

Well, I don't quite know where to start. So much has happened in the past few weeks. I spent a week in Croatia at a workshop and on a short vacation, and came back to Skopje to find heightened security at the airport and KFOR convoys heading for the Kosovo border. I had paid no attention whatsoever to the news while I was on vacation, so I was shocked to hear that, just a couple days before we arrived, guerrillas had ambushed and killed a bunch of Macedonian soldiers. In retaliation, there were riots in Bitola, and there were attacks on Albanian-owned businesses in Skopje. Skopje remains basically safe, but this situation has me more worried than the last. People were still on edge from the last episode of fighting when this one broke out, and they're taking out their frustrations on each other. The possibility that the government would declare a state of war was very worrying, but it didn't come to pass. I think that the formation of the coalition government is encouraging. Of course, it remains to be seen whether the coalition will be effective, but given the tensions in the country, I think that a state of war would've caused much worse polarization. Which isn't to say that that can't still happen. The prime minister seems to be a bit of a blowhard – always mouthing off and acting hard-line and stirring up trouble that the president tries to smooth over. The fighting hasn't stopped, but it doesn't seem to have escalated either. As with last time, we'll just have to wait and see what happens.

On to happier things . . .

SPLIT and MEDJUGORJE

I was in Split, a city on the Croatian coast from 25-27 April for a workshop on NGO Boards and Governance. The training went well – it was a mixed group of microfinance and education staff from the region, so I got to meet a lot of new people. It was a great group. We had lots of fun and went roaming around Split every night until at least 1 a.m – shopping, sight-seeing, café hopping – Friday night we went out dancing until 3:00. It was so much fun!

Split sits on the Adriatic, in the southern coastal region of Croatia called Dalmatia. The centerpiece of the city is Diocletian's palace. Diocletian was a Roman Emperor who moved to the Dalmatian coast after his imperial days were over and built himself a huge retirement home right on the water. After he died, people began to subdivide the palace, carving up the rooms and the walls into shops and homes. Today, neon signs and shop windows nestle brightly beneath slowly crumbling walls. The palace is a maze of a place, with narrow alleys twisting between the high, white walls. There's a surprise around every turn – here a cathedral (which once was Diocletian's mausoleum), there a spacious plaza, and tucked around the next corner is a crumbling colonnade or an



imposing statue. I got chills the first time I roamed the palace. The elegantly decaying palace walls stand in dramatic contrast to the modern store fronts and the vibrant life in the streets. I had so much fun playing the tourist because, well, there was no way I could not. I gawked at everything. My friends were kind enough not to point and laugh. I was completely blown away.



My time in Split was a little too short. Basically it added up to a few evenings. Saturday morning, G., T. and I left Split for Medjugorje. It's a village in the mountains of southern Bosnia where, about 20 years ago, a group of teenagers reported that the Virgin Mary was appearing to them. When word spread, Medjugorje was transformed into an internationally-famous pilgrimage site. It became the most popular tourist attraction in the former Yugoslavia. T. had been there before and G. really wanted to go. I wasn't so sure about it, but decided I may as well go.

I'm glad that I did. For one thing, the drive from Split to Medjugorje winds its way along the coast before turning inland up through the mountains. The Adriatic Sea is calm and clear, shading from aqua green in the shallows to dark blue as the water deepens. The mountains drop to the water – sheer cliffs in some places, gradual slopes in others, where white houses with red tile roofs cling to the mountainside, overlooking stony beaches.

Away from the coast, the mountains rise steeply, covered in trees. Meadows full of flowers (little yellow and purple ones and thousands of brilliant red poppies) lie next to small plots of farmland that the people work by hand. Women in babushkas and men in

dark shirts crouch over the rows with hoes and scythes, clearing the weeds from their crops. There is a sense of timelessness about the scene, even when you're watching it from the window of a bus driving down a wide highway.

