

Back to the Balkans

September/October 2019



Tamara Scarlett-Lyon

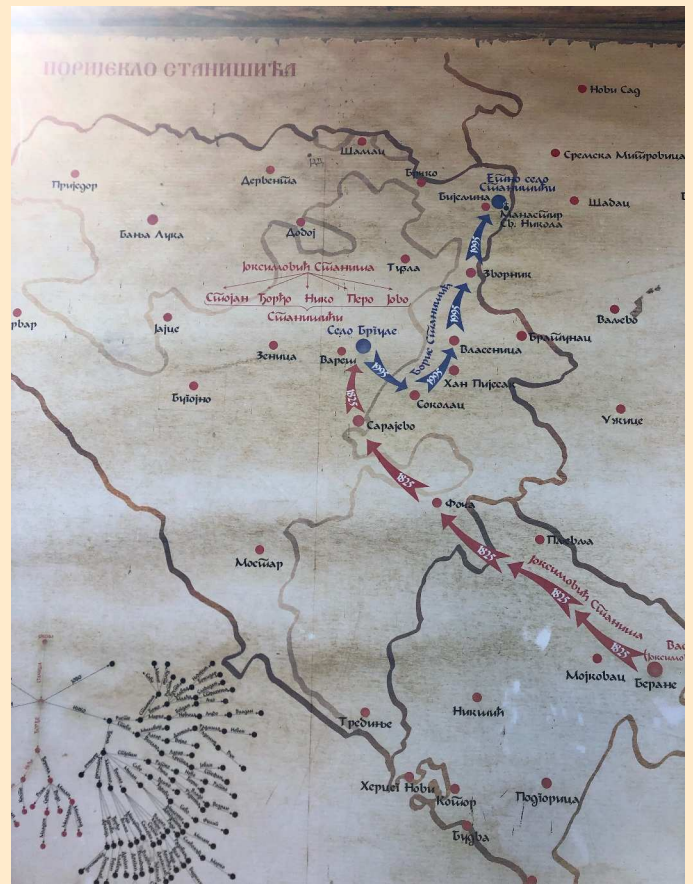
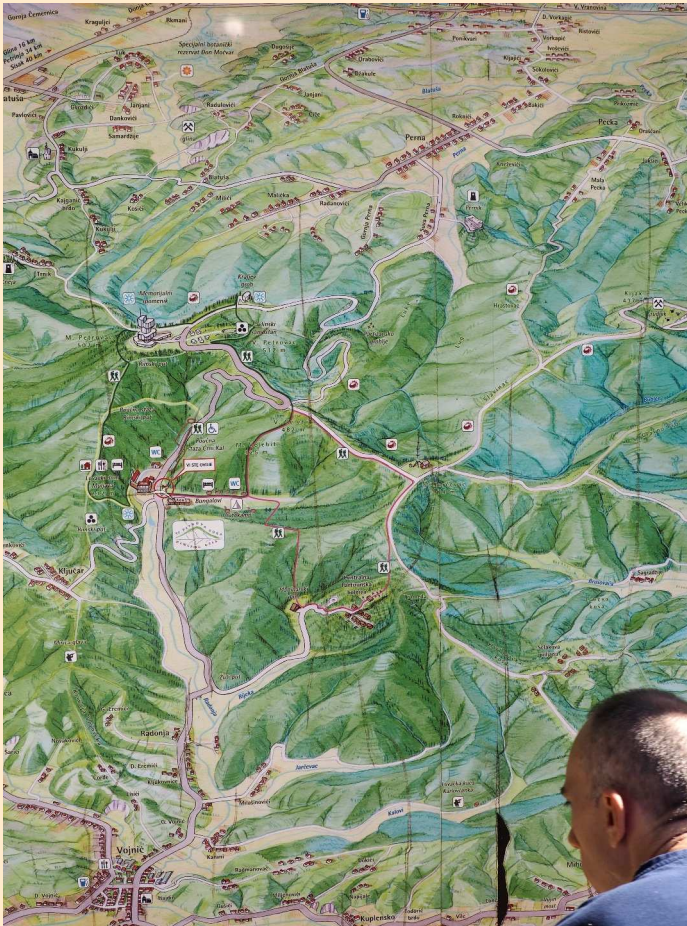
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Despite reading numerous books and articles old and new about the complicated history of the Balkans, and talking with relatives, hosts and family about Balkan history I have a difficult time keeping things straight in my mind, which is why I won't attempt to explain the history of the region. If you are interested I suggest reading a wide range of books written by a variety of people from various backgrounds to help you get a sense of the complexities of the region. What I can simplistically but fairly say is the region is and has been influenced and fought over by powers to the east and to the west, the north and south, with much tribe-like and national fighting among groups within the region. Despite many wars, empires, and shifting boundaries over many centuries the people we've met have been welcoming, generous, good-natured and fun.



Introduction-

My initial interest in the Balkans, particularly Serbia and Montenegro, stemmed from the fact that all four of my great grandparents on my dad's side were Serbs who came to the USA from what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire around 1900. I did not grow up around Serb or Serbian-American culture but even as a child I was aware that my paternal grandmother (who grew up in a Serb-American part of Pittsburgh) lived a very different life than my 'wasp' maternal grandmother who lived in the suburb where my mother (and I) grew up.

I did not become actively interested in learning about Serbia and the region that made up Yugoslavia and its history and cultures until more than a decade after my dad died in 2000. While poking around in a drawer full of my dad's old files at my mom's apartment in around 2013 I came across copies of old emails about family history between my dad and his cousin, Lud, who lives in Dayton. On a whim I emailed Lud and we began a friendly back and forth. Lud shared much family info with me and put me in touch with several distant cousins who still live in Serbia and a Serb region of Croatia.

My communication with Lud and introductions online to family led to my sister Kendra and I taking our first trip to the region in May 2014 with hope of meeting our relatives. Massive storms, flooding and landslides kept us from meeting family on that trip but we loved Croatia and the following year returned to the area with our husbands and on that trip met Ljubo in Belgrade and Rada and her family in Loznica.

Since then my husband Jim and I have visited three more times, each time feeling a little less like a tourist and more connected to our family and friends in the region. Before each trip I think there is no way our upcoming trip can be as good as our prior trip yet all five of my visits to the region have been rich, satisfying, nourishing and equally wonderful. If finances, health and politics allow we would love to return again. Once we no longer have a dog at home to arrange care for we would like to go for an extended stay of several months. For now I feel lucky to have five trips worth of memories that continue to enrich me, as well as the internet that allows me to keep in touch with family and friends.

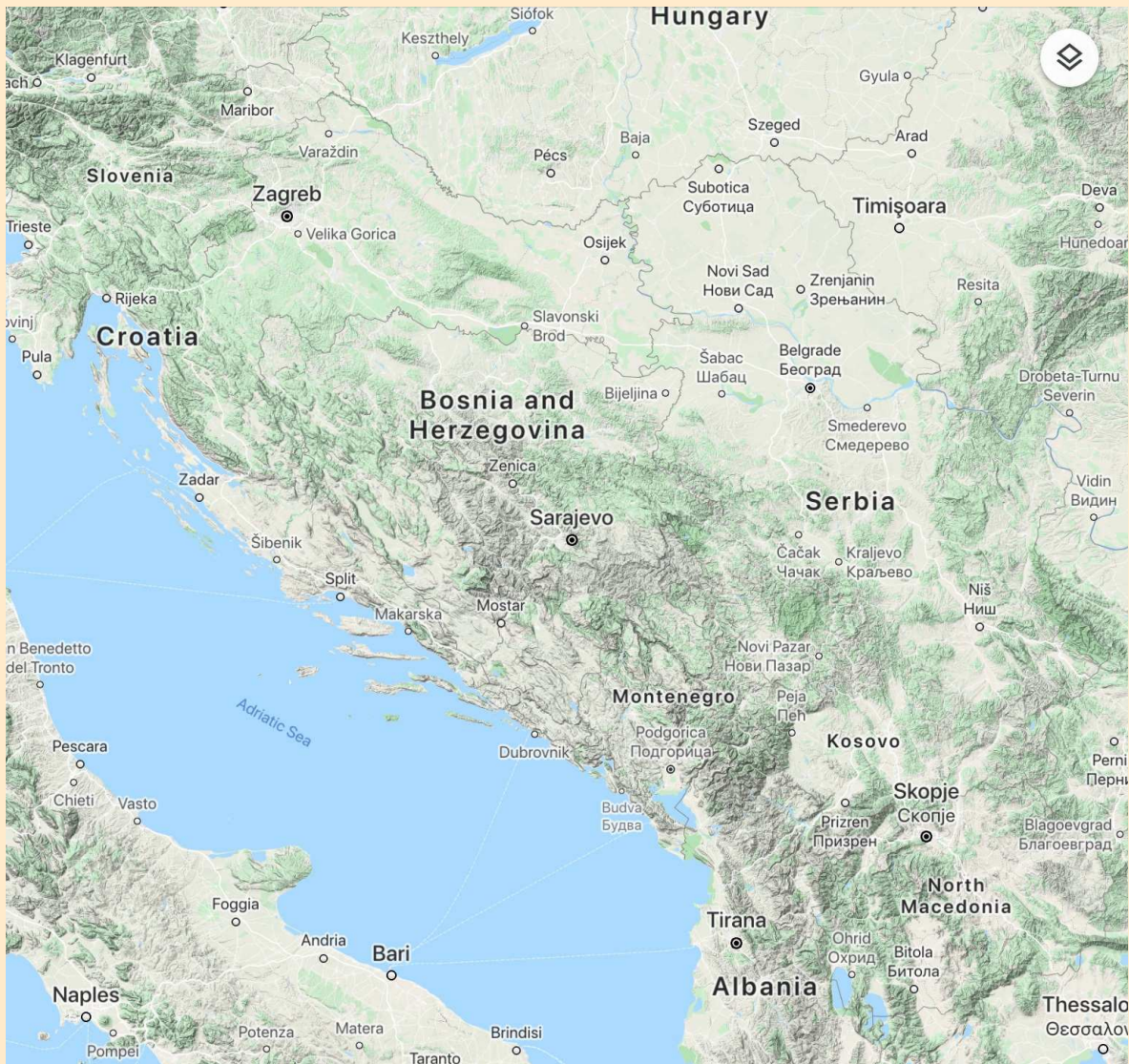


Above- me at my dad's maternal grandparents' graves near Pittsburgh. Below- my dad's paternal grandparents' graves at the same cemetery.



Above, cousin, Djordje Ivosevic visiting Pittsburgh from Prague with cousin Lud/Vlado Vukmir visiting from Dayton. June 2019. Below-Ivosevic home in Turtlecreek built by my great grandpa Nikola Ivosevic (aka Evashavich)





WHERE WE STAYED- September 12-October 15, 2019

Zagreb, Croatia
 Kolaric, Croatia
 Bihac, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)
 Jajce, BiH
 Banja Koviljaca, Serbia
 Miliva, Serbia
 Mataruska Banja, Serbia
 Polje, Montenegro
 Zabljak, Montenegro
 Kolasin, Montenegro
 Limljani, Montenegro
 Virpazar, Montenegro
 Cavtat, Croatia
 Bol on the island of Brac, Croatia
 Zagreb, Croatia



En route to Zagreb via Amsterdam (September 12, 2019)

It's just after 5 pm Seattle time, 1am Zagreb time, and I have no idea what time it is on the ground below our speeding jet. I'm sitting in the middle section in one of the middle seats of row 17, 3 rows in front of Jim because that's all that was left when I chose seats for us yesterday. I'd thought I had reserved specific seats when I made reservations but apparently not. The people around me have their window shades down so I cannot get any clues as to where we are or how light the sky is. I'm even more out of touch with our whereabouts because I'm in one of several rows where the power isn't working so I can't watch our progress using the animated plane tracking option which is usually what I do on long flights. The flight attendant said those of us sitting in these rows can get sky miles to help compensate for our lack of entertainment services. I never watch movies on flights anyway, but I do like tracking our progress on the map.

It's surreal not knowing where I am in relation to the land below me, and weirder yet not knowing where to place myself in time. While at the moment I still feel on Seattle time, time feels pretty meaningless up here. But I know time is passing and even though I cannot see the scene changing outside I feel a subtle push/tug on my body as we speed forward through the sky with just very occasional little jiggles when we encounter mild turbulence. If all goes according to plan we have more than 6 hours before we land in Amsterdam where we are due to sit for 3 more hours before flying on to Zagreb where (if we are on time) it will be shortly after 1 pm tomorrow, Balkan time, (4 am in Seattle) when we land. I'd like to sleep but that seems unlikely. I'd also like to get up and roam the narrow aisles and go pee but the guys on both sides of me are sleeping and I don't want to disturb them. The civil but not chatty guy to my left, wearing a camo jacket, said he has lots of flying ahead but did not seem like he would welcome questions. The young guy to my right, Russian, I think, is not friendly at all. When I boarded I asked if he'd exchange seats with Jim 3 rows back and he said no so I think that colors my impression of him. Maybe in other circumstances I would find him interesting and likable.

As I sit here I imagine sitting at home in one spot in a narrow seat with little legroom for 10 hours, allowed to get up only to go pee. I would have access only to what is in my backpack. I guess I would spend my time the same way I am spending it on the plane- reading, writing, doing word and number puzzles, and occasionally meditating or focusing on my breath. But it is very weird to think of sitting in one tight spot from 2 pm till midnight, which is what I'm doing. I'm glad that in this case even though I am sitting still I am moving forward.

I've been 'studying' my Serbian dictionary but in truth I am just reading bits of it again and again hoping some of it will stick despite not systematically doing anything to help information sink in. I am much better at recognizing the meaning of words when I hear or read them than being able to retrieve words from my brain when I want to speak. I am tickled when I understand Serbian words that are similar to Russian words which I amazingly still recall from 40 years ago when I studied Russian in high school (and a semester in college). I would like to learn Serbian but find it difficult to be disciplined trying to learn it on my own with nobody around to speak with who can guide and correct me. So I settle for just trying to increase my vocabulary. If ever we are able to enjoy an extended stay in the Balkans I will certainly sign up for a language class and make learning the language a priority. I say 'the language' because what is spoken in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia is essentially the same language with minor variations and two different alphabets.

Quick notes from Zagreb-

Hints that suggest I'm not in Seattle, or the US...

The sounds of church bells in the early morning. I woke at about 6:30 and laid awake wondering if and when I'd hear the bells. Soon they started ringing in the distance. The sound of bells, whether Catholic or Orthodox, makes me happy.

Chirping birds with songs unfamiliar to me.

Cars parked on the sidewalks in tight places on narrow streets.

Orange roofs.

The amount of pedestrian activity on the streets in the night.

Slippers for guests. Almost every house or apartment we've been to has slippers for guests just as this place does.

People smoking in the outdoor section of the restaurant where we ate last night (Kvatic on Maksimirska street), the same place I ate with Kendra our first night here on our first trip in 2014. I'm pretty sure the same waiter served us, a very friendly guy in his 60s.

Nuns in habits walking around town, usually in pairs.

Old buildings in need of extensive repairs next to updated or newer buildings.

Hall lights in apartment buildings that only go on if you push the switch on each landing.

Small neighborhood markets and bakeries.

Traffic lights that turn yellow before turning green.

Brief stay in Zagreb

We made it to Zagreb about 40 minutes late, and then waited a long time for our rental car but the guy at the desk gave us some add-ons for no charge which we appreciated. When we finally made it outside to get our car Jim discovered a big tear in the sidewall of one of the tires so we had to wait another 25 minutes for them to fill out papers for a different car.

