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Journey to Valbona

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To the Editor:

As a born and at one time prodigal New Yorker (I returned for 15 years and did a turn owning the oldest independent bookstore remaining in NYC – Park Slope's Community Bookstore), I was of course happy to see my new Albanian home, Valbona, mentioned in your recent article "Hiking Beyond Borders in the Balkans."

It with some distress however that I'm writing, as the article arrived in my inbox yesterday forwarded from computers around the world by half a dozen friends and associates, and accompanied largely by howls of outrage, I'm afraid. So, in the interests of balancing the numerous inaccuracies and recycled bigotries of the article, here, in order of reading (not significance) are my objections:

First of all "the call to prayer" in Gusinje. While I'm prepared to believe that there may be a missionary outpost in Gusinje, blasting the air 5 times a day as recommended, beginning any article about Greater Albania (let's use this handy, if touchy, name to refer to the area of Albanian-speakers including the parts of Montenegro & Kosovo visited by this article) with a reference to Islam as a daily presence is bizarre. Albanians are famously NOT interested in religion. Hence Hoxha's outlawing of it was one of his more popular moves. In the oft-quoted words of Pashko Vasa: "*E mos shikoni kisha e xhamia:/ feja e shqyptarit asht shqyptaria!*" – "Don't look at churches or mosques, the faith of Albanians is Albania!" This was written in the 1800s. One of the unfortunate aspects of the opening of the borders in the 90s was a flooding of Albania by missionaries of every flavor, who not infrequently entice attendance with cash incentives: Put plainly, they pay people for showing up. Of course that's relatively innocuous compared to the Christian missionaries who did such a good job of describing the joys of God's Heaven, that a group of little girls in Tirana hung themselves, to get there the sooner. Perhaps I'm belaboring a point, but that point IS: Beginning any article about Albanians with a reference to religion is at best tasteless, and certainly misleading.

Which comment has already introduced the equally touchy subject of Hoxha's dictatorship. While no one would want him back, Hoxha is a fact of history, and history is by nature complex. Hoxha also stamped out the Blood Feud (now by some reports making a cheerful comeback under permissive capitalism), got women out of the houses, and built an unprecedented number of roads, hospitals and schools. He furthermore instituted massive programs of community involvement, with weekly "*aksions*" (actions) in which people came out and cleaned, planted trees, built things and generally took care of their communities. Thus the city of Bajram Curri for example, now littered with trash and crumbling (though still with an Indiana-Jones sort of frontier charm, if you ask me) was once green and tidy. Furthermore, I have yet to see a historically impartial discussion of his maniacal isolationism, but I have sometimes wondered if it was coincidence that the bunkers went up around the time that Soviet tanks were rolling into Czechoslovakia. Albania recently celebrated 100 years of independence from the Ottoman Empire, and I was surprised to note no reference to the tragic fact that in 1912, once the hard work of tossing out the Turks was done, the Great Powers of Europe immediately stepped in to "help" the newly formed government of Independent Albania. They did this by tossing out the

elected government of Ismail Qemali, carving off half the territory of Albania and giving it what is now Montenegro, Kosova and Macedonia, and weirdest of all, putting in place a Bavarian princeling as ruler (think of saying to Thomas Jefferson “Thanks for all the hard work boys, now get out of the way – and here's a nice German to rule you.”) Point being, I'm not really surprised Hoxha turned his back on the world outside of Albania.

Which leads right on to the toss off comment about “Squabbling Balkan Neighbors.” More than 100 years ago, Edith Durham exhausted considerable effort trying to convince Greater Europe that if the Italians, Austrians *et al* would stop giving guns to the villagers and suggesting they attack each other (thus creating 'squabbles' that would justify their helpful intervention), the Balkans would probably be a much more peaceful place. Even the saintly Winston Churchill had a go during WWII, suggesting to the Serbs that 'those Albanians have a lot of guns, and now might be a good time to go and capture them.' Or in the words of my brother Lirim, after overhearing some visiting diplomats tossing around that old rube, the 'tinderbox of Europe' tag: “The Balkans are very *small*. If Europe didn't want to have a World War, I'm sure we couldn't have MADE them.”

All that is old history however, and perhaps it's too much to expect someone who spent 5 days here to have looked beyond stereotypes and cliches.

