

13 April 2001

As you may have guessed by Macedonia's virtual disappearance from the international media, things have settled down recently. I think I was in Croatia or Bosnia when the military began an offensive that pushed the guerrillas back over the Kosovo border. Since then, there hasn't been any fighting. The government is working on a political solution. We'll see what comes of it. There's a faction of Macedonians who don't want to see the government give any ground, and the guerrillas threatened to renew fighting if their demands aren't met. And T. was telling me that in the Old Town, which is primarily Albanian-owned businesses, restaurants and cafes are closing down very early, around 7 or 8 at night, so obviously, the tensions haven't entirely disappeared. They probably won't for a long time. That's the worst thing about the fighting. Even if there's no more armed conflict, inter-ethnic relations have suffered a setback, and it will take a long time to recover.

My new boss, G., arrived at the end of February, and immediately set about planning trips to familiarize himself with each of the country programs. Since I'd only visited Armenia, I went along with him to Bulgaria, Croatia, and Bosnia. G. is cool. He's from New Zealand, and he was in Macedonia for four years before taking this job, and he's married to a Macedonian, so he knows the country well, and has lots of interesting stories. Since we survived a week and a half of traveling together, I think we're going to get along fine.

BULGARIA, 14-16 March

Sofia is a beautiful city. It has lots of wonderful old architecture, and the most gorgeous Orthodox cathedral I've ever seen. It's probably a lot like what Skopje could have been if it hadn't been leveled by that earthquake in the '60s. Poor Skopje. (By the way, G. told me that the awful post-earthquake architecture wasn't the fault of bizarre Communist esthetics. Apparently, the rebuilding was led by a Japanese architect.) But I didn't get to do much tourist-type stuff in Sofia because it was such a short trip, so you'll have to wait for pictures.

We arrived in Sofia the afternoon of the 14th. It's only about a 4 hour drive from Skopje to Sofia. Unfortunately, it isn't a particularly pretty drive, particularly on the Bulgarian side of the border. There are lots of decaying, gray industrial towns along the road. It was an overcast, rainy day, which made the scenery seem especially grim. And because of the foot-and-mouth disease scare, we had to get out of the car at the border in the drizzle, step on a grimy plastic mat that was soaked with muddy disinfectant, and rinse our hands with some mysterious, murky liquid from a large plastic jug.

Thursday, we went to Pleven, a small city in northern Sofia, to visit the microfinance branch office there and see some clients. It was a beautiful day, and Pleven is a lovely little city. I had my camera along to take pictures of clients, so I took some pictures of the city as well. Near one of the markets where Ustoi has a lot of clients, there was this little memorial park dedicated to the Crimean War. The fence was made from gun barrels and bayonets, and the monuments in the park were made from cannon balls and artillery shells. It was an interesting use of old weaponry

The last night we were in Sofia, we went to this great restaurant called "Behind the Cupboard, Beyond the Alley" (or something like that). Much of what I remember from Sofia is how good the restaurants are. In Skopje, the food is good, but restaurants haven't quite gotten a handle on the service and ambiance end of things. You'll go to a restaurant that's well-decorated and has good food, but they're playing Europop, and when you want the bill, you have to play this elaborate game of trying to make eye contact with a waiter who seems to be desperately trying to ignore you. It gets a bit annoying. The restaurants in Sofia are much better, at least the ones we went to.

On the last afternoon we were in Sofia, I ran over to the crafts market by the cathedral. On the way back to the office, I saw one of the oddest things I've seen yet in the Balkans. Coming toward me on the sidewalk was a man carrying a violin, followed by a large brown animal decked out in flowers and scarves. At first, I thought it was the most massive pony I'd ever seen, because my brain couldn't quite process the fact that I was seeing a bear being led down a city sidewalk. I didn't think that they had dancing bears anymore.

CROATIA, 26-29 March

Zagreb is a lovely city. I thought so even in September, when I first visited. After a few months in Skopje, it's almost too much – too much ornate architecture, too much color, too much neon, too many shops. And the office gets great rates from the Esplanade, an ornate old hotel near the city center, so the accommodations are quite nice, too. I had a wonderful time wandering around the city. Croatia is a bit different from the other countries in the Balkans, because it wasn't part of the Ottoman Empire. It was under the influence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, so Zagreb looks very much like a Western European city, since it doesn't have Turkish influences in the architecture or plan of the city. Supposedly, it looks a lot like Vienna. Even the graffiti is prettier in Zagreb.



View from my hotel room



The cathedral

When we arrived, it was a beautiful warm sunny day, similar to what the weather had been like in Skopje for the week or so before we left. When we got up the next morning to drive out to visit some of the branch offices, it was snowing. It continued to snow heavily all day. I wasn't at all prepared for winter weather, so I was pretty miserable while we were outside, but it looked beautiful as long as we were inside, warm and dry.