We found our apartment (Jagodic) in the same neighborhood just east of the oldest part of town we've stayed in every year. This apartment is spacious and has just about every amenity we might need. Jim took a quick nap then we walked to a restaurant to meet my friend Morana and her mother Katya for dinner. Turns out it was the same place where Kendra and I ate our first meal here in 2014. The food was excellent and we enjoyed chatting with Morana and her mom for a couple hours. Katya told us we can stay in her spare apartment next time we are in town and reiterated we can stay with her and her husband on Korcula island in October if we decide to go there again. Morana is planning to leave Zagreb soon for Austria. She continues to find Zagreb too conservative for her liberal leanings.

I slept almost 7 hours and felt pretty good until mid afternoon when exhaustion hit. Jim cooked us eggs for breakfast to accompany the pastries we bought last night at one of the neighborhood pekaras (bakeries). We then walked to 'Kim's Coffee' to meet my friend Zora. Her partner Mike couldn't come because he had too much to do in Kosovo where he works (with international developers) during the week. I met Zora via a Processwork group online over 20 ago and we usually see her and Mike when we stay in Zagreb. She confirmed our impression that Croatia has raised prices to its detriment. This year there was a 20 percent drop in tourism as it is no longer the bargain for Europeans that it used to be. Zora loves her work as a therapist but hopes to retire soon and split time between the family house she will inherit near Belgrade, her flat in Zagreb, and maybe buy a place with Mike on the coast. She was sorry we won't be able to attend her big 60th birthday party at a rented hall complete with live music, but the date is a few days after we are due to leave for home.

She walked us to a medical supply shop where I bought a yoga mat for about \$25 which I hope will inspire me to do yoga a few times a week while on this trip. We parted ways and hurried home to finish packing so we could get on the road to Kolaric to meet with family for lunch.

Before leaving we had a nice visit with Lydia, our apartment owner, when she came to pick up the keys. She fixed

up this apartment for her 26 year old daughter for when she is ready to marry but in the meantime she rents it out to travelers. She has a teenage son who was born with serious health issues and can't walk, talk, feed or himself but she views him as her angel. She takes him out and about despite his limitations and delights in him rather than feeling sad about his condition. Each morning when he wakes to another day she feels it is a gift from God.

We left on time but it took 40 minutes to get out of Zagreb onto the highway because of construction, detours, missed turns and poor directions from GPS. This has happened to us before when trying to exit this city.



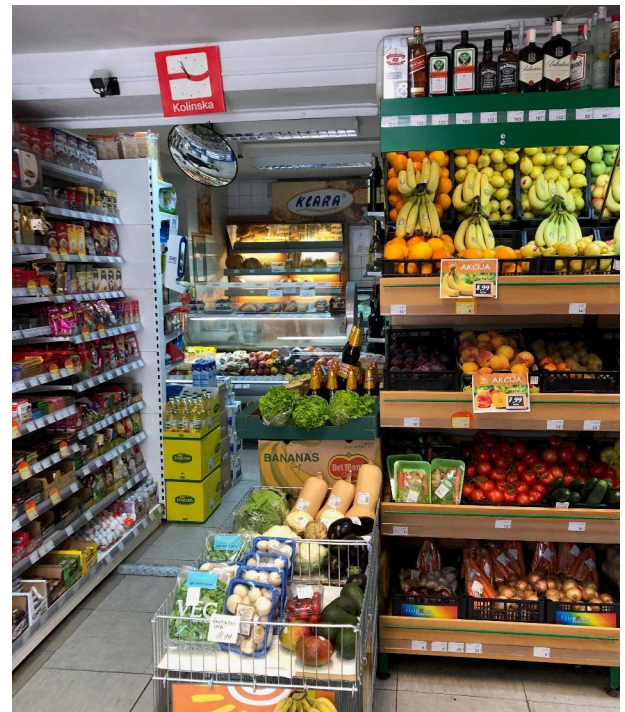
Our friend, Zora Subotic in Zagreb



Our apartment, Jagodic, in Zagreb



View from our apartment in Zagreb



A typical market, in Zagreb



Ivosevic family property looking toward Vojnic



Ivosevic family house and property, Kolaric, Croatia



Ljubo and his aunt, Milica Ivosivic in the family home



Ivosevic property behind the house

Kolaric Croatia

Even though our trip has barely begun I feel swept up in a dream-like altered state. Jet lag and sleep deprivation intensify my feelings of being on the one hand almost ecstatically connected to the land, culture and people here, and in other ways like a detached foreigner (which I am!) in a surreal world. I often find it difficult to sleep when I travel probably because I am unusually sensitive to sensory input and when I travel I am inundated with myriad new sights, sounds, smells, foods and customs. Writing helps me process things but when I'm too tired to write everything stays jumbled in my head as I try not to forget things I want to write about.

We arrived in Kolaric, not really a village but more a collection of dwindling small farms 2km from Vojnic, about 90 minutes south of Zagreb.

The family property is where Ljubo's dad, Pavao, and uncle, Djordje (and their 3 sisters) grew up. My connection to Djordje and Pavao is their grandfather was brother to my great grandma Anna's mother, Kata. In other words, their grandpa was Anna's uncle. Although my connection to Djordje, Pavao and Ljubo is quite distant they welcomed me as family and Djordje says he views me as a sister.

I don't know how big a hectare is but the family owns 50 and their land includes large fields, forest, fresh water, and extends up hills on both sides of the road. The land has been in the family at least as far back as Djordje's grandparents. Anna's mother Kata, my great great grandmother, grew up on this land.

The property is surrounded by a high green metal fence referred to as a 'hedge' which we later learned was erected a few years ago largely to prevent refugees from taking up residence in the house when nobody is home. Their house is on the main route that refugees take from BiH through Croatia in attempting to enter Austria or Germany. Refugees in BiH are a huge regional problem and over a hundred continue to arrive in BiH every day! More on this when I write about Bihac.

Along with a very large house that sleeps 12 (rebuilt after the 90s war when it was burned down, and prior to that was burned down, rebuilt, and burned down again in WW2), there is an older small house (burned and rebuilt after WW2) where my great great grandma lived, a big wooden storage barn, and a building where the pigs and chickens live. Interestingly, while the house is large there is no separate living room. Along with kitchen, bedrooms and bathrooms the only other room is a large dining room with a big long table in the center. We have run into this many times in this region. Social interactions take place around eating and drinking so it makes sense that houses don't need living rooms. People either congregate around a table or, when the weather is nice, sit outside on porches, patios, driveways or yards.

Our spacious simply furnished bedroom upstairs in the back of the house looks upon fields in the foreground that rise moderately steeply up to a dense forest covering a large hill. As with most homes and apartments we've been in, bedrooms rarely have closets but have wardrobes instead. Jim speculates that since most homes are made of concrete blocks and rooms not framed in with wood it might be difficult to build closets.

The extremely timid dog, Lolo, never let me pet him but Jim was able to. Paolo used to have many more animals but now only has 8 sheep (with very long tails, like dogs), 2 pigs, and some chickens. They keep the pigs and chickens inside, something I do not understand, but did not want to offend them by asking why they don't let them outside. They also used to have cows but although Paolo, 82, still loves the land and animals he cannot easily take care of things the way he used to. His wife, ten years younger, has health issues that keep her from taking care of things easily as well.

Ljubo does not know what will happen to the land when his parents become even more infirm or die. He cannot afford to move back home nor can his sister. The region is largely abandoned and most of the remaining people there are very old. The Croatian government will happily buy land from people but at a price so low it is almost like stealing. Since the 90s war the government has given formerly Serb homes to Croats and resettled Bosnians (100,000 are still displaced from the war 20 years ago) trying to slowly bleed away the Serb presence in Croatia. The frustrating thing to the Serbs is the land they have lived on for generations (since the mid-late 1700s) was never Croatia. It was part of the Ottoman and Austrian-Hungarian empires. The Serbs were induced to move there to provide a buffer from the Turks. It has been their home for generations. It is very sad seeing so many empty and abandoned homes and farms. Young people continue to leave the whole the western Balkan nations at a very high rate.

Not only are the Serbs slowly dying off or moving away, the Croatian government has been intentionally allowing monuments and landmarks that honor Serbs and their history to disintegrate or be vandalized. They are erasing and rewriting history as well, indoctrinating young students to a very skewed version of history that ignores or denies the atrocities committed by Croats.

Soon after arriving at the farm we learned that Ljubo's mom had gone into the hospital a few days prior to have her gall bladder removed. She had been sick off and on for a long time but finally was in excruciating pain and had to have surgery. Because she was still in the hospital they had a friend come to help Aunt Milica (Djordje and



Ivosevic home

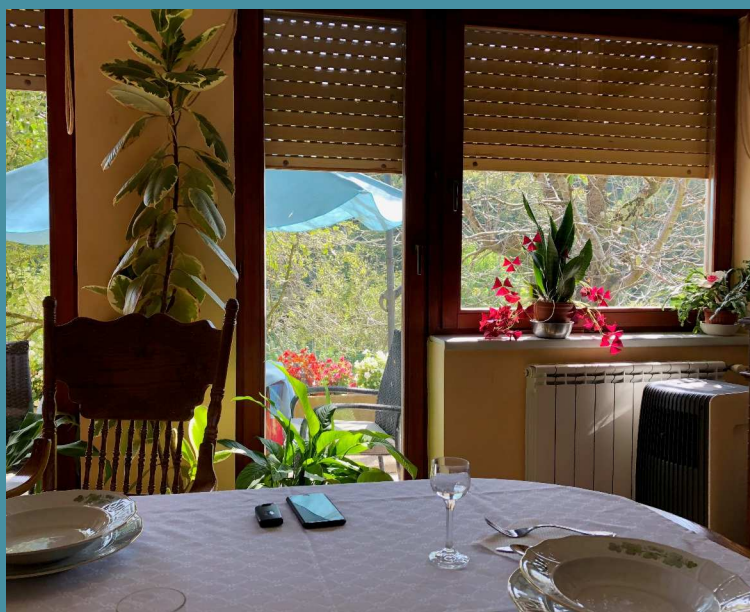


Pavao, Milica, and friend



Dear pig and future food for the family

Yummy kiwi-pineapple cake baked by Milica and her friend



Pavao's sister, age 88) prepare lunch (except for the roast lamb which they ordered from a restaurant up the road). Jim and I went along for the ride to pick up the lamb and appreciated seeing a whole pig roasting on a spit in an open oven next to the parking lot of the small restaurant (another familiar sight in these countries). When younger Paolo and Djordje roasted pigs themselves but it is too big a chore to cope with now.

Once back at the house we were served a lovely spread of lettuce, fresh tomatoes, roasted potatoes, bread, homemade salami and thin ham, roast lamb, and homemade rakija made from peaches from a big tree in the yard. For dessert we ate a torte baked by the woman who helped serve the food. The pineapple-kiwi torte looked like it was made by a professional baker. Then we were served apple strudel made by Milica! I asked for the recipe for the torte and look forward to trying it when we get home. Neither dessert was very sweet which suits us well.

After a leisurely meal we got a brief tour of part of the land. Both Djordje and Pavao were slow climbing up the grassy steep hills but did surprisingly well for their ages. They pointed in the direction of the source of the delicious pure fresh water they use at the house and Djordje said we can move there if ever we run out of good water.

Ljubo's dad is very quiet but gentle and kind. In contrast to his younger brother Paolo has little interest in talking about politics. He worked at a gas station in town for years, and also took care of the land, gardens and animals.

Ljubo's aunt Milica is a very warm and kind woman, hunched over and with shaky hands but still has it ingrained in her to serve others. The men kept admonishing her not to carry plates in and out of the kitchen because it disturbs then seeing her shaking hands. Several times during our visit I hugged her and she spoke in Serbian to me as if I knew what she was saying. Ljubo said she was very glad to meet me and happy to be connected to family in the US. According to everyone Milica was the smartest of the 5 kids but didn't get much education because her dad married her off at a young age and her husband was possessive and would not let her go to school or work.

After the meal we continued sitting around the table for a long time. Ljubo was the only English speaker besides us and was extremely patient translating Djordje's stories and opinions, most of which I'm sure he has heard many times. Djordje talked lots about the property, the area, history, family stories, and politics. I tried to include Milica and Paolo in the conversation but neither of them talk much. And Djordje likes to talk!

After the tour of the property we drove about 20 minutes to the property in the 'village' where we thought Rada's grandma and my great grandma Anna's family lived. An abandoned large house sits on the unused property although someone comes and mows around the buildings to keep them from getting grown over. There are several small dilapidated houses in the compound as well as a huge wooden barn and small outbuildings. Ljubo called Rada while we were there trying to assess whether the house that Anna lived in still stands, and we think we know which one it was but are not sure. The most striking thing on the property is a huge old beautiful deciduous tree with an impactful presence between the newer house and the old ones. Djordje gave me a small branch from the tree to bring home.

(The following week when visiting Rada we showed her the photos of the property we had visited and she said that was her uncle's place, not her mom's and Anna's. But we did learn where the Martinovic land is (a km or 2 from where we were) so if we come again we can visit it. No structures remain on that property).

We also stopped at the small new Serb Orthodox Church just up the road from the old Martinovic land. It was created by a local man who donated money for the local school and church.

On our way home we stopped at the turn off for the dirt road where Rada's dad, an Orthodox priest, and a dozen or more other men were murdered during WW2. It was sobering to think that what was abstract for me was very real to the families who lived there during that period.

When we drove through the gate of the green 'hedge' back home Djordje had Ljubo stop the car so he could tell us about the small building on the property by the road. During the Tito years when Djordje was a young man he had a high position in the nationalized milk industry. He was a problem solver and innovator and came up with the idea to build this structure that was refrigerated inside where the locals could drop off their milk each morning without it spoiling and then a truck could come pump it out and take it to towns where it could be sold. He got a grant for this idea and was so successful he was given a big award for the huge increase in efficiency and productivity. He said if young people wanted to move back here now they could make a good living selling milk, or meat.

By the time we got to the house it was dark outside. They wanted to know what we wanted for dinner. Jim felt no need for dinner after our big lunch and I could have foregone dinner as well although I was a bit hungry. But they insisted we eat again and they served the lamb again, this time cold, homemade salami and dried thin ham, kajmak (a light creamy cheese with texture similar to thick sour cream), lettuce, tomatoes, bread, and more rakija. I had a tiny slice of cake. We enjoyed more conversation dominated by Djordje. Jim and I headed up to our room at around 9:30.

I couldn't fall asleep till after 1:30. Many dogs near and far outside barked for hours and their agitated, protective



Petrova Gora-WW II secret hidden hospital and hiding place for Partisan fighters and local families, including our Ivosevic cousins.

and mournful noises echoed around the hills and valleys. Later a barn owl started crying its unearthly screech. I did not know what it was. It sounded like a mythical mix of a snarling wild cat, a dog in pain and distressed bird. I found later via YouTube it was a barn owl. Between the dogs and owl and the bright moonlight it was as if I was eavesdropping on another world. This nocturnal world conjured a sense I was hearing the spirits of the region moaning, grieving, and crying out in pain. It was not scary but it was sad and intense. During the quiet periods between the dog and owl sounds I enjoyed the peaceful slow rhythmic chirp of crickets.

How can I begin to convey the day?

On Sunday we ate breakfast at around 9:30- fried eggs, bread, kajmak, sausages and thin ham, and tomatoes. Excellent. Of course Ljubo's dad poured us a shot of rakija first. He always offered rakija any time we sat down at the table. I continue to find rakija first thing in the morning to be very invigorating and satisfying. The scorching burn of the high alcohol content liquid passing down my throat into my stomach seems to shock my system into action in an invigorating way that feels strangely healthy.

Because we were going to visit Partisan monuments (not respected, protected nor maintained by the Croatian government) Ljubo and Djordje asked if Jim would drive in our car with Croatian plates rather than Ljubo's car with Serbian plates. Jim obliged although we were slightly cautious because the roads were gravel and poorly maintained and our car does not have great clearance but jim is an excellent rough road driver and we had no problem.

