. Kotor is certainly worth a stroll, and ticks all the boxes of the curious charm-seeker, but it failed somehow to conquer me and after 90 minutes we called it a day and decided to revert to beer sipping in the main square. Sveti Stefan has on its side the plus of being one of the most charming villages of the Mediterranean, probably, such a stunning small peninsula of perfect houses in the middle of a turquoise sea. Only it's a town-hotel, meaning that you cannot visit it unless you stay at the hotel, whose reception was built in a concrete obscenity not far from the spit connecting the beautiful village with the revolting rest of the town. This happens only too frequently in these mushrooming countries where they finally gave up bazookas to embrace less gruel activities that marks higher points on Trip-Advisor. Only, for obviously budgetary reasons, they are forced to concentrate all their attention on single and small jewels, while they develop the rest with their usual style that is, we already remarked, superficial to say the least. This also creates a vicious circle: one a place starts to attract coaches, new people move there to get the drops trickling down the bounty chain. And street vendors, waiters, cooks, tour guides, cleaners, museum assistants, fortune tellers, street artists and beggars certainly deserve a place to sleep and eat, but cannot afford the tourist rates. So the new town around the village explodes with the usual Slavic lack of coordination and the whole result is hardly a gem. Stand on the Sveti Stefan spit and look west, toward the town-hotel, and you have the rare chance to admire such a perfectly preserved medieval village to deserve a place in Disneyworld, then turn 180 degrees to return more down to earth.

Perast is a wonderful exception, and one wonders why. My personal theory is that you are forced to turn so many corners to reach Kotor that, after the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> village you cross wondering who in Hell could possibly want to sleep there, when you reach Perast you take the by-pass road. That would be a mistake. We have to thank a very luxurious sailing ship if we took the road through the village, then we stayed for two days. True, it rained cats and dogs for those days and only a lunatic would have actually even thought to ride a bike around. But still, the white stone houses of Perast and its tiny fishermen's havens, its utmost perfection and the total lack of something 'modern' within sight, and a proper restaurant, did the trick and made the difference.