The most upsetting contemporary thing about this article is also possibly not the author's fault, but on behalf of my outraged correspondents *and* self, I do need to say a few words about the 'Peaks of the Balkans' project, and foreign aid in Albania in general. Albania and surrounds are currently being flooded with foreign aid money. The EU alone is pumping 90 million euros a year into Albania – and no, it isn't an EU country. There have been numerous excellent books in recent years, criticizing the International Aid Industry. And while I must begin by saying that I have met many good, kind, generous people who are working within this framework, I will continue to say that my overall experience is that the system itself is wired, if not for failure, most certainly for corruption. I'd boil the problem down to the simple (if simplified) fact that ultimately, all accountability is *up*. Grant recipients are not primarily pushed to complete projects successfully – and *certainly* not to take their time and learn something – and *God forbid* you figure out a way to do something cheaper: coming in under budget is the cardinal no-no. No, the goal is to to successfully write reports which can be turned in on time to national offices, to be sent in turn to international headquarters. That way all the people with salaries get paid, and given the fact that most agencies (for example GIZ, which only awards 4 year contracts maximum) they also ensure a successful employment history and secure the promise of future contracts. If these reports can have some photographs attached, that's even better – hence one report on 'community involvement' I saw, with some nice pictures of a proudly reported Community Meeting. “But we (the community) didn't hear anything about this project – who are those people?” “Oh, that's his family, and some people who work for him.” To be fair, how on earth was the sponsor supposed to recognize this cheerful deceit? And to be even fairer, I suspect the grantee won't even see it as a deceit. The agencies' job is to give away money. In this recently-poorest-corner-of-Europe, local capos are happy (*very* happy) to take the money. If turning in reports and photographs makes the agencies happy, well, it's win-win all around!

Thus we arrive at the Peaks of the Balkans project. Now, don't get me wrong. I think hiking trails are an excellent idea, and I think that the idea of trails that cross borders are just as wonderful today, as they were 15 years ago, when the Balkan Peace Park Project came up with the idea and began promoting it, way back when no one wanted to hear about Albania. I think it was a fantastic idea all the time that Antonia Young and her dedicated international team worked to promote it. What I *don't* think is great is that with a big fat budget, GIZ swooped in and co-opted the work of a number of other people. You will notice that nowhere is Balkan Peace Park credited. Here in Valbona, local people (yes,

including me!) have been working – on our own initiative – for several years to map, clear, mark and sign some 200km of hiking trails. Thus it does make one bitter to read casually of GIZ's “involving dozens of other groups.” They certainly didn't involve the local community here, beyond dropping by for a coffee (they were able to stay for only half an hour, they said) and telling us they didn't want to hear about our trails, and had no interest in supporting what local people were trying to achieve. Nor did they hire anyone local to work on the project. Instead a nice boy from Shkoder called up one day, and asked Alfred if he could show him where the trails were. Alfred discretely found he was busy. Perhaps this explains why several of the odd aluminum signs which showed up last autumn seem to be pointing in the wrong direction. Finally, the one thing that an enormous international agency could have done, was to work with the 3 countries involved to facilitate granting of border-crossing permission – and no matter what Mr. Neville was told, your average tourist has no easier time today getting permission to cross those borders than they did . . . well, back in Hoxha's time, practically speaking. Another aid dollar, well-spent.

Now, back to the other inaccuracies of the article. I'm not sure if Mr. Neville is aware that 'Kardovic' is a Serbian name – and while I know perfectly well that there are just as many lovely Serbians as there are lovely . . . everyones(!), it would seem an odd choice of guide in Albania. Perhaps this accounts for the impression he received, and passes on, of Albanians as gun-totting, fist-fighting (when, I presume, no guns were handy), narcotics pedlars. I can only say that having spent the last 4 years wandering around the Malesi ('highlands'), usually accompanied only by my dog, and often in a little pink sundress (well, it's hot in summer), for safety, civility and sobriety I'd pick Albania over, say, East New York any day.

Oh – and by the way, Valbona is not Catholic. The first person to settle permanently in Valbona 12 generations ago (one Selim Pretash, founder of the *Selimaj fis* or clan) received his land grant from the Ottomans in return for demonstrating his commitment to developing a community by building a mill. Ottomans tended to grant civil contracts to good Muslims, so hey-presto, the area became “Muslim.” There is an enclave of Catholics – of whom my good friend Kol Gjoni (whose mustaches are *truly* fearsome!) is one – in Rrogam, at the other end of the valley – they hopped over here from Theth some 50 or so years ago. They were trying (alas, unsuccessfully it turns out) to avoid the collectivization of their goats.

And lastly, in case, despite its inaccuracies this article still inspires you to consider visiting the area to do some hiking, I should add the reassuring news that I did that same walk, through Qafa e Pejes – only we made a little detour, camped out and went up to the top of Jezerces, and then down into Valbona from there. I'm a little mystified by the perils Mr. Neville reports – although long, I didn't find it *so* taxing – and to be fair I did the whole thing with a sprained ankle (not from the hike), so it's probably even easier than I found it. And you really can't miss it – if you add GIZ's Peaks of the Balkans trail markings, it's now been marked 3 separate times! Thank god for German efficiency and those Aid euros!

Sincerely,

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