Croatia is a beautiful country, and I'm really looking forward to visiting the coast in a few weeks. But as you head into the areas closer to the Bosnian border, you can still see evidence of the war. There are areas along the roadside where clusters of short yellow plastic poles stick up from the ground. They're minefield markers, not that we'd have known that if M.,

the program manager, hadn't explained it to us. She said that the government removed the warning signs because they said that the signs were scaring off the tourists. Because, you know, scaring the tourists is so much worse than allowing them to get blown up by mines. Government logic. M. also told us about a man who was killed recently when he stepped on a mine in his back yard. He and his family had moved back home years ago, not long after the war ended, and hadn't had any problems with mines before, so they had no reason to suspect that there were live mines around their house. It's horrible to think that people have to live with the knowledge that they can never be sure that the ground they're walking on is safe.

On Thursday we drove out to visit the branch office in Osijek before going on to Bosnia. Osijek was on the front line of the war, and the war damage was most apparent there. There's been a lot of investment in recovery from the war in Croatia, but some areas were too heavily damaged to recover quickly – Osijek is one of them. G. had been there several years before and was impressed with the reconstruction that had taken place since his last visit, but there were still a lot of crumbling shells of buildings with holes in the roofs and the walls where they had been hit by artillery.

On the drive to Osijek from Zagreb, and then from Zagreb to the border, I had a curious feeling, like I was at home. At first, I thought it was because the highway was so well-maintained, and there were so many newer cars (many of the cars in Skopje look to be older than I am). Then I finally realized that we were driving through flat land – no mountains blocking the horizon, just fields and trees. I hadn't realized how accustomed I'd become to the mountains around Skopje.

BOSNIA, 29-31 March

There are reminders of the war everywhere in Bosnia. Bosnia is poorer than Croatia, and rebuilding has taken longer, even with the influx of foreign aid. And Bosnia is, in a sense, an occupied country. There is evidence of the military presence everywhere. There are soldiers in uniform, either SFOR (NATO Stabilization Force), or the local military. The inhabitants don't seem to mind. In fact, I was asking S., the program manager, what people thought about the withdrawal of some US soldiers about a week before. He said that they'd been expecting it, but that people weren't happy about it. The feeling that many Bosnians have is that if NATO pulls out, or its presence is weakened, the Bosniaks (Muslims), Bosnian Croats (Catholics) and the Bosnian Serbs (Orthodox) will all be at each others' throats again.

Bosnia is currently divided into two parts, the Republika Srpska, and the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Republika Srpska (RS) is predominantly Serb, and the population of the Federation is mostly Bosniaks and Croats. But now there's a faction of the Croats who want to secede from the Federation. Some Croat soldiers have left the Federation army (the Federation and RS have separate armies), and no one's quite sure whether they've taken their guns with them or not. And generally, the Federation and the RS barely coordinate with each other. We were told that a UN general designed the license plates for the country after the Federation and RS weren't able to agree on a national standard because the Federation uses Latin script and the RS uses Cyrillic. So the plates only use letters that are common to both alphabets. And the language is another sticky issue – Serbs say they speak Serbian, Croats say they speak Croatian, so official references to the language say something like, “the local language spoken in Bosnia-Herzegovina.”

The first day in Bosnia, we were in Banja Luka, the capital of the RS. We stayed in a private home there, which is owned by a very friendly woman who was constantly trying to feed us. On Friday morning, we drove to Sarajevo. S. took us on a route up through the mountains, and the scenery was just beautiful. It reminded me of Armenia in some ways, all cliffs and

valleys, but there was much more greenery, and the trees were covered in pink and white blossoms.

For all the natural beauty of the countryside, there were sad sights as well. Remnants of buildings, and so many cemeteries, all of which seemed to have an unusually large number of new headstones. It was hard to tell whether there actually were a lot of new headstones, or whether it seemed that way to me because I was aware of the conflict in Bosnia. Maybe it's a bit of both. We passed a peculiar little village, where a block of identical houses sat in perfect rows. It was built by an international donor, and it couldn't have looked more bizarre compared to the natural sprawl of the other villages we passed.

It was about 4 hours to Sarajevo, so we arrived at mid-day. I fell asleep after we stopped for lunch, and only woke up as we were driving into the city, past a tower topped with the Olympic rings. I'd almost forgotten that the '84 Winter Olympics were in Sarajevo.

Once you're in Sarajevo, you can see why snipers were such a problem during the war. The main part of city sits in a valley, surrounded closely by high, steep hills. Anybody with a rifle could've sat up in one of the houses in the hills outside the city and had a clear line of fire into large sections of the city. Despite the reconstruction efforts, many buildings still carry scars from the war. Many of the buildings are pockmarked with bullet holes, and many more have plastered over the bullet holes, but haven't repainted them to match the façade. And then there are the "Sarajevo roses," which are spots on the pavement where shells exploded. Some have been painted red, as reminders of the war.