First we went to Petrova Gora to see the replicated structures of a secret hospital enclave from WW II. Partisans built cabins and excavated underground caves where local soldiers and civilians could be treated, and where families could hide when Nazi troops or Croatian Ustashi came through the local villages. Djordje's family stayed there for some months when he was one year old, Ljubo's dad about 4 and Milica about 10. It was early winter and one night it was so cold they covered baby Djordje with leaves, blankets and branches. It snowed heavily in the night covering everything, and in the morning when his parents dug him out and they thought he might be dead but he opened his eyes and asked for bread.

We walked through the compound and entered numerous small cabins, some used for operating (big windows to let in light since they had no electricity), others used as infirmaries for recovering patients, and a kitchen. Even though the cabins were rebuilt in the 60's, some of the original furniture is still there- rusted bedframes, a spartan metal operating table, basins and miscellaneous other things. I would have thought things would have been stolen, especially since the Croatian government does nothing to protect or maintain the place. We also peered into the trap door that led to one of the caves. Obviously if the choice is between hiding underground or being killed I probably would choose the former but it looked like a very claustrophobic challenging place to sleep and hide.

Djordje told the story (there is a commemorative plaque outside one cave entry) of a German doctor who worked there. Many people, including her, got typhoid, and knowing she would die told the Serbs to bury her at the top/ front of the cave so if enemy soldiers found her they would see a German and would assume they were all Germans and would leave alone the Serbs hiding deeper in the cave.

Djordje also told stories from the time when he was only 25 and was head of government in Vojnic, like a mayor, and was in charge of arranging Tito's visit to the area and escorting him around the area. Tito asked Djordje what the biggest problem in the area was. Being young and brash he said a big issue was the difficulty the locals had in killing boars. During the war the Germans forbade the locals from killing them because they wanted to have boars to shoot for sport. Tito, a hunter, didn't understand how it could be difficult to kill a boar because he once killed 15 in one hour. Djordje said, 'that's because you have 100 people beating the bushes flushing them out and directing them right to you'. Tito's eyes got big and he stared at Djordje with a piercing gaze but said nothing. My interpretation of the story is that Tito was impressed by Djordje's naive boldness in saying that to him.

Djordje took Tito to the Petrova Gora hospital area and on a very rainy day and the path became extremely deep with mud and Tito's boots got all dirty but he didn't care. He made a comment about having people who take care of his many boots. The wives in the group were wearing high heels which made walking on the muddy forest paths treacherous. Djordje was anxious that someone might fall and get hurt. After the hospital tour, during which Tito was extremely respectful and interested, Djordje took him to the restaurant where we ate today and he ordered basic, not fancy, traditional food. Tito loved it and was in no way offended by being served a simple meal.

Djordje wants to ask the Chinese to invest in the hospital site, to fix it up and make it a tourist attraction along with the other monument we went to nearby on top of a small mountain (called- The Monument to the Uprising of the People of Kordun and Banija). This huge tall grand partisan monument was originally covered by reflective panels and could be seen from miles away (including from the family property) and shined brightly when the sun hit it. But after the 90's war the Croatian govt abandoned it and allowed theft and vandalism of the place. Many of the panels



Jim and the Ivosevic men



New church up the hill from ruined one



Orthodox church near Vojnic that was bombed and burned in WW II



Milica



Ethno restaurant near Petrova Gora

were stolen. When local Serbs asked for protection of the monument the Croatian government said there was nothing they could do. Jim read online that there is a movement to have the monument restored but it remains to be seen whether that will happen. We told Djordje of our concerns about involving the Chinese. I said I would investigate when I got back home to see if there might be any US or European Serb businessmen who might want to invest in such a project. When I spoke with Lud about this he cautioned me saying that not all Serb Americans supported the Partisans, so I should be mindful of how I speak about it.

After seeing the two historic sites Djordje treated us to lunch nearby at an ethno-restaurant in the woods by a stream. We sat on a large covered patio where lots of regional locals, including cyclists, were enjoying the good food on this Sunday afternoon. We ate beef noodle soup, seasonal salad, and Jim and I shared a mixed grilled meat plate.

Djordje is interested in American toilets with their strong flushing that helps clean the bowl, and air circulation systems that keep crop trees from frost damage. He wants more specific info on how to use that technology for his nut and fruit trees. Often spring comes early here but later there is a frost that hugely impacts ripening and yield.

We then made a short tour through Vojnic, the bigger village near Kolaric. Again, everything Serb or Partisan is neglected. Monuments still stand but some of the plaques commemorating the Partisans have been removed. The monument grounds are overgrown. Vojnic and the region used to be mostly Serb but after the 90s war the Croatian government started importing mostly Bosnian Catholics. They were allowed to build big a Catholic church their first year in town but the local government denied the Serbs a new church on an available lot in town. Djordje is still pushing for this.

The government also tore out mature trees and half of a nice park and put in huge plaza with the Croatian insignia embedded in the tiles and added a big statue of the old Croatian king who had nothing to do with this area.

We then stopped at the old stone Serb Orthodox church outside of town that was bombed and burned during WW2 when many hundreds of local people were killed, especially artists, intellectuals, and professionals. There is now a newer church up the hill. Djordje is disgusted with those Orthodox priests who are greedy, corrupt and in cahoots with the government.

Once home we sat outside for a while on the patio, then went with Ljubo to Karlovac about a half hour away to take Milica back to her old people's home. Her healthcare, 3 meals a day and lodging are all covered. Ljubo drove us around Karlovac as he described things about this small but culturally lively city that make it an attractive place for people to live, then walked around a park by the Korana river, and then had drinks, lemonade (unsweetened of course) for me, at a popular riverside cafe. The traffic heading north toward Slovenia was heavy because many Bosnians work in Slovenia or Germany and come home on weekends and then drive back on Sunday evening.

Once back to the farm we ate an onion potato salad made with vinegar (yum!), breaded veal, also good, more salami and ham, bread and more rakija.

There is much more to say but all I will add is that it was especially powerful visiting these various sites with someone who has a personal connection to them. Djordje was full of stories and insights that would not be available had we just visited the sites as unaccompanied tourists. It makes Jim and me marvel all the more at all the hidden away places and stories that we ignorantly pass by both here and back home. The land everywhere is full of forgotten stories.

Yesterday (Monday)

Ljubo (36) was up early to go to the store, do chores, and make us eggs served with ham, salami, kajmak, bread and rakija. He does so much for his parents and family on top of working a demanding job that leaves him almost no time for himself or a social life. Hopefully that will be changing soon. Within the next few weeks he plans on leaving his job in Belgrade (working for Djordje) and moving to Munich where he will hopefully find IT work and be able to start fresh and have a saner schedule. He is looking forward to this change. He will still be close enough to his parents to go see them often and help as much as he can. Ideally he'd like a job that he could do remotely at times so that he can work from Kolaric. Because he has a Croatian passport he can work in other EU countries with no problem.

(since writing this he has indeed moved to Munich and found work there)

We all shared appreciation for each other and of course Djordje told more stories. He said when he went to Florida in the 1970s to visit his aunt who moved there 50 years prior she gave him oranges as if this was a special treat for him. When he told her that oranges are readily available in Yugoslavia she did not believe him and insisted he was lying and had been indoctrinated by the Communists. Then she insisted he was a Communist agent. Because she

was elderly he gave up trying to convince her that oranges were even easier to get than apples and he gave in and said that yes, he was a Communist agent. Family ties are stronger and more important to him than having a shared political philosophy.

I forgot to mention that even though no one knows what will happen to the family land when the older generation dies, as a gesture of hope for his grandchildren Djordje planted a large hillside across the road with scores of straight rows of Douglas fir trees. He picked Doug firs because they grow in the US and it was his way of linking the two places. I'm not sure how well they will grow here, nor do I know why he planted them in straight rows, but I appreciate his gesture.

He also said that the cheese we were eating is made in Serbia but when sold in Croatia there is no mention on the packaging of the product being Serbian, and this is true of many products. Croatian products are recognized as being Croatian when sold in Serbia but not vice versa.

We were sorry to leave without being able to help clean up the kitchen or house but Ljubo insisted he would take care of it even though he and Djordje needed to leave a half hour later than Jim and I. After taking a few group photos outside we left by 9:30.



On To Bihac, Bosnia and Herzegovina

The road was small and winding through farmland and woods and we reached the BiH border in a half hour. I couldn't stop myself from repeating again and again that I found the landscape beautiful. Despite there only being one lane at the border the line was short and moved quickly.

Once in BiH even though the natural landscape was similar to that of Croatia the character of the towns and villages changed. Many towns have mosques including some new large ones that clearly could not have been funded by locals. This area was hit hard in the 90s war but there is a good bit of growth and updating going on. As we traveled along the roads continued to be narrow but in decent condition.

When we passed the town of Cazin we saw an old fort on a nearby hillside and tried to find our way to it despite lack of signage. The fort was built in the Middle Ages and used by various sides until the mid 1800s when a rich Austrian duke took it over and turned it into a palace for his family. It was occupied until the 1930s and now stands in ruin but the grounds are open to the public.

We had a nice chat with the ticket takers (surprised we would come from so far away to visit Bosnia) and paid the equivalent of about \$1.00 to wander the grounds and ruins of the fort and villa. The grounds are covered with many dozen sculptures created over the years by artists from around the world who gathered periodically during the Yugoslav period at artist colonies to create works from the local stone. As is usually the case when exploring old places we could not help but wonder what the place looked like 800 years ago.

We resumed our drive to Bihac but since we did not yet have SIM cards for BiH we could not find our apartment. According to GPS we seemed to be nearly on the right spot but it turns out the coordinates and address on booking.com were not correct which is why we couldn't find it. Luckily we talked to a guy (not from the area) sitting in his car who said his friend was coming soon to meet him and she should be able to help. Her dad ended up calling the apartment for us and was given the correct address and we followed him along the narrow streets up a two way one lane road to Apartmani Emina.

Emina greeted us warmly and showed us our spacious 1- bedroom apartment but didn't stay to chat because she speaks no English. She did gesture for us to remove our shoes before entering (as usual slippers were provided), and pointed out the fresh fruit on the table and water and homemade rakija in the frig.

The apartment included a piano, a large flat screen tv, a complete set of Ivo Andric's books, and a chandelier in the middle of the room that Jim hit his head on a dozen times.

The walk into town from our apartment on a narrow residential street part way up a hill just south of town takes about 10-12 minutes. Pedestrians must keep alert as many of the roads are narrow (a car width and a half) and without sidewalks and many drivers speed even on these small streets. Some of the buildings are still pocked from bullets from the 90s war.

We are on the second floor and have a balcony in front that looks out upon the little road, the city and surrounding hills. Our street is relatively busy with pedestrians passing by all day and into the night, including many refugees (from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, North Africa, and other assorted places) that continue to flood BiH in general (between 100-150 PER DAY) and Bihac in particular due to its proximity to the Croatian border. This is a huge problem because Croatia's border is closed and there is little in the way of support, supervision or help for either the refugees or the Bosnian government to deal with the problem. Making matters worse the Croatian police and security are treating the asylum seekers poorly at best and sometimes brutally. Some refugees are beaten by Croatian police, robbed and then kicked back into BiH. A camp was recently created for the rejected refugees near Bihac on top of an old landfill where there are no toilets, showers, or care of any kind. The landfill is surrounded by mine fields left from the war. Understandably the refugees are not eager to stay there.

During our walks through Bihac we have seen hundreds of dark skinned men, mostly young, walking in small groups, bathing in the river, and passing time in the shade. Our apartment host reiterated that as new refugees stream in, the old ones cross the border into Croatia and get kicked back to Bosnia so the number of refugees here grows continually.

The center of a Bihac is pleasant with areas of wide-girthed tall beech trees in parks and along some of the main streets. The clear teal blue waters of the Una river flow right through town and there are extensive parks and walking paths around its banks. Bihac also has a medieval church turned into a mosque and several other old towers and buildings but the layout of the city seems haphazard. This city was hit hard in the 90s war and while signs of the war are mostly limited to bullet holes in exterior walls it is quite clear this once thriving city is struggling economically. We saw more than a few local women in head scarves and various types of Muslim garb which is a newer trend in Bosnia since the 90s war ended. People we know who grew up in Bosnia said before the war very few women dressed the way Arab Muslims dress. We are very curious about how much the Bosnian



Old fort and sculpture park in Cazin BiH



version of Islam has changed in the past 20 years.

We ate dinner (outside) at a place by the river and ate typical Bosnian fare- grilled chicken, salads, grilled veggies, fries and water 'with gas'. Total cost for the two of us was about \$14.

We headed up the hill to our apartment and once again I was kept awake due to the frequent barking of dogs. But I also think my nighttime wakefulness is due to my little mind trying to process the many things I see, hear, smell, and feel each day in this foreign land.



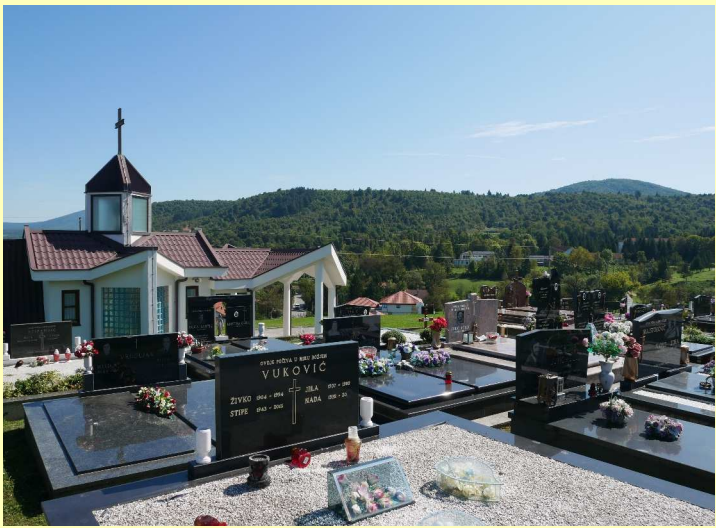
Apartment Emina in Bihac
Our street at night



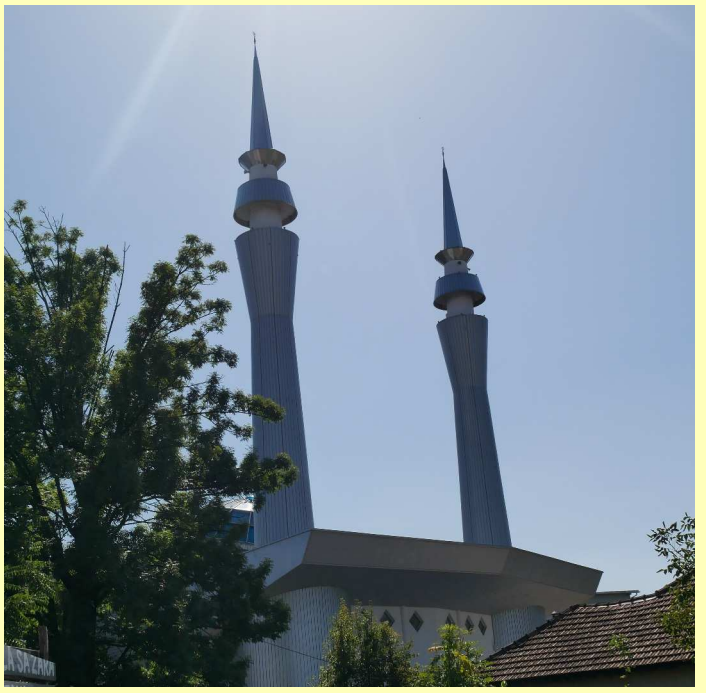
Old church turned mosque



View from the balcony



Scenes from around Bihac



Day 2 Bihac

I only slept 4 hours again. Barking dogs helped keep me awake.

