

21 October 2001

It seems so strange to me to get concerned e-mails from those of you living in the US, when I'm so concerned about what's going on with all of you. This anthrax scare has me worried, mostly because of the effects of fear. It seems to me that the media are mostly stirring up fear, looking for the most sensational story. Of course, that could be a misperception on my part, being that I'm getting most of my news from CNN and a quick skim of the top headlines of various national and international news services. Actually, for about the past two or three weeks, I've been avoiding the news as much as possible. Trying to maintain a threshold of staying informed without getting sucked into the 24/7-glued-to-the-TV-and-Net habit I developed in the weeks after 11 September. For awhile, I was so burned out I wasn't even bothering to follow the news in Macedonia, but local events have started to reassert themselves.

Maybe it's a symptom of the general low-grade depression and pessimism I've been dealing with for the past few months, but I'm really, really starting to lose hope that Macedonia is going to come through this situation okay. Not that I was holding out high hopes to begin with, but I really did feel that as long as the "people in the street" weren't radicalized and militant, that the country really might be able to pull through. Well, I'm still not seeing a lot of militancy, but people's political opinions are becoming more radical. I've heard more and more arguments about why Albanians and Macedonians can't live together peacefully. The only thing remotely encouraging is that these statements haven't been followed by calls for fighting, only a weary endorsement of ethnic separation.

On the other hand, the political rhetoric continues to get more and more extreme. There are elections coming up this winter, and it seems to me that politicians and parties are making decisions motivated more by their political survival than by the survival of Macedonia. Or maybe they're just reading the same mood I am, that people aren't willing to struggle for Macedonia's survival as a multi-ethnic country.

At any rate, the legislative end of the peace process (the constitutional changes required by the peace agreement) keeps getting held up by political maneuvering. The latest incident was the Speaker of the Parliament saying that debate on the amendments would not continue until all people who are missing and presumed kidnapped by Albanian guerrillas were accounted for. He backed off this stance, but then said that the constitutional amendments would be considered individually, instead of as a package, which is counter to the peace agreement. These incidents, as well as the delay in announcing an amnesty for those Albanians who joined the guerrillas (the President's Cabinet announced the amnesty, about two weeks ago – the amnesty and the constitutional amendments were supposed to have been implemented within 45 days of the signing of the framework agreement, which happened in early August), prompted the two main Albanian parties to begin a boycott of Parliament sessions until the constitutional amendments are considered as one package. The Albanian parties also feel that the government needs to not only endorse the amnesty (which it did), but needs to pass a law to that effect, which it hasn't and doesn't seem likely to do. Since the boycott began, the parliament has had problems with maintaining a quorum. Some members of parliament have further complicated the process by endorsing calls to put the issue of constitutional change to a general referendum.

In the meantime, despite the completion of Operation Essential Harvest, and the start of Operation Amber Fox (where DOES the military come up with these names?), and the “official” disbanding of the NLA, there has still been fighting in the Kumanovo and Tetovo areas, some of it pretty fierce. De-mining operations have begun, and there have been attempts made to move people back into their homes, but the dorm at the end of my street is still occupied by displaced people. I don’t know what arrangements they’ve worked out for housing the students who should be living there.

The news about the Interior Minister keeps getting creepier. The UN war crimes tribunal has been requested to investigate him and the reserve force he started, the Lions, for war crimes committed during the height of the conflict, particularly in the village of Ljuboten. The Lions are generally sort of unsavory. Apparently, Boskovski (the Interior Minister) also has connections to ultra-nationalist Croats, who definitely have a shady past. And now, it’s getting more and more difficult for foreigners to obtain residency visas – which have to be obtained through the Interior Ministry. Before, one of our admin assistants went to the Ministry with our passports and returned a few hours later with our six-month residency visas. Now, though, several people haven’t been able to obtain visas at all, my boss had to go through an interrogation in which they pulled out his file in order to get his visa, and it’s my turn next because I only got a three month visa last time.