You might think that Sarajevo would be depressing, but it isn't. I loved it. There's a lot of vitality in the city. And it has a wonderful old town (known as the Turkish quarter), like Skopje's but bigger and more centrally located. I spent most of Saturday shopping in the Turkish quarter. Because of the international presence, it's easier to find certain things in Sarajevo than in Skopje – souvenirs and gifts, for instance. And I found a great little bookstore that carries a lot of English-language books. I had a wonderful time exploring the old city. Within blocks of each other are the main Orthodox church, the Catholic cathedral, and several grand mosques. And there are still streets in the Turkish quarter that are dominated by one type of craft. Down one narrow street, I had to duck around multi-colored rugs hanging from the eaves of the buildings on both sides of the street. One shop keeper told me that when Hillary Clinton visited Bosnia, someone bought a rug from his shop to give to her. A few blocks over, another narrow street echoes with the sounds of metal work, and the shop window are full of ornately decorated trays, jugs and coffee service sets. Yet another street is crowded with paintings and sketches displayed on the sidewalks. There was wonderful woodwork and leather work as well, but the most peculiar souvenirs I saw were shell casings that had Sarajevo landmarks etched into them.



Chess game in a plaza in Sarajevo

On Sunday, G. and I left Sarajevo very early in the morning and had a very long layover in Zagreb. But the layover in Zagreb was shortened considerably because we ran into problems in the Sarajevo airport. Apparently, there's some machine that helps start airplane engines. And that morning, the only such machine at Sarajevo's airport wasn't working. So we had to get off the plane and wait in the airport café for a couple hours. Fortunately, NATO had a spare that they lent to the airport, so we eventually got off the ground.

We still had about five hours to kill in Zagreb, though, and we'd both been up since 5 that morning. It was a long day, but it was beautiful, and we spent some time walking around the Botanical Garden, which were just beautiful.

A MACEDONIAN WEDDING, 7 April

Last Saturday, my friend N. invited T., A. and me to come to her brother's wedding. N. lives in Stip, a small city to the south of Skopje, and we had a beautiful day for the drive. Macedonia is a lovely little country. I have to get out of Skopje more often and see more of it.

We arrived in Stip with just about enough time to check into the hotel and change before we went over to N's house. When we arrived, we could hear music blasting out of her family's apartment, we went upstairs to find that the two main rooms of the apartment were nearly entirely filled with two huge tables that were absolutely covered in food. Shortly after we arrived, the best man and his family came in, and the party really got started. The wedding band arrived and started playing traditional music, and everyone got up and started clapping and singing and dancing on their chairs. One of N.'s brother's friends started swinging the chandelier around. This went on for awhile, then it was time to go outside and dance in the street and hold up traffic, which was fun. The drivers were surprisingly tolerant. Then everyone caravanned over to the bride's house. Natasa's brother was hanging out the window of the lead car, waving and gesturing to everyone to honk their horns.

When we arrived at the bride's house, everybody packed together and walked up to the bride's house, led by the band. The bride's family had hired their own band, so the noise was deafening by the time we got up to the house. Then we had to smush in around all the bride's guests, most of whom were out on the front patio dancing. The family was kind enough to let us "tourists" see all the wedding customs. The bride was waiting in a room upstairs for the groom's arrival. But her brothers and guy friends were guarding the door. N.'s brother and all of his friends all crowded up the stairs and played at pushing their way in, but ended up having to pay them off to get inside (A. told us that at her sister's wedding, she made the groom empty his wallet to get in the room where her sister was waiting). Once they got in, they had to have the "shoe ceremony." Traditionally, the groom's family buys the bride's dress, bouquet, and shoes. One of the groom's close male friends or family members is entrusted with carrying on the shoes and helping the bride put them on. But before the bride actually puts the shoes on, she complains several times that they're too big, and the friend who's helping her put them on has to stuff them with money.

After the shoes were finally on the bride's feet, they broke the wedding cake. Traditional Macedonian wedding cake looks like a round loaf of bread with designs baked on the top of it. The bride and groom each take a side and pull it apart. The tradition is that whoever has the larger piece will be dominant in the marriage. Both pieces looked about equal to me, and the older women got into a playful argument about whose piece was larger. Then they broke up the cake and gave pieces to all the guests. One of the women told us to break off a small piece first and save it, and put it under our pillows when we went to sleep that night. T. and I tried it, but I didn't dream of anything, and she dreamt of ants.

After the cake-breaking, we went back downstairs and watched the dancing, which was still going strong. After a little while, the bride came downstairs and joined in the dance for a couple circuits before everyone piled back into their cars and caravanned to the courthouse for the marriage ceremony. There was only a civil ceremony, not a church ceremony, because the Orthodox church doesn't conduct wedding ceremonies during Lent. The bands came along, too, and while a few people went into the courthouse to see the ceremony, everyone else stayed outside and danced.

After the ceremony, and the wedding pictures, the bride and groom went outside and threw coins and candy to the crowd. Then everyone went over to the hotel where the reception was held. The reception hall was huge. N. told us that there were 550 guests at the reception, which apparently isn't unusual for Macedonian weddings. There was more dancing at the reception, of course. I was impressed that so many people had the energy to keep going. It had already been a long day at that point, and the reception lasted well into the night. T. jokes sometimes about finding a nice Macedonian guy to settle down with, but she looked at me at one point and said, "I can't marry a Macedonian - I'd never survive the wedding!"