Jim made breakfast (yes, eggs with cheese and peppers and onions, and Pekara items).

We enjoyed another warm sunny day in the low 80s.

We had been planning to drive 45 minutes south to Una National Park but Alan (our host) offered to give us a free boat ride on the river so we decided to take a long walk and meet up with him at 3.

We walked a couple miles around the outskirts of town and passed a large mosque with a school attached to it. We also passed a military compound where we heard lots of guns being fired. We continued up a hill to a Catholic cemetery with nice views of the city and hills. We saw numerous small groups of refugees waiting at the gate, but I don't know what they were waiting for. Periodically a few of them passed through the cemetery toward town.

We continued walking through the outskirts of city getting a feel for the place. We both enjoy seeing tourist attractions but we both also like just walking around whatever town we are in seeing and taking in the commonplace sights of a place, noticing differences in people, gestures, dress, cars, yards, houses, buildings, plants, and roads. I yearn to take more photos of people but don't want to be invasive or rude so typically do not photograph people.

Once back at the apartment I napped for about 20 minutes and then we went downstairs to meet up with gregarious Alan (early 50s?) for our 'safari' (his word).

Alan's English is poor but his vocabulary is large enough that we could communicate ok. He drives like those Balkan drivers that terrify us when they pass us by. He played Bosnian music from the radio at high volume as he laughed and chatted with us as we sped, and I mean sped, down the narrow twisting road for about 20 minutes to his property by the river. On the way home I peeked a few times at his speed which was typically in the 80-100 km/hr (50s-low 60s) on a road that had a limit of 40 km/hr.

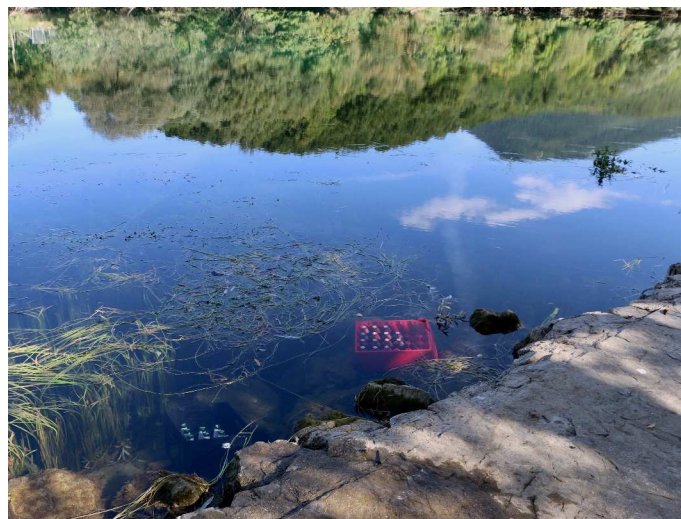
Alan's fenced narrow slice of property extends from the road down to the river. There is a storage shed with a flush toilet near the road and a rustic one room cabin with a huge fireplace/oven and a table with seating by the river. Between the cabin and river is an outside seating area where four of his friends were gathered drinking, eating, laughing and talking loudly like men here tend to do. A couple large crates of beer sat submerged in the river.

We joined Alan in his flat bottom boat that has a table in the middle. He brought a few beers, a thermos of coffee, milk, water and lemonade on board and off we went using his tiny outboard motor to slowly glide us along the smooth, still, teal-blue clear water. In most places we could see the bottom. As we made our way up the river Alan shouted out numerous times to various friends he saw along the shore. He took us into coves and then up to the base of the low but powerful falls. I repeatedly dipped my hands into the cold water as we slowly puttered along.

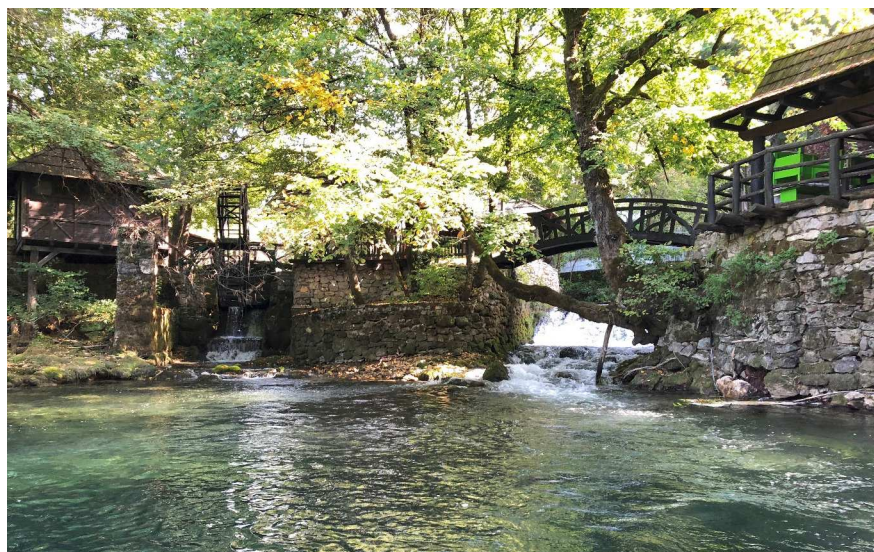
Our river ride lasted an hour or so during which time we learned Alan grew up here and has three kids including a son who is married and lives in Sarajevo. In addition to renting their apartment Alan has a job of some kind but we never found out what he does. He said most people in Bosnia do a little of this and a little of that to get by. When Jim asked if life was better or worse when the region was Yugoslavia he quickly said worse. His view was that Yugoslavia was essentially 'Serbia' and the Serbs are violent and killed lots of people. Due to language limitations we could not go further with that conversation. I wondered if he had this sentiment before the war as well or if it emerged with the war. From what we've heard and read it seems that economically things were much better before the war and standard of living was higher. But perhaps that was not enough to make up for feeling like his people did not share power equally with Serbs? I was glad I did not specify that my ancestors were Serbs, although I sense he would have been just as friendly with us based on the fact that we are Americans, whom he likes.

When we got back to shore Alan guided us into the cabin and said he would be ready in a few moments, but then came back with beers, beverages and a plate of bread, chevapis and chicken and good naturedly said 'sorry' and went out and sat with his friends who were drinking. Periodically he would come check on us, apologize, laugh and go back out and sit with his friends. We did not mind at all. After an hour or so his friends finally left, Alan cleaned up, and we sped back to our apartment. As we were leaving his property we saw about a dozen refugees waiting by the road. This group included some women and kids. One of the boys seemed like he wanted to ask for water for his water bottle but was afraid to ask. Alan ignored him and later reiterated that the refugee issue is a huge problem in Bihac. He locked the gate behind us. Jim and I thoroughly enjoyed the whole process (although not so much the speeding car ride).

That evening we walked back into town and ate grilled chicken (turkey for Jim), rice and salad at a different waterside restaurant patio. I enjoyed our perch on the balcony hearing numerous languages emanating from the people walking by, and watching locals stop and chat with each other. I slept over 7 hours that night! It rained in the night and today is cooler.



Boat ride with Alan



Jajce BiH

I'm sipping tea, sitting on the balcony of our room in a guest house on a hill in Jajce BiH looking out upon orange roofs, a ruined fort built in the 14th century, green thickly treed hills, a small grove of pear trees below us and a thin strip of low clouds resting above the canyon where the river (unseen from my perch) cascades and drops down small and tall falls. From here I do not hear the river but instead hear the river of traffic passing on the road across the valley. A slight breeze rustles the leaves of nearby trees, dogs bark occasionally, birds tweet, and a rooster crowed a moment ago. I do not hear it now but early this morning I was wakened by the call to prayer from several minarets, followed by gonging church bells from two churches.

We arrived here yesterday afternoon after driving about 2.5 hours from Bihac. The two lane road was in decent shape most of the way and traffic was sparse. The countryside along the route is gorgeous, sometimes thickly forested with no house in sight, and in other places the land is rolling and mostly open, although always surrounded by big hills and small mountains. Most towns have at least a couple mosques and often a couple churches as well.

Once again we almost made it to our apartment without help, but not quite. There was a sign for our place at the bottom of the road but we didn't go far enough up the 'road' before turning around and asking someone for help. Our apartment requires driving up an extremely steep narrow rough road which we find somewhat stressful to navigate but we made it. Our host, Nehada, welcomed us warmly but speaks no English so simply showed us around the place. We have a private room and shared bath and kitchen/living room although nobody else is currently here. The bathroom is very modern (including a tiny on demand hot water heater built into the sink faucet) but the rest of the place is not. The kitchen sink only has cold water and there is no heat source other than a small wood stove in the kitchen. But we have plenty of wool blankets so we were comfortable last night despite temperatures being in the 40s. Today skies are mostly grey and it likely won't warm up beyond the mid 50s which is quite a change from the 75-85 degree days we've had until yesterday.

Jim had been planning to drive an hour and a half up to the city of Banja Luka to do a mountain bike ride with a local guy he has corresponded with on Facebook but last night reluctantly decided to cancel the ride for various reasons, including slight nervousness about the road and not having me along to navigate. He is disappointed as he had been looking forward to meeting this guy and riding with him. Hopefully we can arrange a ride elsewhere later in the trip.

Jajce is a beautiful small city situated in a heavily treed hilly area, greatly decreased in population since the 90s war which was intense here. The Croatian army bombed an Orthodox monastery and in turn the Serbs bombed every Muslim mosque and Catholic Church. Thousands of Bosniaks and Catholics fled. A couple years later the Croats returned and bombed the place and reclaimed it. When Bosnians tried to come back the Croats blockaded the way for a period but slowly people returned, although few Serbs live here now. I notice that despite being 3 generations removed from this region, and understanding that the history of this area is complex, I must watch out for my subtle tendency to want to slightly side with the Serbs' views of history even though I know they have caused great destruction and harm to many towns, structures and human lives. I guess as an American I am used to identifying with a nation that has done both great and horrible things.

No matter how much I read about the history of the Balkans it is confounding to me how people who got along for long periods of time suddenly were willing to turn upon their neighbors and kill them. I do not think it is just due to projection that I sense a lot of unprocessed trauma and feelings in the atmosphere here. I have felt this most strongly in Bosnia (which was hardest hit in the war and has been slowest to recover) each time we have been here. BiH is the only one of the Balkan countries we've visited where we don't have established personal connections with locals which might in part be why I feel less at home here and more like a tourist. People are friendly and helpful but not overly warm. Our Balkan friends from other countries tell us that Bosnians are very friendly, fun and have a good sense of humor. I hope next time to make more connections in this country.

Despite the disorganized layout of the streets in this town making it difficult to walk find a direct route from one place to another we enjoyed exploring this town yesterday, first to the medieval fort atop the hill, then down to the Pliva river which joins the Vrbas river at the bottom of the impressive series of waterfalls, then back up and across town to a preserved 3rd century temple to the Roman god, Mithras, then to the oldest part of town where we sat outside despite the chilliness and ate pizza and salad. While at the table in addition to numerous stray dogs looking for handouts a group of about 12-15 very bold birds (sparrows, according to my sister who identified them from photos I sent) perched on the chairs around us and several even stood on our table just a couple feet from our plates. One even came up to our plate. I was surprised by this behavior which I'd expect from gulls or pigeons but not smaller birds like these.

Jajce (once the capital of the Kingdom of Bosnia in the 14th century) is not yet a full fledged tourist town although UNESCO has recently started funding preservation of some of the sites. We did see some Chinese tourists, some German tourists, and some middle-eastern tourists complete with women fully clad in black with only their eyes visible. The beauty of this place and its ruins as well its proximity to mountains, lakes and forest make it ripe for development which I expect will come before long.

A little more from Jajce

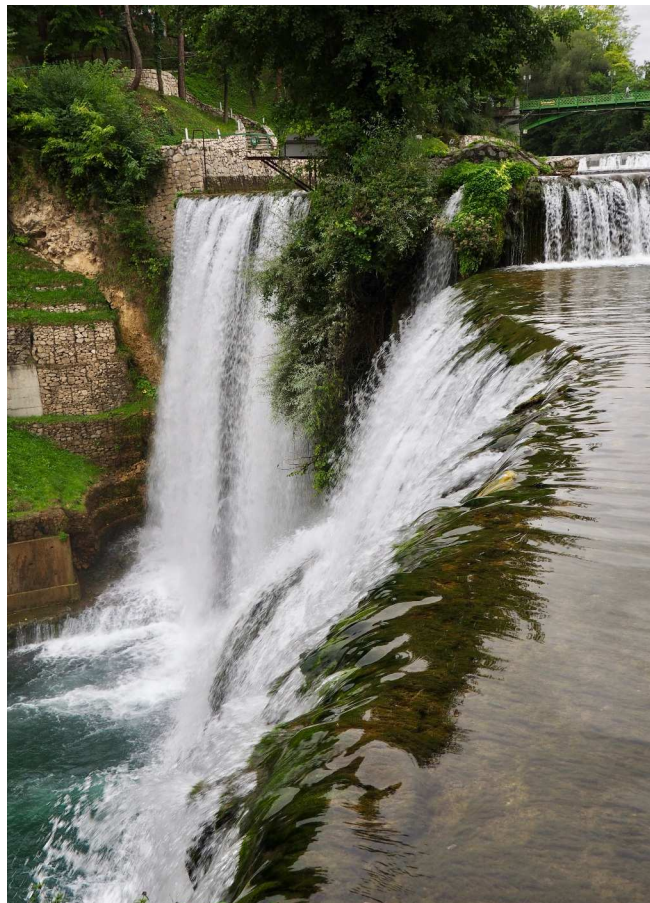
We had a leisurely morning. Jim cooked eggs to accompany our pekara items. I sat on the balcony for a long while catching up with writing and doing practices. When I sit still in these foreign places, despite my open senses, heart and mind it all feels like too much to grasp or comprehend. It feels surreal. I feel like I'm looking upon the place from the outside, that I cannot fully become part of the scene I am in.

We set off shortly before noon for a walk up the hill behind our place with the idea of doing a loop on village roads above town which we plotted by using the map on my phone. We were very glad to be on foot and not in the car because the roads are extremely steep, twisty, narrow and eventually turn into gravel and further on become rutted rocky paths that are impassable by car.

Houses are clustered in tiny villages on these high hillsides and range from uninhabitable ruins, to modest homes in need of repair, to good sized homes either newly built or recently renovated. We saw a lot of people outside, about 90 percent of whom looked over 70, doing chores- splitting wood, lugging stuff around in buckets, pruning, weeding, repairing fences, etc. Nobody initiated saying dobar dan (hello) to us but almost everyone replied with a dobar dan in response to us. A couple people asked in Bosnian where we were going. I vaguely gestured we were just out for a stroll with no destination and they seemed satisfied with that despite this not being a typical tourist or hiker's route. We passed several mosques and several Muslim cemeteries with their slender tall grave markers all facing east. We saw no churches. Eventually we entered woods with no sign of current human habitation although we passed several abandoned farms and houses overgrown with trees and vines.

In the telling our walk doesn't sound that interesting but Jim and I fully enjoyed both the rigorous exercise we got walking up and down the steep hills (about 9 miles and 1500 foot elevation gain), the great views, and noticing and absorbing the many details of life up in these small villages above Jajce.

We ate dinner at a Turkish restaurant in the old part of town. It was quite chilly that evening. As always I enjoyed listening to the evening church bells and calls to prayer from the various mosques below us.