Croatia - Istra

Last weekend I got out of Skopje for a few days. We had a holiday on Thursday, so I took Friday off, too, and went to Croatia with a friend from work and his family. It was an interesting trip – he has a 5 year old daughter, and it’s been a long time since I’ve traveled with a child that young. Mom, Dad – you really deserve far more credit for surviving those long car trips than I’d realized.

We had a hell of an itinerary for this trip – we were initially planning to fly to Zagreb on Wednesday evening, head on to Istra (the northern coast) and return to Skopje about mid-day on Monday, but there was trouble with our return flight, so we decided we’d take the train back from Zagreb to Skopje. So our itinerary looked a little something like this:

Wednesday evening – arrive in Zagreb

Thursday morning – go shopping in Zagreb

Thursday afternoon – start seven hour bus ride to Rovinj

Thursday night – Saturday morning – Rovinj

Saturday morning – start seven hour bus ride to Zagreb

Saturday afternoon – arrive Zagreb, start 9 hour wait for train (12 a.m. departure), shop

Midnight – start 16 hour train ride back to Skopje

Sunday, late afternoon – arrive Skopje, go home, collapse

It was crazy, but I still managed to enjoy myself. For one thing, we had absolutely perfect weather. For another, Croatia is a beautiful country, so the 7 hour bus ride really wasn’t all that bad. I just kind of sat back and watched the scenery and dozed off.

Istra is beautiful. Not as dramatic as the Dalmatian coast, but lovely and peaceful (well, peaceful in the off-peak season, at least), and heavily influenced by its proximity to Italy (read “great food”). The centerpiece of the town is a massive cathedral that sits atop a hill built thickly with buildings painted in warm pinks, earthy yellows, and soft blues. Narrow cobblestone streets wind through the town, opening onto plazas and promenades that stretch to the edge of the water. The water is the same clear, cool blue that captivated me in Dalmatia. I spent most of my time in Rovinj along the waterfront, just watching life go by – people strolling along the promenade, boats sailing in and out of the harbor. It was so relaxing.



We spent half the day in Rovinj on Friday, and then took the bus to Pula, a city nearby, for the rest of the afternoon. The main attraction in Pula was the incredibly well-preserved ruins of a Roman amphitheatre that dates from the time of Augustus. It was a gorgeous, sunny day, perfect for just wandering around the ruins. The amphitheatre is apparently still in use as a performance space, because there’s a stage and bleacher-style seating. It must be an incredible setting for concerts or plays, because the open archwork behind the stage looks out over Pula’s harbor. We sat in the grass and stared out over the sparkling water and baked in the sun.

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Pula also has an archeological museum that sits at the base of a hill crowned with an old fort, built by the Venetians in the 17th century. It's really not remarkable for being anything other than old, but offers a beautiful view of the city and the harbor.



The train ride from Zagreb to Skopje was something of an ordeal. We were really tired when we got on the train, of course, and fell asleep pretty quickly. But then we were roused out of bed at 4 a.m. when we got to the Yugoslavian border. We were brusquely informed that we didn't have visas for Yugoslavia (as if we didn't know that) and we had to get off the train at this grim, foggy little train station in the middle of nowhere to buy tourist visas. I felt like I was in a bad Cold War spy movie. So we got back on the train and fell asleep again, only to be rudely wakened yet again when the train pulled into Belgrade 3 hours later. Suddenly our nearly empty train was packed with people – so many people that the hallways were full. And just when we adjusted to the sudden increase in noise and cigarette smoke, a band started playing a few compartments down. Accordion, horns, drums, the whole nine yards. Lent the scene that extra bit of surreality it was missing. The rest of the trip is a blur – I can't tell you what the Yugoslavian countryside looks like because I was totally spaced out and just counting the hours back to Skopje, cringing every time we stopped at another tiny rural train station. I don't know that ever been quite so happy to get back to Skopje after a vacation.

But I did love that amphitheatre . . .

