

First, I was planning to write once a week. Then, I started planning to write every two weeks. Looks like I'd better make once a month the goal. Things have picked up significantly at work. Among other things my boss is leaving early next month to go back to grad school for her MBA. She thinks it'll be possible to get a replacement in quickly. The really funny thing is that I'm going to be helping to train her replacement when I feel like I've barely begun to figure out my own job. Nothing like a little upheaval to keep things interesting.

There's snow on top of the mountains that are furthest from the city now. It showed up a couple weeks ago. The weather has turned colder and grayer, but not so unpleasant that I can't walk to work. Its about 45 minutes from home to the office, and it's a bit brisk first thing in the morning and in the evening, but I warm up quickly. The vote was overwhelmingly in favor of the smaller apartment with satellite TV closer to Vero, so I thank everyone who weighed in. It's a cozy little place. I'm still not totally unpacked yet. Maybe I'll finally get around to it over the next few weekends.

I hope that everyone enjoyed Thanksgiving. As I mentioned, I was planning to go to Greece. Well, that fell through. So instead, I spent Thanksgiving wandering around Skopje with T., one of the women who works in the education department for the region. We started out by having lunch in the old town. It's one of the few sections of Skopje that survived the big earthquake in the '60s. The old town is mostly Albanian, and is heavily Muslim. It feels more exotic than the rest of Skopje. The streets are narrow and paved with cobblestones. They're flanked by low, old buildings and odd alleyways branch off the streets under archways. The streets are lined with cafes, bakeries, restaurants, and small shops. To get there, you cross the Vardar River from the modern Center of the city over an old Turkish bridge. Sidewalk vendors set up shop along the bridge selling everything from candy and gum to underwear. On the other side of the bridge, past the old Turkish baths, you enter the old town. It's like a completely different city. It's quieter, and slower paced. At the right time of day, you can hear the call to prayer from the mosques. They don't have the best speakers, but it still sounds cool.

After we finished exploring the old town, we went hiking on Mount Vodno. I think that "Mount" Vodno is actually more like a really big hill, but it felt like a mountain going up. T. has a knack for picking steep paths. The funny thing is, all the trails cross the road that winds around Mount Vodno at least three or four times. Which a) makes it difficult to get lost and b) means that the seriously tired hiker could get to the top and hail a cab to get back down. However, on the way back down, T. and I did manage to get lost. We ended up on the outskirts of Skopje, nowhere near where we had started. We walked for a good long time before we finally gave up and caught a cab back home. Later, we went to dinner (traditional Thanksgiving pizza). A group of Italian men at the table next to us wished us a happy Thanksgiving and proceeded to try to pick us up. Which T. and I found especially amusing, since none of them bothered to take off their wedding rings!

Not too much of note has happened since Thanksgiving. One Sunday, T. and I went to the zoo. We saw geese, chickens, sheep, goats, deer, cows, pigs, horses, and one of the saddest-looking bears I've ever seen. Rumor has it that the Skopje zoo has a lion and a hippo. We didn't see any sign of either, but there was a zebra in with the horses.

I've found all the movie theaters. There are only 6, and each of them shows one movie. So your choices are limited, but since the most expensive tickets cost less than \$2, it doesn't feel like as much of a waste to see a so-so movie. And I'll get a chance to see some of the movies I missed in the States - Skopje is about 6 months to a year behind US releases. They're much more current with music, however. There are lots of CD shops around here, and it takes much restraint not to splurge on music every week. CDs cost about \$2 a piece (pirating is a huge industry in the

region), and there's plenty of variety in the selection. Some are pretty good copies, even down to the art on the CD itself. Then there are the ones where everything on the cover is misspelled and the disc inside is labeled with permanent marker (T. has the "Cremberries" CD "Platinum," featuring the song "Salavation").

This week, Christmas lights went up in the center square. Christmas decorations are starting to go up in some of the shops, as well. It seems that Macedonians aren't quite accustomed to celebrating Christmas yet (religious holidays being frowned on under Communism), but they're making an effort. Apparently, Macedonians put most of their holiday spirit into New Year's celebrations. People started setting off firecrackers weeks ago. I can't wait to see what kind of New Year's parties they have around here.

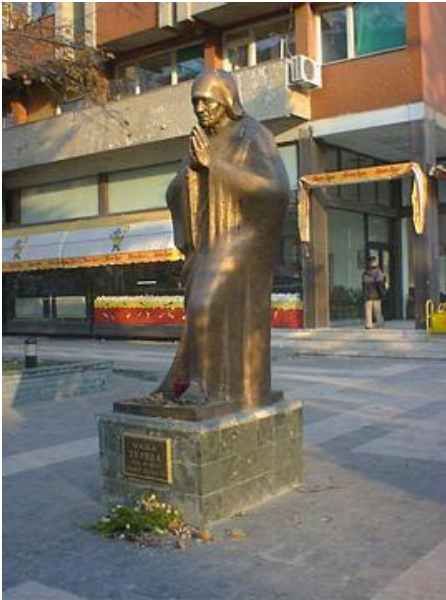
I finally set up everything related to my digital camera, so here's a picture of lovely downtown Skopje:



There were meant to be some pictures of the old town and the statue of Mother Teresa, but they seem to have disappeared. If you're wondering why Skopje has a statue of Mother Teresa, it's because she was born here. The plaque is in the center of town, where the house Mother Teresa lived in once stood. It's in the middle of a street that runs past the shopping mall. It's a pedestrian zone during the day, but some vehicles drive down the street after dark. Apparently, this wasn't a problem until the Kosovo crisis. The KFOR trucks are too big to avoid the site, so they drive over it and knock over the little posts that surround the plaque. Which reminds me – I don't think I've mentioned before how terrifying Balkan driving is. Imagine an entire region populated with crazed cabbies. Crossing the street is an adventure -- Nothing like a shot of adrenaline to get your day started. The more I see, the less I'm sure I even want to drive in this country. That bumper sticker, "If you don't like the way I drive, get off the sidewalk," would have no humor in the Balkans (okay, so it doesn't have much in the US, but you get my point), because sidewalks are fair game for parking, driving, whatever.

Closing on a note that will cause my mother no end of worry isn't a good idea, but its getting late and I still have to go to yoga class. Did I mention before that I'm taking yoga classes? They're taught in Macedonian. I can mostly follow along, but the guided meditation sections are basically my nap time. On the plus side, I now know the Macedonian words for "inhale" and "exhale."

I found the missing pictures!



Statue of Mother Teresa



Plaque at the site of her house



A little bit of Old Town. It really seems like I ought to remember where I took this picture, even four and half years later. It still feels so familiar. But I would still get lost in Old Town, even when I was living in Skopje. It was a small area, so I always find my way out eventually, but I was always surprised at just how easy it was to get completely lost in such a small section of the city.



Christmas lights at the square