Jajce



Old fort in Jajce with a house right next to it



Along our walk outside of Jajce



Our lodging in Jajce



on our walk



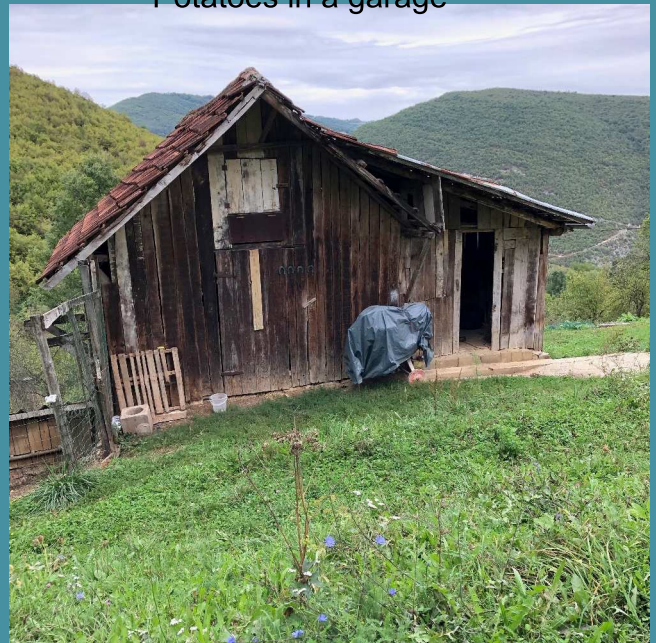
Old shrine to Mithras in Jajce



Potatoes in a garage



The Jajce hospital that we thought was an abandoned building



Jajce BiH to Banja Koviljaca Serbia

We woke to fog in Jajce this morning but luckily by the time we ate breakfast and packed it had burned off. We left at about 10:15, unsure whether to take the seemingly more established route to Serbia, or to take a route on smaller roads that looked to go up and down numerous mountains. We opted for the safer route north to Banja Luka then east through Doboj and over to the border crossing near Zvornik.

Even though the distance was less than 100 miles it took us about 5.5 hours because for most of the way we were on a basic 2 lane road that went first through a lovely canyon (with several dams and power plants) and then through village after village that required driving slowly. We did get to speed along for a while on a fairly new toll highway which was a nice change of pace.

We arrived at our 3rd floor studio apartment in Banja Koviljaca, the same unit we stayed in two years ago, at around 4 and were met by Milanka, the owner's housekeeper who speaks no English but is friendly and showed us around the studio apartment. We were happy to see fresh fruit and wine waiting for us.

Our unit is in a nondescript moderate sized building that looks to have been built in the 70s or 80s. We like this unit because it has a balcony and looks out at pine trees on the edge of the Banja Koviljaca spa grounds.

We walked down to the main street to get groceries and phone cards. Our groceries included a big red pepper, onions, tomato, 2 yogurts, cookies, bread, 10 eggs and some mints for \$6. The currency here makes us feel rich. 10,000 Serb dinars is about \$100 US.

Once again we had trouble figuring out how to activate our phone cards but were proud of ourselves for figuring it out quicker this time. We then headed to the cafe/restaurant (Contact) next door where I ordered spaghetti, salad and bread and Jim got pizza and salad, and we shared a large bottle of mineral water all for \$12. The food was pretty good. I told Jim that one of these days we need to try pizza with tuna which we have seen on menus in various places.

Today we are heading to an eco-village in Bosnia with cousin Ruzica (our great grandmothers were sisters) and her husband and three kids...

Banja Koviljaca Serbia (near Loznica)

Sunny this morning. Cool breeze but looks like we will have a warm clear day before rain arrives tomorrow. We are proud to have figured out how to work the washing machine (trying to guess which of the dozen or more icons to push that won't result in a 2-hour wash cycle) and hope our clothes will dry on the balcony before the weather changes.

I woke (too early) to the distant sound of the call to prayer coming from a Bosnian town on the other side of the Drina river that divides Serbia from BiH.

Soon after the call to prayer a flock of a few hundred birds returned to the neighborhood after roosting somewhere nearby. Each evening we see and hear them gather and circle for a while before flying as one up the mountain behind us and returning again in the morning. I'm sure my sisters could identify them but I can't.

Yesterday morning after breakfast 'in' again Jim and I met cousin Ruzica, her husband, Lazo, and their kids, Djordje (10), Nevena (almost 9), and Katarina (7) in front of the Royal Hotel down the road. Poor Ruzica is sick with a bad cold but was willing to spend the day with us anyway. We followed them by car across the border into Bosnia to a commercialized tacky mostly uninteresting ethno-village about 50 minutes away. This place has an artificial pond, a mini train, ponies, goats, ducks, swans and chickens, a huge hotel built in a traditional style (not sure which tradition!), cafes, restaurant and a small amusement park all set in the middle of flat agricultural land. The thing most interesting to me was a line on the wall of one of the buildings about 5 feet up marking the river level during the May 2014 flood that prevented Kendra and me from coming here on our first trip.

The kids were pleasant as before, shy with us but good at entertaining themselves well. Lazo and Ruzica continue to greatly limit the amount of time they can be on the computer. Djordje is now the only kid in his 5th grade class without a cell phone. Ruzica said their dad is strict and she is soft because it is not in her nature to be strict. The kids like school, and are good students. Their parents hope they will want to go to college and are saving money so that will be possible but they will not insist upon it. Public universities are currently 1000-2000 euros per year (private 4000-5000) but they expect the prices to keep rising. When Ruzica and Lazo went to university it was free.

Ruzica's English is good enough for us to communicate pretty well and she is able to translate so that we can talk with Lazo who speaks no English. Lazo is especially interested in how much things cost in the US.



Horse and wagon behind us in line at the border



From our balcony in Banja Koviljaca Serbia



Rada's apartment building in Loznica



Sign for Loznica in Banja Koviljaca



Banja Koviljaca spa grounds



Fresh produce at the market

Lazo was surprised to hear that Jim cooks breakfast for us. He does nothing in the kitchen and likes the traditional roles for men and women. Ruzica of course would like it if Lazo helped around the house. She said her brother shares the housekeeping with his wife. She laughed and said she and Lazo share too- she does 100% and he does 0.

At lunch Ruzica did not order anything for herself but instead waited for the kids to eat and then ate what was left on their plates.

Despite the place itself being nothing special we had a lovely time together on this sunny warm day. People here pause for coffee numerous times a day. In this case we walked around a bit, had coffee, walked some more, ate lunch, drove part way home and stopped for coffee again. At the border crossing on our way home there was a rickety horse-drawn cart tied with rope and a tree branch to the horse directly behind us in line. We have never encountered a horse and cart when crossing the US-Canada border! At the border crossing into BiH I took a photo of a dog lying on the road (every border crossing has stray dogs lounging or wandering on the road) and the policeman in the booth shook his head and scowled at me menacingly but did not say anything.

We got home at around 5 and bought gift certificates at the spa to give to Ruzica and Lazo as we have done the past couple years we've visited them. We ate again at the place next to our building and each ordered salads since we were not very hungry after having a big lunch.

Rada's in Loznica, Serbia

We arrived at 10 Pop Lukina in Loznica where Rada and her husband have lived in a small one-bedroom ground floor apartment for many years. This is the home Ruzica and her brother grew up in and Rada's mother lived with them as well. It would be tight quarters for five people to live together day after day and year after year. Ruzica said she and her brother Strahinja fought a lot as kids but get along well as adults. The whole family gathers for dinner at Rada's every Saturday night.

Rada greeted us warmly and happily received the flowers we bought from a shop in Banja Koviljaca. We were led into the living room (where Rada now has the picture we gave her last year made from dried flowers hanging on the wall with her other flower paintings) and given the traditional sweets on a tray (quince this time) followed by dipping the spoon in a glass of water and taking a drink. We then accepted their offer of Turkish coffee.

Rada pointed out a painting on the wall (copied from an old photo) of the family farm where her grandmother and my great grandmother grew up in the tiny village of Gornji Bodacki near Vojnic Croatia. This is the place Ljubo and Djordje thought they were taking us but it turns out we were not quite in the right spot. Later in the afternoon Jim and Lazo spent over an hour searching online maps for the correct place but it wasn't until after we got back to our apartment that Lazo was finally able to confirm the land parcel number that allowed us to identify the land on the map. No structures remain but outlines of buildings can be seen on the satellite map. Next time we visit we can look for the correct spot. We had been in the correct village but did not turn down the correct road. The property was owned by Rada's brother who is no longer alive but now is owned by his two adult kids who live in Novi Sad.

Shortly after we arrived Ruzica's older brother, Strahinja, arrived with his daughter, Jelena (12) and son, Nikola (5) who never stopped smiling.

Strahinja speaks a little bit of English but Ruzica was again our translator. Part way into the conversation Jim asked Jelena if she studies a language at school and she said yes, English. She had been quietly listening to us talk but she only spoke if we asked her a question. We learned that she plays volleyball (she is in year 6 of school) and that Nikola loves marvel comic hero's, his favorite being spider man. Strahinja's wife is an anesthesiologist and works long hours so Strahinja spends a lot of time with the kids and helping around the house when not at work himself as a judge. He deals mostly with traffic cases, fights, brawls, etc. Ruzica said that women in the medical field, including herself, have a difficult time and are not given the same respect or appreciation as men. She also said that anesthesiologists are not highly paid or regarded, only surgeons.

After chatting for an hour or more we moved to the dining room where we were served homemade rakija (from green nuts), homemade chicken soup, and bread, then stuffed roasted red peppers followed by platters of sliced tomatoes from the garden, grilled meats, sausages and chevapis. We ended the meal with a sliced, baked cake roll with apricot-nut-chocolate filling.

As has been the case every time we've visited, Rada did not eat with us (nor did her husband) but instead did the serving. She said even though she is old (79) it is still important to her to cook and serve. She likes doing it. I asked what she likes to do in retirement and she said she likes to read a lot, especially romances and crime fiction.

We continued chatting around the table as we showed Rada our photos from our time with Djordje. She said the place where we stopped looked like her uncle's but it was not where she lived. Jim, Lazo and Rada then tried to find her old home on the map on Jim's laptop as I mentioned above.

After the meal Lazo came with the three kids. I was delighted that Katarina, the youngest who had been shy with us the day before came right up to me and hugged me and greeted me in English. The 5 kids soon went out into the courtyard and played 'survivor'. Ruzica said when she was a kid the courtyard was grass but now it is covered with paving stones although there are some trees.

Rada wanted to bring out old photos but couldn't find them so brought out Lud's book and we looked at some pictures together.

Lazo showed Jim how to make Turkish coffee and gave us several coffee bags to take home as well as 3 small cups, one each for me, Jim and Cedar. He said when Cedar finds a wife they will send a 4th cup. He also said if Cedar comes back to visit it won't take long for them to find him a wife.

Lazo also gave us a big bag of apples from their tree, and homemade slivovica. Rada gave me a traditional brightly colored woven bag/purse and thick wool slipper sox and a gift of wool sox for us to mail to Lud when we get home.

In addition to a few small gifts for the kids we gave each child 1000 dinar (just under \$10), 500 from Lud and 500 from us. It was a Lud's (great) idea to give the kids money and we decided to add to his gift.

Before we left we gathered in the courtyard for group pictures. It is always a little hard saying goodbye to them because we never know if we will visit again. We hope to. Rada said that every time we come to the Balkans we must come visit.

We stayed till after 5. On our way home we drove up to the top of the mountain behind our place to see the Gucevo monument created to honor Serbs who fought there in WW1 to prevent the Austrians from making their way to Belgrade. The Serbs were outnumbered but used guerrilla warfare to hold the line. The monument is in a spot with a wide vista to the land below.

We ate again at Contact and sat at what had become 'our' table where I had 'vitamin salad' (basically a salad with lots of veggies) and turkey almond risotto which was great. Once again I passed up ordering one of their delicious looking desserts thinking I'd get one another day, but I ended up going the entire trip without ordering any dessert, one of my few regrets!

We decided to stay one more night so we could have a rest day with no socializing or long driving, and to give us time to figure out where to go next. I enjoy looking online at maps and lodging options but I don't like the amount of time it takes. I hope to get a massage at the spa next door tomorrow, something I say I will do every time we come but it hasn't worked out yet. A 50 minute massage cost between \$25-\$30. I'm curious to see what approaches they use.



Nevena, Nikola, Djordje, Katerina, Jelena in front. Strehinja, Rada, Stanisa, Ruzica, Lazo in back

Last day in Banja Koviljaca

I'm sitting on our balcony overlooking the spa grounds, gearing up for packing up the car and heading for our next destination, wondering if we should change our reservations. Last night after booking two nights at an 'eco house' in Miliva, a village near the Serbian town of Despotovac I was perusing previous guests' comments more closely and a post in Serbian caught my eye because under criticisms it mentioned 'put' (which means way, or road) and 'automobile'. When I translated the comment it said something about the road being bad for small cars. I wrote to the owners of the place asking about the access to their place and they wrote back saying that there is a 'small river' to cross but it's usually only 10 cm deep and about 1.5 meters wide and they cross it in their Yugo with no problem. Well, if we were here in our own car we would not be concerned, but driving our small rented car, a Renault Clio sedan which has low clearance through a stream on a rainy day makes us a bit anxious. When I wrote them again with our concerns the response was 'the river is small. Photo on booking.com'. I guess we are going to give it a try, fingers crossed!

Meanwhile, back in Banja Koviljaca, the rain has let up. Low clouds shroud the hills.

We like this little town but change is afoot, probably not for the best. Last evening Zoran, the guy that Jim did a mountain bike ride with here a couple years ago, and his wife Tanja stopped by 'our' restaurant for a short visit while Jim and I ate. Zoran has done an immense amount of work creating, mapping and signing a couple hundred kilometers of mountain bike and hiking trails in the area and is a leader in the outdoors community. His wife mountain bikes as well.

Zoran said that by next year there will be a new big Chinese funded hotel in town next to the spa grounds. One might think that would be good news to the locals but this is likely not the case if the results are similar to elsewhere in the region where foreign investment has ruined the landscape and charm of villages and towns and has brought in rich foreigners who inundate places with busses and crowds while confining most of their spending to the foreign owned resorts. The locals end up with the problems of growth but not the benefits. I am a little bit afraid to return to see the impact.

As for good news, Zoran has been spearheading a project in conjunction with local governments and outside aid to plan and create bike lanes between Banja Koviljaca and Loznica. This will be a big improvement. Many people in these areas ride bicycles as their main or only form of transportation. I'm not referring to the spandex-clad people we see in the US. Here people of all ages use bikes as their main way of getting around, including bent over very old people in bulky layers of thick clothing, men in old suits, and women in long skirts and dresses. The roads are narrow and without shoulders and drivers speedy so bike lanes will be a huge improvement for safety. Zoran gave Jim a cycling jersey with the sponsors of this project listed on the neon yellow shirt. He wants Jim to wear it once back home and take pictures of himself wearing it on his bike.

We enjoyed our brief time with Tanja and Zoran. They both work for a mining company that recycles car batteries. They are almost done building a small summer house by the river and said we can be their guests when we visit next time. They reiterated that there are two Serbia's, the government, and the country. The country is wonderful and the government bad.

Yesterday morning we walked over to the spa so I could make a massage appointment (\$25 for 50 minutes). The woman told me 3:30, so Jim and I drove into Loznica and walked around for a couple hours. It's a small city but very bustling and busy with cars and pedestrians. Traffic flow is poor and intersections chaotic and hair-raising. There is a long pedestrian mall that is pleasant and functional, but not spruced up to attract tourists. We wandered the streets aimlessly and made our way to the big Orthodox Church at the edge of town set on a hill next to a school. A number of school kids heard us speaking English and said, 'tourists' and began calling out words they know in English- 'hello', 'what is your name?', 'goodbye'.

Inside the church we spoke with a friendly man who was dust mopping the floor. He said he had been best man for a guy from Texas who married a Serb woman. When he asked the Texan why he wanted to live in Serbia the guy replied that here you have everything and don't have to pay for anything, referring to how cheap everything is.