I was a little bit apprehensive about Medjugorje. I was afraid that it was going to be full of people speaking in tongues and seeing apparitions in every cloud formation. But it was the most peaceful place I've ever been. The village is nestled in a beautiful little valley surrounded closely by low green mountains, and further off, high snow-capped peaks. The heart of all activity is the church. At one time, it sat off at a distance from the town, but now restaurants, cafes, travel agencies, pensions, and souvenir shops crowd the road leading up to the church. Teenagers will sit in large groups on the benches outside the church in the evenings, and younger children play around the edges of the grounds while their parents are at Mass.

The church is packed for every service. People have to stand and sit in the aisles, even though the church is quite large. Rows of benches have been placed outside, and a large outdoor chapel was built in the back to accommodate the crowds. Loudspeakers broadcast the Masses and prayer services, and when the wind is right, the singing will carry all over the area. It's a polyglot mix of pilgrims, people from Medjugorje itself, and people from the surrounding towns. The gospel is read in at least 6 different languages at every Mass.

Medjugorje's attractions basically consist of the Church, Apparition Hill (where the apparitions were first seen) and Mount Krizevac ("Cross Mountain" -- the local people built a huge concrete cross on its peak in the 1930s). There's not a whole lot to see, but the countryside is just beautiful. I made it out to the foot of Mount Krizevac (I wasn't up for the hike to the top), and was it was just a beautiful walk. There are masses of clover along the path, and their fragrance is so sweet. I spent a couple hours just relaxing in a café, writing and watching other people begin their hikes up the mountain, and listening to the birds singing.

I'm not going to take a stand on whether miracles happen in Medjugorje or not, because I don't really think that it matters. I don't even think that you have to be a religious person to recognize that there's something special about it -- something positive and profound that has affected a lot of people in lasting ways. Even the countless souvenir shops selling Catholic tchotchkes don't detract from the basic sense of reflective calm about the town. I felt much better for having had the chance to spend a few quiet days there just thinking and enjoying the atmosphere.

DUBROVNIK

Since I actually took time to write in Dubrovnik (I didn't in Split), I'm going to share some sections from my journal.

30 April



“The Stari Grad (Old City) in Dubrovnik is an ancient walled city, built in the Middle Ages on a cliff that juts out over the sea. An unusually tall mountain towers right over the city on its landward side. As in Split, the water is amazingly clear, blue and calm. You can see the seaweed clinging to the rocks nearest the shore, and watch schools of nimble little fish feeding in the shallows.

Nearly every yard in the modern city that surrounds the Stari Grad is full of huge dark green bushes with clusters of tiny white flowers that fill the air with a heavy, honeysuckle fragrance. Orange and lemon trees grow wild in the yards and parks.

The Stari Grad itself is built of off-white stone, with roofs tiled in reddish-blond clay. The streets are paved with the same stone, stretching narrowly between the buildings. It seems so strange at first that people actually live in this tiny little bit of the city. The sunny upper windows of the buildings are festooned with laundry, and the street level is packed with shops, cafes, and restaurants. The sun is strong here, and the wider streets are blindingly bright.

Immediately after you pass through the walls, the street drops down steep, narrow stairs lined with doors that open out on to tiny platforms. In the same way, the little streets that branch off the center of the city climb suddenly up the mountain in steep, shadowed staircases. It’s fun to explore, if you have the energy for climbing.

Dubrovnik is also a city that doesn’t forget. The streets are pock-marked from shell explosions that have been purposely left unrepaired. Large maps at the city gates and the staircases leading to the top of the wall detail the damage done by Serbian artillery during what the Croatians call the Patriotic War.

G. and T. (maybe I should call them “Gin” and “Tonic”?) are off walking the city wall. I made it about halfway around before I decided I’d had enough and went off to find a shady café. The view from the walls is beautiful. I walked the seaward half of the walls. When I looked to the right, there was the sea, deep blue and sparkling with little wavelets. To the left, I was looking out over the roofs and towers of the city. It’s a breath-taking view. Absolutely worth the painful climb up the very long and very steep staircase that’s the only way to get to the top. “



Left



Right

1 May

“I found a lovely little place to sit for awhile. It isn’t a beach so much as a place where the sea simply meets the rocks along the shore. The beaches, such as they are, are strewn with families baking on the pebbles and splashing in the water. Far too hectic and noisy.

