

It's been two weeks since I arrived in Macedonia, and a lot has happened. The daze I was in when I got on the plane in DC hasn't quite worn off, but I'm getting settled in the office. I have my own office (so far – most people have to share, so I don't expect this to last indefinitely), on the sunny side of the building, which mitigates the oppressiveness of the space. This office is very dark – dark wood walls, dark blue carpets, heavy black furniture. The building itself is squat and unappealing, and it's in a rather desolate spot on the edge of Skopje. Not the most pleasant space I've ever worked in. The microfinance team was kind enough to donate some posters, though, and once I unpack I'll bring in some of my own stuff to dress the place up a bit.

I haven't found an apartment yet, but I've moved out of the hotel and into the guest house, which is a welcome change. I have started looking at apartments, and am now suffering from my usual decision-making disorder. I found 2 apartments that I like, both in good locations. One is a bit too big, and a bit more expensive, but it has really nice artwork and furnishings (the landlord was a diplomat in Nigeria for 4 years), and is more convenient to the office. The other is in a nicer building, really close to Vero (the expatriate haven – the grocery store where lots of imported food is available), in a neighborhood that generally has a higher proportion of expats. It has satellite TV, so I can get English-language news, but the furniture is very big and rather grandmotherly. The living room furniture, in particular, is a sea of overstuffed floral unattractiveness.

It's interesting how the whole apartment situation works here. Often, people move out of their apartments and leave all their stuff behind so they can get the extra income from renting their home. It kind of feels a little creepy to be living with other people's things. Another common scenario is that parents will purchase and furnish apartments for their children, so that they have a place to live when they're ready to start families of their own. So part of what you have to contend with when you move in is whether you can live with the existing furniture. You can negotiate to a point, especially where smaller stuff is concerned, but the whole thing is yours – lock, stock and barrel, from the sofa to the rugs, the pictures on the wall and the tchotchkes in the curio cabinet. I'll come to a decision of some kind this week. I'm getting very tired of living out of my suitcases.

The past two weekends, there's been a fair going on in Skopje. (Actually, it's more like a big market – mostly vendors selling all sorts of things, from clothes to pets.) The microfinance program had a booth there to advertise to the vendors, so I spent a large part of the past two weekends hanging out with their staff. They're a great group. After the fair closed up last night, A.B. invited us all over to her house for Turkish coffee. It was very nice – her parents came in and talked with us for a couple hours. You don't just “do coffee” here – first you get the coffee, then your host brings out cookies, then they bring out more drinks – there's a whole little ritual involved. Macedonians take pride in their hospitality.

Sunday, one of the other expats invited me to go to Stobi with him. Stobi used to be a Roman city, and the ruins there are small, but interesting. It's about an hour's drive south of Skopje, and the countryside is still pretty, even in the middle of November. The fall colors here aren't very intense, the colors of the landscape are more earthy than what I'm

accustomed to, but there are hints of red and orange and yellow in the foliage, and the mountains in the distance are a stunning backdrop to any setting. We were there for most of the afternoon, just wandering around. There's absolutely nothing separating you from the ruins – you're free to climb all over what's left of the 2000-year-old buildings. It's a fun change of pace from American historical sites where everything is closed off or fenced in. Of course, in the US, you'd also have more context -- a detailed explanation of what the building used to be and a sketch of how it looked in its heyday, instead of a rusting metal sign saying only "LARGE BATH" or "HOUSE OF PETRONIUS."

It's wild to be in a country where history goes back so far. In the US, the Civil War is "old," the Revolutionary War is "very old" and the colonial period is our idea of "antiquity." A strong sense of American history might go back 500 years, maybe. Here, it can potentially go back thousands of years. Although from what I've seen so far, it doesn't seem like the majority of people are really any more interested in those thousands of years than most Americans are in our 500 or so. The history geek in me gets excited about these things. For everyone else, don't worry, I'm moving on.

I spent several days last week in Sofia, Bulgaria, for a finance training. It was smack in the middle of the week, so there really wasn't any time for sight-seeing, but it's only about a 3 hour drive, so there's lots of traffic back and forth. I'll get to go back soon. The shopping in Sofia is legendary here. The shopping in Skopje is okay, but apparently things are cheaper in Sofia. I haven't been here long enough – everything is cheap to me. Sofia is more European and cosmopolitan than Skopje. There are more people, the architecture is older and prettier, and it's more upscale. Much of Skopje was destroyed in a severe earthquake in the 1960's and the rebuilding program tended toward very large, strange-looking concrete structures that are now decaying from decades of neglect. The overall effect is of unrelieved drabness. In some places, though, older buildings have survived. We drove through the older, primarily Albanian section of the city on the way to Stobi, where some of the older mosques are still in use. And there are several inviting green spaces I've stumbled across. Skopje has plenty of character, even if it isn't particularly pretty.

I find that it's difficult to get used to the mountains. After spending my whole life in flattish places where there's a fair distance to the horizon, it's odd to have your perspective cut short by a giant rock. I keep glancing out the window and thinking, "gee, the clouds are awfully low and heavy – hey, are those houses on those clouds?" I'll acclimate. There's good hiking close to the city, maybe I'll get motivated one day and actually go. For now, I've got my hands full learning my way around. None of the streets are labeled, and nothing is numbered, so it's a bit tricky. Fortunately, taxis are extremely cheap, so when (when, not if) I get hopelessly lost, I can always get home.