We bought a couple candles from the church shop and lit them and put them in the big metal boxes where people burn candles for the living and the dead.

When I walked to the spa at 3:20 for my massage (while Jim did a run up the road behind us to the ethno village where we stayed 4 years ago with Kendra and Squeak) I was told by a different woman at the counter that my appointment had been at 2:30! Jim later confirmed (what I knew was true) that the woman who made my appointment had said 3:30. In any case, I did not get to receive a massage. Maybe next time...

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Lazo and Ruzica



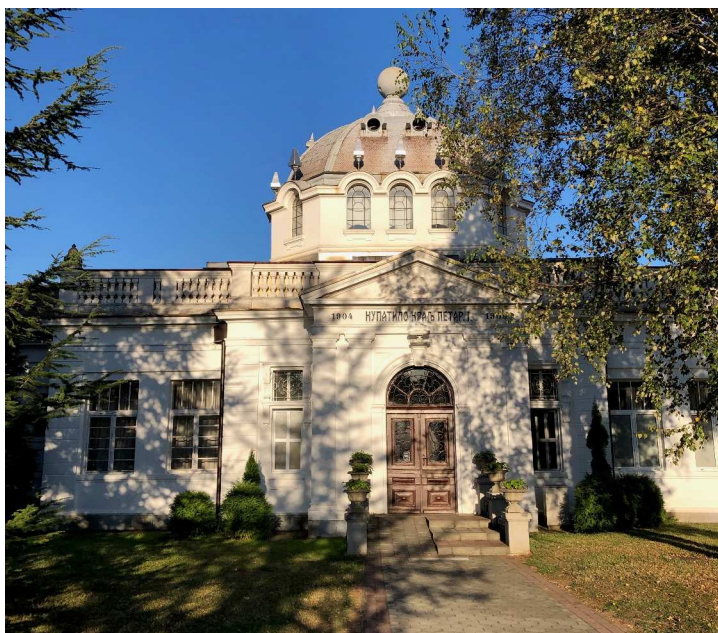
Djordje, Nevena, Katerina



Lunch at Rada's



Orthodox church in Loznica



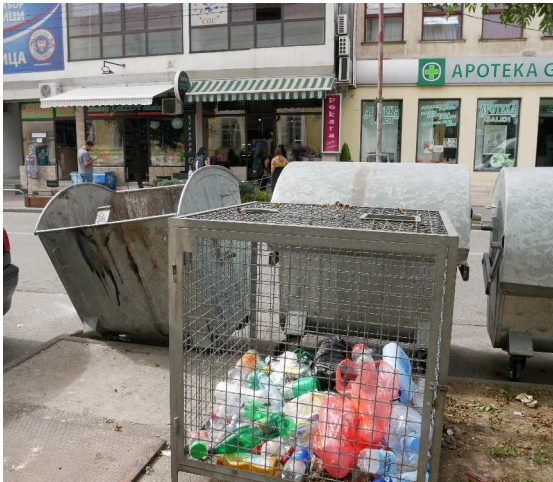
One of the spa buildings



Strajina, Nikola, Jelena at Rada's



Two of several Homer Simpson restaurants in Loznica, and a rakija bar next door



We saw numerous bins for collecting plastic waste around Serbia, something we've not seen in previous trips



Abandoned factory in Loznica



WWI monument at Gucevo above Banja Koviljaca (below) and the view (above)



Our apartment building in Banja Koviljaca

Miliva Serbia

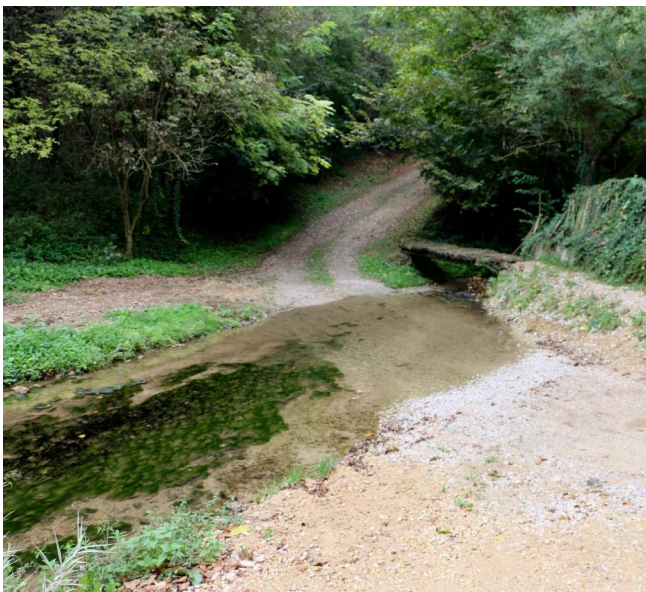
Well, we made it across the river to our cottage near Miliva after about a 4 hour drive. If we could have driven a modern road as the crow flies we probably could have gotten here in 2 or so hours but no such direct road exists. We had to drive north to Belgrade to catch the east-west highway and then head south to our destination. I was a little sad we weren't stopping in Belgrade but was eager to stay next in a small village.

We met Lilja in front of the little church in the old worn down small village of Miliva, a few miles from Despotovac. We followed her (in her Yugo) on a one lane road to the edge of the village, down a gravel driveway, across the gravelly stream that was about a foot deep and 12 feet wide, then up a steep driveway and around a tight turn to the gate of this little eco tourist house. The bright green house is well kept with spacious rooms but very dimly lit with blue-hued fluorescent bulbs which give me a headache. The property itself is magical, almost like a miniature Plitvice. They own about 2.5 hectares of woods, gardens, and, best of all, a crystal-clear stream with numerous terraced pools and small cascades running through the property. Lilja grew up in this village and her husband owns this property. She speaks no English but sat us down on the porch and smoked while serving us homemade rakija. Between google translate and my slowly growing vocabulary we managed to communicate pretty well. Before leaving she took us on a long walk around the property, pointing out things of interest and telling stories. There was a huge old wooden cask sitting unused that she said her kids used to like playing in. She showed us the garden and picked some huge squashes and a big bowl of cherry tomatoes for us and told us to help ourselves to more.

After Lilja left we walked back into the village to the market to see what we might find for dinner as there are no restaurants in the immediate area and we weren't really prepared to cook dinner for ourselves. The market is small and the vegetable selection meagre and unappealing. We were surprised to see security cameras in this tiny poor market and wondered if they have trouble with theft, and if so, who is doing the stealing- locals? kids? refugees? This small village populated almost entirely by old people is well off the main road, and the main road is not busy. It does not seem like a place that would have much theft.

We bought a big sausage and came home and made eggs with sausage, and squash on the side, and an odd salad of peppers, carrots and tomatoes. On our walk home from the market an old lady with very few teeth stopped us and talked at us in Serbian for a few minutes. I had no idea what she was saying except it included mentioning and showing us her bad teeth. She also pointed to my camera. I wondered if she was wanting money, maybe for taking a photo earlier of dried peppers hanging from a barn that might be on her property? Or maybe she was assuming since we had nice cameras we had money to spare? Or maybe she is just a bit off in the head. There seem to be such people in many of the villages we've been to.

We look forward to hanging outside by the stream tomorrow. We also hope to walk to the famous Manasija monastery. It's time now to close the iPad and enjoy the sounds of the stream and crickets...and the dairy man's loud traditional music blaring from his radio across the gulch.



Stream across the road to our cottage in Miliva



'Our' cottage



On the way to Miliva we wondered what happens when a train needs the bridge...



The church in Liva



The soccer field, church and gardens are the best maintained things in the village.



One of many interesting gates in the region



Miliva



Peppers drying and another gate



More from our yard in Miliva



Corn is abundant at this time of year



Unusual wood storage facility in Miliva



More from Miliva and along the way to the Manacija Monastery



Manasija Monastery

The sound of light rain last night was comforting. I slept ok, but too short, and woke for the third day in a row with an annoying headache. The morning was foggy but cleared up early.

I walked down to the stream and pools, appreciating all the work that has gone into creating a space that feels both natural and tastefully curated. Someone has planted a wide variety of trees, shrubs and patches of flowers as well as created various rustic benches and seating areas. I do not tire of the sounds of flowing water.

After breakfast (I had oatmeal for a change) we walked through the property out the far gate, crossed the stream on a very slippery log bridge, and found our way to the end of the path where there is a cave. The tourist info calls it a gorge but it seemed like a cave to us. There is a small church next to the cave and we wondered if centuries ago this cave might have been used as a sacred place.

We gathered our stuff and set out on foot through the village toward Manasija Monastery 4.5 miles away. We could have driven but felt a pilgrimage on foot was a better choice, plus we want to avoid unnecessary stream crossings in our car.

I love waking through villages rather than driving as I am not only able to greet people as we encounter them but also can pause and notice things I would otherwise miss, things such as:

- the many houses with small human faces sculpted high on their outer walls.
- names, faces and dates on the death notices on phone poles, sides of buildings and on big old trees
- fabulous gardens in front of and behind gates and fences
- gates with elaborate patterns and designs not common in the US
- pigs and chickens in courtyards
- bright red peppers hanging to dry in odd locations
- dogs and cats
- solar panels on a few homes
- wire cages where people can deposit their plastic bottles for recycling
- details of homes, barns and outbuildings both old and new that would not be up to code in the US
- people sitting on porches or in yards doing nothing (no phones in their hands!), another sight you don't see much in US cities.
- laundry hanging to dry....

Just about everyone returned our greetings, and a few more curious folks started talking with us in Serbian until we said we only speak English. Some people continue talking even when they know we don't speak their language. I admit I am continuing to get better in understanding the gist of what is being said sometimes. I still dream of coming here for an extended stay and doing an intensive course in Serbian.

Eventually the village road met the main road and that part of the walk was tedious, breathing in car fumes and walking a straight flat route past small shops mostly related to agriculture, cars or machinery but eventually we reached Despotovac where we turned left and slowly made our way up the hill to Manasija. Crossing the bridge over the river a woman of about 40 was very friendly with us even though she spoke no English. She wanted to know where we were from and specifically what city. She had never heard of Seattle. I always feel happy when I meet people who do not know my city. It's a reminder that we live in a big world and my reality is not important to most people.

Shortly before reaching Manasija we came across a large dragon made out of straw. He was not very frightening.

The monastery, also known as Resava, built in the early 15th century, is surrounded by high fortified walls. Sometimes the long steep flight of metal steps up to the top of the fort are open to visitors but it was not open today. As with every monastery here it has been attacked, repaired or rebuilt many times but much of the original refectory still stands. In the church about a third of the original paintings still exist. It's amazing to think that at one time just about every inch of the inside surfaces from stone floor to high domes were graced with richly colored paintings of saints and Biblical stories. Photography in the church is not allowed. Besides the big church there are also ruins of the refectory and other buildings within the high walls of the fort.

We bought a few candles and other things at the gift shop, and lit candles for family and placed them in the thing that I should learn the name of so I don't keep referring to it as the thing where people put candles! I sometimes have to google the custom in order to remind myself that people put candles in the upper tray for living people and in the lower tray for those who have died. If I forget I do both and figure I have everyone covered.

Our 4.5 mile walk home felt longer than 4.5 miles. Along the way we stopped for early dinner at a nearly empty restaurant in Despotovac with a friendly owner where we ate (outside, of course) salads and pizzas. A local boy of about 7 kept delighting himself by using a piece of grass to create a loud whistle, just like I used to do at that age. I liked the feel of Despotovac which was not touristy at all. We continued our somewhat painful walk home (my hip was hurting again) back through the village where a dog joined us and walked close to my leg all the way across the

stream and up to our cottage. The black cat we talked with this morning was waiting for us on the patio when we arrived.

It's not quite 7 pm and it is fully dark. Fall is definitely here.

This has been a good spot to spend a couple nights. While it is nice to enjoy the conveniences and amenities of more touristy places we are grateful to be able to stay in less developed areas where we get a better sense of ordinary life that feels quite different from our own ordinary lives.



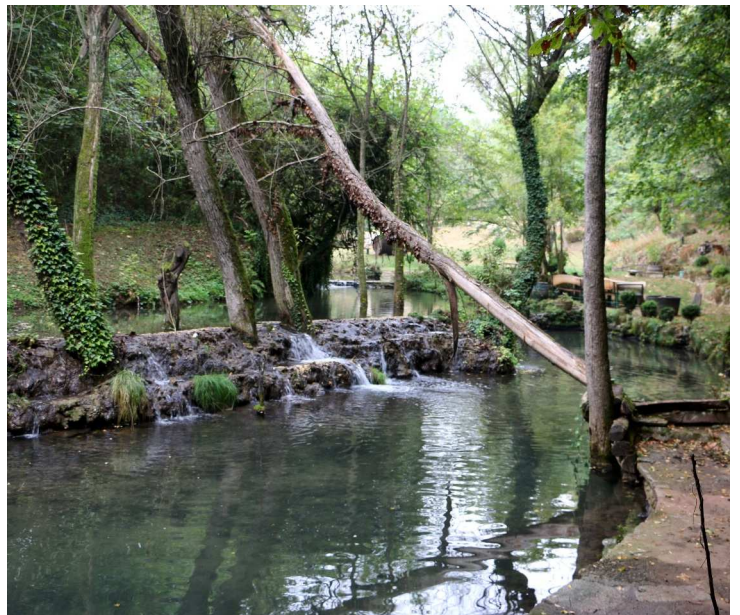
The 'gorge' by our place in Miliva



Church next to the 'gorge'

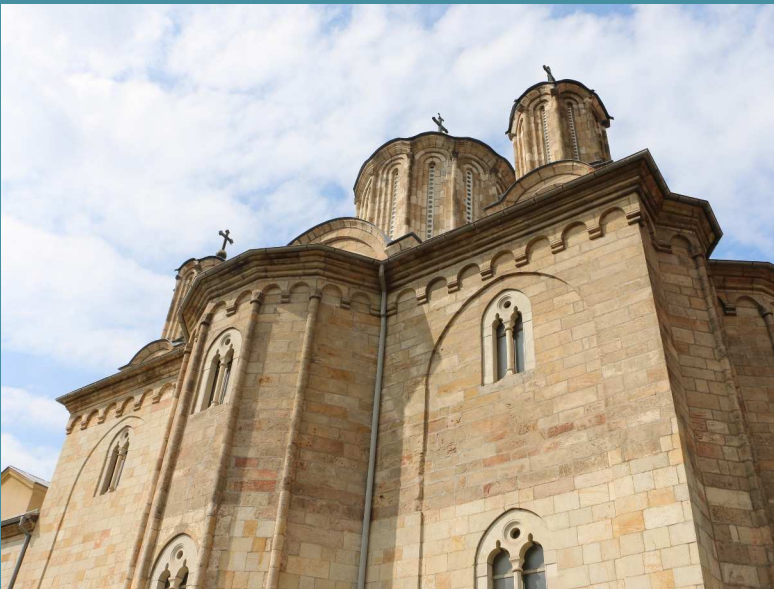


bridge back to our cottage after seeing the gorge



'Our' yard at the cottage

NEXT PAGE- Manacija Monastery



Miliva to Mataruska Banja near Kraljevo, Serbia

It rained a lot in the night and thundered briefly. Normally I love the sound of rain but last night lying sleepless in bed all I could imagine was the stream rising and making the road impassable for our little Clio. Also adding to my sleeplessness was the very loud chirping of a cricket that somehow had made its way into the house. Just as I normally love the sound of rain I also adore the sounds of crickets, however at such close range I found the noise to be disturbing in my sleepless state. Jim went searching for it but to no avail. I finally fell asleep at 4 am but only slept for 3 hours.