This, I think is a perfect spot. There are rocks to climb on, sun and shade to sit in, a cool breeze blowing, boats to watch on the water, and little schools of fish swimming about the bases of the rocks.

I climbed around on the rocks for a bit – I saw a few tide pools down by the edge of the water and couldn’t resist the impulse to explore. In the course of my poking around, I managed to annoy several shell-dwelling creatures and an older gentleman a few yards away who was indulging in some nude sunbathing. Oops.

I just cannot believe how incredibly clear the water is. I was sitting out on one of the rocks, just enjoying the sun and watching the seaweed gently swaying the slight current. It looks almost like treetops blowing in the wind. From time to time, some fish would swim by, or I’d see a crab creeping about on the rocks at the bottom. Before I knew it, I’d been out there for nearly an hour and I’d gotten sunburned on the back of my neck.”



On our last night in Dubrovnik, there was a rock concert held on the steps of this church. A bit of an odd choice, maybe, but what an incredible setting.

In addition to all this gorgeousness, Dubrovnik also has a great bookstore with a large selection of English-language titles, an amazing array of restaurants (excellent seafood and real Italian food), beautiful architecture, and lots of great little shops. T. and I went to the movies in a theater with good sound and comfortable seats (a combination that's nearly impossible to find in Skopje). It was great.

We had a lot of fun shopping. We both picked up some traditional Croatian embroidery from this little shop off one of the side streets. We must've been there for nearly an hour, because the man who ran the store had to tell us all about his wife and her "aunties" who do all the embroidery, and how they have their own silkworms and make their own silk thread to use for the finest pieces, and how he'd been all over the world during his 15 years as an engineer in the navy, and what he thought of the break up of the former Yugoslavia, and how he knows American, German, and Italian and even learned a few words of Japanese from a couple of tourists who he accidentally got drunk on rakia when they visited his shop (he didn't realize that they weren't accustomed to really strong liquor, until they started laughing at everything after their second glass).

OHRID

The weekend immediately after we all got back from Croatia, I went to Ohrid with R. and N. Ohrid is the major tourist destination in Macedonia. The city is in the southwestern section of Macedonia, and it's where everyone goes in the summertime when it's unbearably hot in Skopje, but they can't or don't want to go to Greece.

It's about three hours from Skopje to Ohrid, and it's a beautiful drive. Mountains, forests, rivers, farmland, vineyards . . . Macedonia's got it all. Except a beach, but Lake Ohrid is an acceptable substitute. It's huge, it's blue, it's quite lovely.

Ohrid is a historically significant city, too. It was in Ohrid that Saints Cyril and Methodius created the Cyrillic alphabet, which then spread from Ohrid throughout the Balkans and Russia. Ohrid was also the home of Saint Kliment, who produced the first Cyrillic bible. N. told me that there's an on-going feud between Ohrid and Skopje because the people in Ohrid say that it's the real capital of Macedonia and the Skopje is a city without any history or culture. There are some famous monasteries and churches around Ohrid, but we only had about a day and a half, so we only went sight-seeing in the city.

There was plenty to see, though. The churches of Saint Sofia and Saint Kliment are beautiful. After we finished exploring the city, we hiked up to the ruined old fort that overlooks Ohrid. It was a good hike, and a beautiful day, and the view from the fort was beautiful. And, since Macedonia isn't a litigious country, climbing all over the fort walls is totally allowed.

I'm going to have to write more about Ohrid after the next time I visit, because this has gone on long enough, and it's late, and I'm tired, and I'm leaving for Vienna and Bratislava the day after tomorrow (it's a tough life, let me tell you), so I've got lots to do.