Maybe I can blame what happened later on my sleep deprived state. We ate a fine breakfast on the porch and then packed and cleaned up the house. Jim took a big load to the car and then our host arrived a few minutes early. Despite her repeated urging, 'poloko' (take it easy, no hurry) I found myself hurrying to gather up the last load and be on our way. I carefully looked around the house to be sure we hadn't forgotten anything. We parted with our host warmly and Jim and I successfully crossed the 'river' and headed southwest toward our next destination, a 2.5 hour drive away. The winding narrow road (in mediocre condition) passed through beautiful sparsely populated farmland with small mountains visible in the distance. Both of us commented on how much this region looks like Pennsylvania. It appears that corn is one of the biggest crops in this country. We see it everywhere both in large fields and in tiny yards between houses. And we've seen many tractors pulling open carts filled with shucked corn on roads big and small.

About 40 minutes into our drive I received a text from our host saying I'd left my iPad and journal on the terrace table! I had done a careful examination of the inside of the house for our belongings, and I know I looked at the table outside but somehow in my haste and sleep deprived state I obviously did not look closely enough. Had I merely forgotten a jacket or book we would not have bothered to turn around, but my iPad and journal are not replaceable so we turned around and drove 40 minutes back to our little village where our host's mother met us in front of the village church and gave me my stuff. We are grateful we got the message when we did rather than when we were farther along on our drive. I was surprised and bothered by the fact that I'd not paid closer attention to the whereabouts of these two items that are important to me.

In any case, we made it to our new home by about 2:15. Rather, we made it to the village. The directions provided by google were not correct, but given that access to this apartment requires turning down an unmarked tiny driveway and then driving across grass through a park to the back of our unmarked place it's no wonder that google didn't get it right. Luckily our host, Dan, happened to be passing by in his car and saw us in our car with Croatian plates (a rarity in rural Serbia) and figured we were his guests so we were able to follow him to the house.

We had yet to get the story of Mataruska Banja but it was clear that it at one time was a lovely spa similar in size to the one in Banja Koviljaca. Our upstairs apartment above Dan's house is on the edge of the spa grounds which now is an unmaintained park with large mature trees including a walnut tree in front of our balcony. There appears to be only one functioning building on the grounds, a rehabilitation hospital. The other dozen or more buildings are empty, deteriorating, and graffiti covered. At least some of the local graffiti artists are talented and have created large murals on the outside walls of many of the buildings.

...
We found the ATM that Dan directed us to at the one working building on the spa grounds, got our money, walked down the main street where we stopped at a tiny shop to add minutes to my phone card, then went to a pekara to get treats for tomorrow, then to the biggest market in town which was cramped as most markets are and not very big at all. A dog laid in the middle of the market parking lot unperturbed by cars, bikes and pedestrians. Despite the small size and economically dead condition of the village the street was relatively busy with people.

Later we walked to the pizza restaurant, seemingly now the only functioning restaurant in town and ate pizza (2nd day in a row) but without any salad (there was only pizza on the menu). I hope not to eat pizza again anytime soon! Our server urged us to get the small pizzas and we were glad he did as the small was equivalent to a large in the US. As usual we sat outside, and as usual stray dogs looked at us longingly for handouts.

When we arrived back at our place our host, Dan, was outside with his two boys and we stopped and had a long chat with him and learned about the spa. Historically the spa was successful when run by the old regime (Communist) but 7 years ago the newer private owners for some reason decided to close the spa and let the buildings and grounds quickly deteriorate. The saddest part is they did not close up the buildings to protect them. They left doors and windows open so the elements and vandals have done a lot of damage in a mere 7 years. The same people also closed the big hotel next to the spa as well as the community recreation center. Of course this had a huge impact on the small businesses in the community. As is true just about everywhere in these countries, those who are able leave the country for better opportunities. Dan likes raising his kids here and has no plans to leave although he wishes the owners would reopen the spa because this little town is really hurting due to the closure. It's a beautiful area with thickly forested hills and small mountains surrounding the village and is close to numerous monasteries and a 12th century fort. When the spa was open it was a good place for tourists to base from but now there are very few amenities for tourists.

We liked Dan but had a hard time when he kicked his sweet little friendly dog that kept jumping up on us as we stood talking. He didn't kick him hard but we cringed nonetheless. Every time we came and went from our apartment we would stop and talk to and pet this sweet little dog that was tied up in the yard on a short chain.

Dan's little apartment is a one of very few in this town and it would appeal only to budget conscious travelers. It is on the second floor of his house and is clean but very small and the layout a bit odd for those used to American apartments. The kitchen is about 4 feet wide and contains the only sink in the place. The minimal appliances are...not up to par, but work. As usual there is no good knife, no spatula, no good fry pan, and no easy way for heating tea water, but Jim is resourceful. The bathroom has a toilet and shower and while the water flow is light at least the shower hose holder is not broken like in many places. \$22 per night feels like a fair price given its location, balcony and comfortable bed. There is a loft but we are sleeping on the double bed that takes up much of the room downstairs. The balcony looks out upon the big trees of the spa grounds and is a great place to eat, sip tea, and enjoy the many locals passing through the park on foot and on bikes.



Our apartment and abandoned hotel behind it



Mataruska Banja

Zica (pronounced zheecha) Monastery and Maglic fort, Serbia

I slept well despite the occasional barking by stray dogs throughout the night. This town (similar to most) has a lot of stray dogs that lounge and wander around, sometimes singly, sometimes in groups of 2 or 3. They and the stray cats especially like hanging around the outdoor restaurant patios. They also have a fondness for lying on roads, sidewalks and in parking lots. Usually they are mellow and shy and starved for love in addition to food.

We ate breakfast on the balcony (clear warm morning) then drove a couple miles east to the renown Zica monastery (built in early 12th century) unique in that it is painted a rich red. It looked like it could fit well in New Mexico. Some speculate they chose red to remind them of all the bloodshed in the region.

As with every monastery this one has been overtaken and ruined by invaders numerous times and this one also suffered in a rare earthquake in the 1980s, but has been restored numerous times over the centuries and is in very good condition. Many frescos are still intact. The paintings in this place are said to show a great advancement in technique which was apparent to me. The expressions on faces were more realistic and expressive than those we've seen in some places we've visited. Photography is forbidden inside the church but the exterior is a photographer's dream so I was content with that.

This monastery is still active and we saw numerous nuns clothed in black habits (not sure if the Orthodox refer to them as habits or if that is reserved for Catholics), most of whom were friendly. We happened to be there at noon when the wonderful church bells rang.

The place was not busy aside from a class of school kids who were leaving when we arrived. We saw a handful of Orthodox visitors who kissed the various icons as they made their way around the church. Of the few foreign tourists there was one guy who shamelessly took pictures inside but the rest were respectful.

The grounds are well kept with numerous outbuildings including a very old small chapel, a bell tower, lodging for the nuns and an open-air small gift shop where we bought a few things.

Jim and I both loved both the look and the feel of this monastery which is now one of our favorites. The place felt warm, safe, quiet, peaceful, and welcoming, a good place for respite, renewal or a retreat.

From there we drove back through 'our' town and south about twenty minutes through the Ibar canyon to see the Maglic fort visible high above the road. We parked next to a small dead snake by another roadside spring-fed water fountain and cautiously crossed the winding small road that is a major route for semi-trucks and cars, and found the foot bridge over the river that leads to the path to the fort. There was a sign in Serbian in big bold letters that we could not read but based on the look of the dilapidated bridge we assumed it might be a warning to cross at your own risk. Later, after returning to Seattle I looked up the message on the sign using google translate and discovered it said, 'Attention! Use of this bridge is prohibited'. Speaking of signs, we saw a sign on the road that said something like, your safety is your responsibility, not other drivers'. That was not reassuring given that so many drivers speed and drive in the middle of the road and pass recklessly. I don't know if this means if someone hits you the at-fault driver has no responsibility to compensate you for car or bodily damages.

As we crossed the swaying bridge, tilted significantly to one side and replete with missing and rotting boards over the wide quickly moving river below we understood why a warning sign was posted. Walking 15 minutes up the trail we wondered why those in charge decided to upgrade the path up the hill before upgrading the bridge.

At the 13th century hilltop fort we encountered only 4 other people, a group of foreign tourists older than us. We enjoyed walking around the rocky ruins including climbing steep laddered steps up to a walkway on top of the wall. We had great views of the surrounding hills (drier than the area just a few miles north, reminding us of California), river and road below.

After safely re-crossing the rickety bridge and before heading home we ate a delicious lunch at an inconspicuous but extremely popular restaurant a few meters up the road. We later learned the place is known for its fresh trout but our chicken and steak kabobs were excellent as well. It appeared to be a popular stop for passing truckers, making it the nicest truck stop I've ever seen. The meal for the two of us including full dinner plates, two salads and a large bottle of mineral water was about \$13. In contrast with Croatia, Serbia continues to be a very cheap place to visit. We've been paying between \$20-\$30/ night for very sufficient clean lodging. Each place has quirks but we have been comfortable.

Last night we sat on our balcony enjoying the locals of all ages passing through the well used park. As I've mentioned before, many people, young and old, get around on old bikes, often with children riding on the handlebars or the back of the bike, with no one wearing helmets or using child seats.

Today we plan to visit the highly regarded Studenica monastery an hour south and then head across the border to Montenegro where we will spend the night with the parents of our young friend, Kristina, who insist on hosting us in gratitude for helping Kristina and her boyfriend get to Chicago where they are earning about 10 times more money than if they worked in Montenegro.



Looking toward entry to monastery



Entry to Zica Monastery

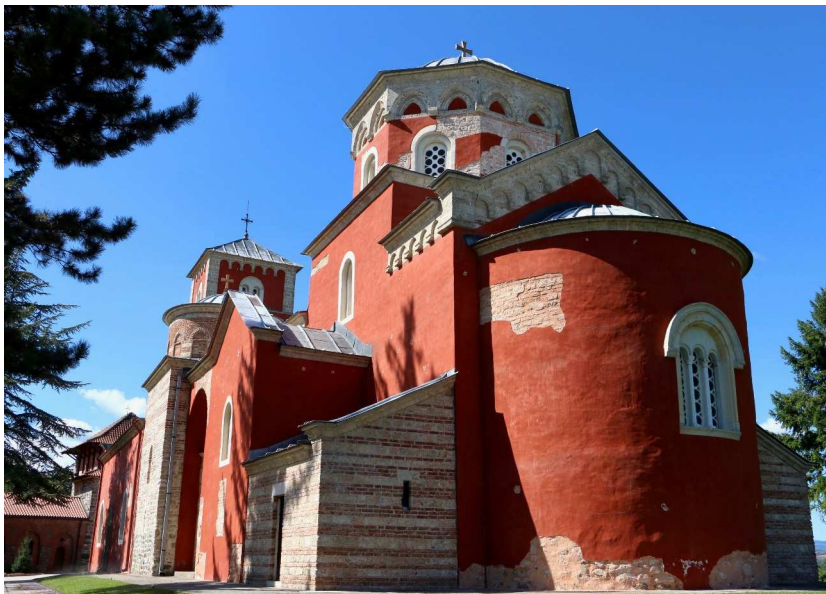




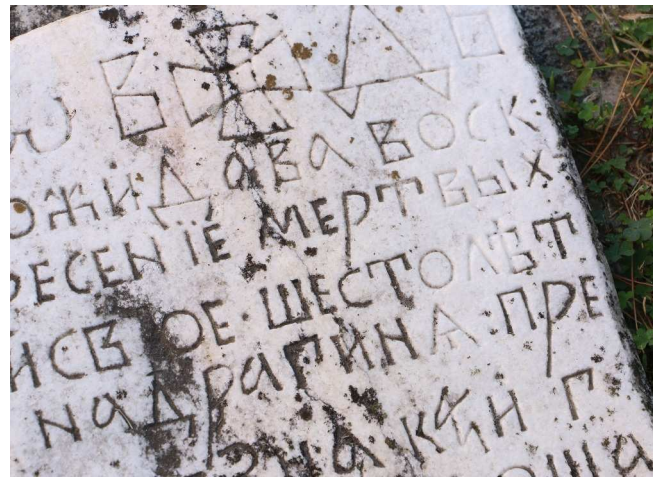
traditional wooden gong to summon for prayer
on special occasions



Bell tower and old chapel



Ceiling of grotto



grave marker



Old chapel

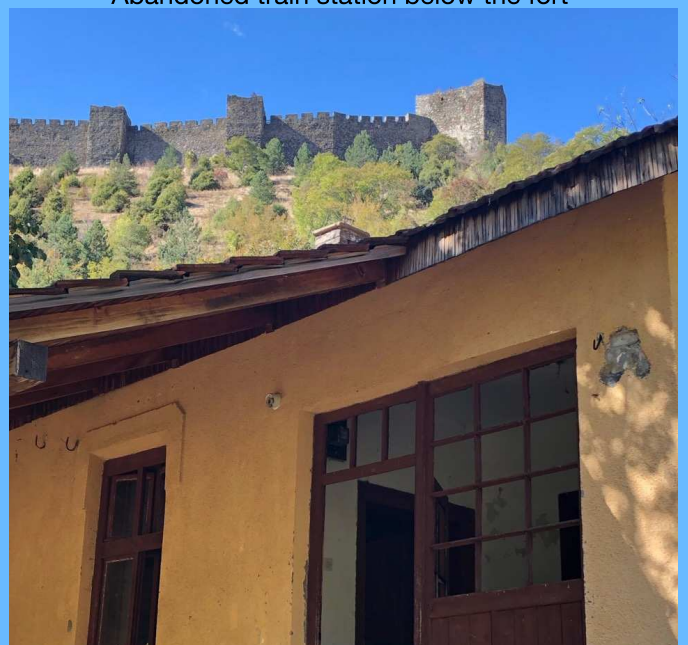




Rickety bridge and Maglic Fort



Abandoned train station below the fort





Pix from around Mataruska Banja



Studenica monastery

After breakfast on the balcony we packed and drove south for about an hour through the beautiful Ibar Canyon to the famous Studenica monastery built in the 13th century. Numerous kings were coronated there and Lazar endowed it and is buried there along with other notable people.

Even though it was a sunny Saturday morning the place was not crowded although as we were leaving a group arrived for a wedding. We wondered what was behind the wedding tradition of people putting small rolled towels between the car and the side mirror.

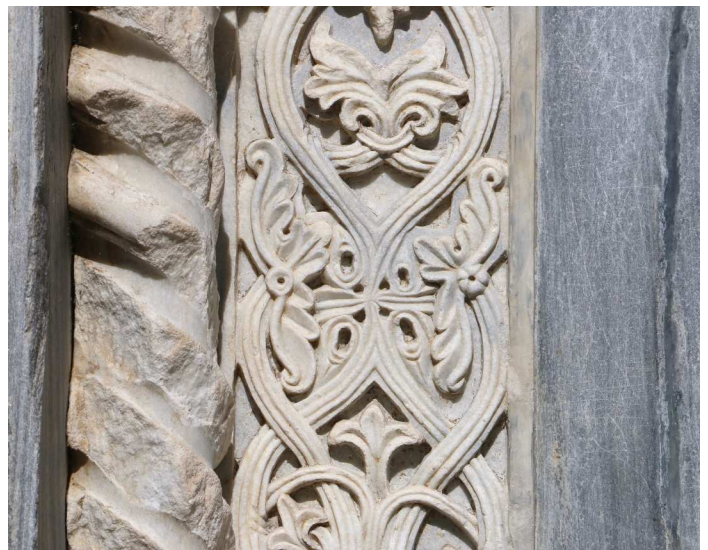
This stone complex is surrounded by high forested hills and farms not near any town or village. This monastery, too, has been attacked and renovated many times. The frescos inside are from many periods ranging from the originals painted in the 13th century up through an extensive 6 year restoration project currently in process. The inside of the main church has sections of scaffolding along many of the walls where artists meticulously work to restore and preserve the frescos. I watched a few of them for a while and concluded it is not a job I would want because it looks tedious and requires one to crane one's neck for long periods to get to certain spots. I wanted to talk with one of the restorers but they were busy and I don't know if they spoke English. I wanted to know where they were from and if this was just a job to them or if they have any connection to Serbia or the Orthodox Church.

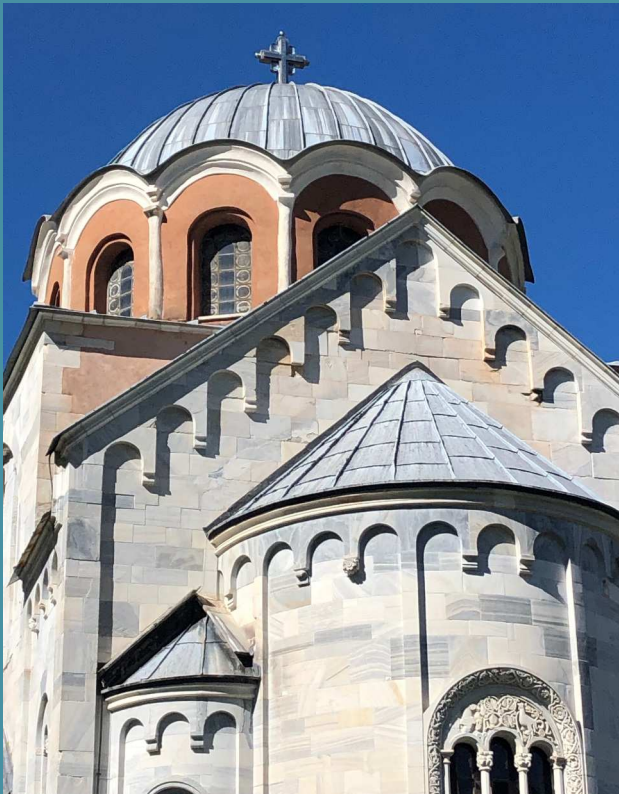
To describe the monastery as beautiful does little to convey the qualities of the place. It is impressive without being grandiose. The atmosphere of the space (smelling faintly of incense) feels sacred. It is easy to believe many prayers have been said and chants sung here. I've said before that I feel a palpable difference between Catholic and Orthodox churches. The Orthodox places feel more earthy, cave-like and supportive of turning inward with humility. Many Catholic Churches feel showy as if meant to impress. While I appreciate the beauty of Catholic churches I prefer the feel of the Orthodox places. That said, when I am in these churches I also am aware of the down sides to the Orthodox Church with its corrupt priests with unsavory ties to politicians. But I feel at home in these spaces nonetheless.

When I entered this church and saw people lighting candles, crossing themselves, kissing icons, relics and tombs, and backing out of the doorways I was almost moved to tears. I know nothing about the inner lives of these people or if they follow the Orthodox ways out of habit or true devotion but I was touched nonetheless as I considered the history and current state and decline of Serbia and the region, and the passing of time in general.

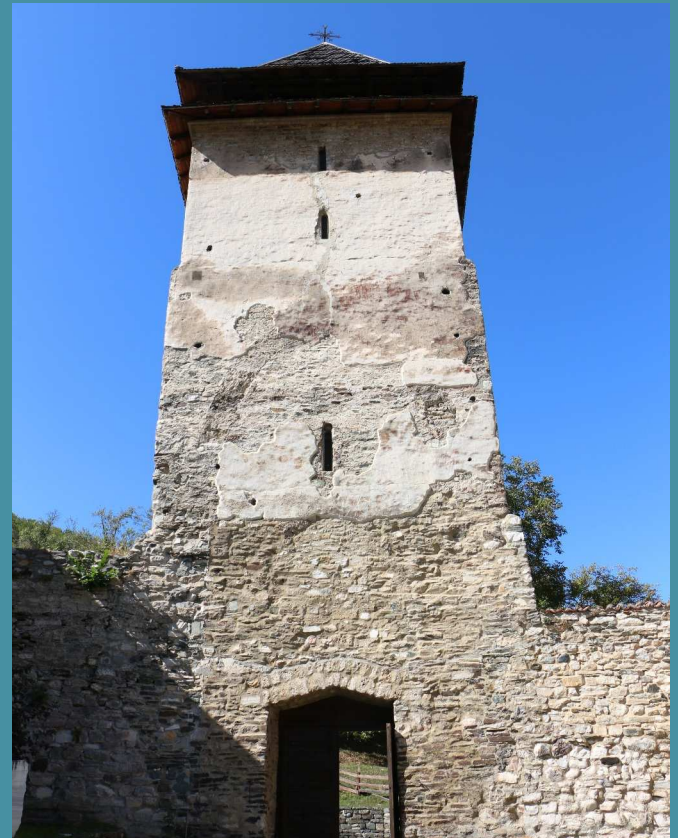
After a visit to the gift shop we resumed our trip south toward Novi Pazar, a mostly Muslim town with a very different feel from the area to its north. The streets were chaotic with cars going every which way without the courtesy and predictability found in much of the west. It looks like an interesting place to explore if one can do so without driving much. The area to the west of Novi Pazar is also predominantly Muslim with the only churches visible in the towns we passed being old monasteries and ruins.

As I've written before, even though I am all for cultural and religious diversity and commingling and coexistence, I understand why some local people whose families have lived in a region for centuries among like-minded neighbors might not feel eager to welcome immigrants and refugees who bring a different culture with them. It is not fair of me to pass judgement given my very minimal exposure to this area but I admit I feel a slight clenching when I pass by towns small and large with new severe looking shiny mosques and their tall skinny pointy minarets that have been funded by outside sources very different in culture from the Balkan Muslims. I wonder how much influence the foreign Muslims are having socially and politically on the historically more liberal Bosniak Muslims.





Studenica Monastery



Into Montenegro

We came upon the one lane border crossing unexpectedly having seen no signs of it ahead of time. There was a gap of maybe a couple kilometers between exiting Serbia and entering Montenegro which seemed a bit odd to us.

Southwestern Serbia and eastern Montenegro are mostly unpopulated regions of big hills and small mountains. Leaves are beginning to change colors so many of the hillsides were yellow, orange or red mixed in among the green. I kept commenting on the beauty.

About 4 hours after leaving Studenica we arrived in the town of Mojkovac where we stopped for gas and SIM cards to use in Montenegro. We were pleased with ourselves for finding Kristina's parent's house in the village of Polje a few miles outside of Mojkovac with no trouble after staying there last year for a night.

Kristina is the girlfriend of Dusan. Dusan's mom (Slava) owns a farm in a nearby village where we stayed several years ago and became friends with the young couple who are temporarily working in the US so they can save money to better establish themselves in Montenegro. Kristina's parents hold us in high regard for helping them come to the US even though we did very little.

Kristina's parents, Mico and Bojana, are doing some improvements on their house thanks to financial help from Kristina and Dusan. Bojana is satisfied with their modest house and would rather Kristina not give them money so they can save faster and come home sooner, but Kristina and Dusan want her parents to be more comfortable. In any case, a friend was there for the weekend helping turn the attic into a bedroom for Kristina's parents. They've also finished the exterior of the house and built railing-less stairs from the railing-less balcony up to the attic. The small main floor is unchanged.

We were greeted warmly with homemade rakija and Turkish coffee. Mico and Bojana do not speak English so we did a lot of gesturing and smiling and used google translate to talk in more depth. Sometimes the translations are way off (and pretty funny) but mostly good enough to get the gist of what is said. We also Skyped briefly with Kristina who was so happy we were there with her parents.

Their house is in a 'village', Polje, a few miles outside of Mojkovac. I'm not sure how much property they own but the house is surrounded by fields where a couple cows and goats graze. They also have many bee boxes. As with most rural areas in the Balkans you never have to look far to see wood piles and haystacks. Mountains line both sides of the valley which is wide at this point but narrows dramatically up the road.

Our time there was wonderful in all ways except for one awkward issue. In addition to their cat Tigger they have a young dog named Buba that they keep tied up on a very short chain out front. When they got her as a puppy they tried having her in the house but didn't have either the knowledge or patience to train her so they decided to leave her outside. She has a little wood house and a concrete slab but she clearly is hungry for interaction and freedom to roam. Also we noticed her eyes were goopy and her collar way too tight. As guests we felt in a quandary. We didn't want to be intrusive, critical or patronizing, but we also had a hard time seeing the sweet dog confined so rigidly. The next day we asked if they ever take Buba for walks and Bojana said no because the dog refuses to go with them when on a leash. We asked if we could take her for a walk, which we did, but indeed the dog refused to walk on its leash so Jim carried her around. Finally he put her down and she bounded off happily. We also mentioned the tight collar and Bojana was willing to loosen it a notch.

After we left Kristina wrote explaining why her parents keep the dog tied up. They fear if she ran too far she might get hit by a car, something that happened to a previous dog. I wrote saying we know they love the dog and we didn't mean to be critical or offensive. Kristina reassured us that no offense was taken.

Saturday evening Bojana served a big dinner of extremely juicy fall off the bone tender lamb, stuffed peppers, homemade cheese, potatoes with cheese, homemade bread and yogurt-milk (my favorite!). For dessert we had a cake layered with cream and covered with chocolate made by Danika, an older neighbor who hung out at the house both Saturday night and Sunday morning. She is retired from working at a textile factory (now closed) where she was also a star handball player on the factory team. Bojana works at a factory that makes leather work gloves. She works from 7am to 3 and earns about 200 euros a month.

Bojana said numerous times that she considers us part of the family and is forever grateful for our help getting Kristina and Dusan to the USA. She cried when talking about how deeply she misses having Kristina nearby. It could still be another couple years before they leave Chicago and return to Montenegro.

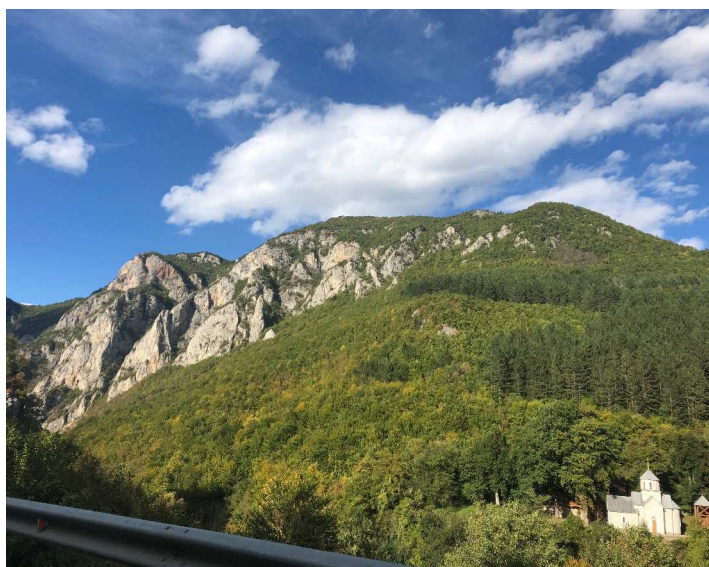
Jim and I slept well in the small bed in the small room and next morning were served rakia and Turkish coffee as well as leftover hard boiled eggs and dried ham and cheese from the previous night's appetizer plate.

Mid morning Kristina's longtime friend and neighbor, Neda, and her twin 11 year old siblings Pavle and Lana, came for a visit. We learned Neda is pregnant, due in January. She has had an uncomfortable pregnancy and is very afraid of suffering in labor. She would prefer a C section if possible. I always feel sad when I encounter women

afraid of childbirth and wish I could in some way help them feel more at ease with the process. She plans to stay home with the baby (Vasily) for a year and then have her mom take care of him. She is getting married in a week and wished we could come to the wedding. Her husband is an only child and both parents are dead, and his god father does not believe in God so they cannot have their wedding in a church. 350 people are coming to the wedding! Lana and Pavle are as bright eyed and fun as I recalled. They seemed to like the various gifts we bought them- a Waldo book, chocolate and other little things. When I asked Lana what she likes to do for fun she said, 'learn, and play'. Pavle likes soccer. He and Jim took a walk together and once again Pavle commandeered Jim's camera and took lots of photos.

We ate a big brunch of a potato-meat moussaka, cheese, stuffed peppers, various rolls and breads, yogurt-milk, homemade juice, homemade jam, and cheese baked in pastry (pita). Bojana kept asking us to eat more. When we left she gave us a bottle of her juice, a bottle of their rakija, cheese, dried ham, bread and rolls!

After sitting on the terrace with Danka and sipping more coffee, chitchatting and walking the dog we got ready to leave at about 1:30. Bojana seemed to enjoy the little gifts we got her- applets and cotlets, a bracelet, and sculpted tiny flowers, all made in or near Seattle. She kept wanting to take photos of us to send to Kristina. She reiterated that we are family to her and are welcome every time we come to Montenegro. She gave numerous big hugs and kisses and we were on our way through the impressive deep Tara canyon to Zabljak.



On the way to Mojkovac.
below-Kristina's family's house in Polje



View from the deck, and neighbor and his goat



Kristina's house upper right



Mico and Bojana, Kristina's parents and our dear hosts



Pavle and Lana (twins)

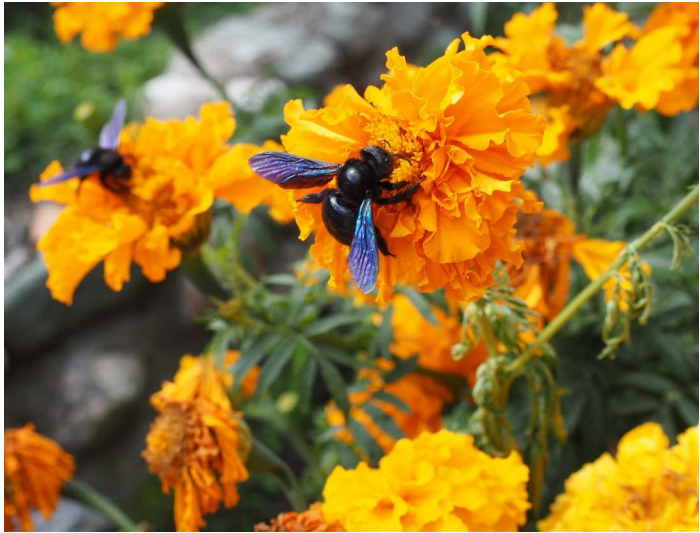


Mico and friend helping him with remodel



Family's house and hives

Black bees with purple wings



Breakfast!



Zabljak Montenegro

The road from Mojkovac in the valley to Zabljak on a high plateau climbs and winds steadily upward through Tara Canyon. This narrow canyon at its deepest is 4300 feet deep, the deepest canyon in Europe. The drive is beautiful and the road despite its narrow curviness and dark tunnels is not too scary in most places but there are a few spots with no guardrails. As usual I kept repeating, 'wow!', and, 'this is SO pretty!'.

Instead of staying at our usual apartment near Zabljak we booked three nights at an 'eco farm and katun' through Meanderbug that is about a 15 minute drive from town. Brit, the owner of Meanderbug who we have met a couple times on previous trips, thought we'd love the place and its owner, Zoran.

We thought we had clear directions however it turns out the road from town usually used to access the place is torn up and closed so we tried following the detour route shown on google maps and ended up on a bad rocky road that dead-ended at a house in the woods. Luckily a guy came out and called Meanderbug for us and instructed us to go to the bus station in town and Zoran would meet us. As I've said, Jim is a good driver on bad roads but it's one thing to drive one's own car and another to drive a rental car that is not made for such roads.

We met up with Zoran (the 'bus station' was an unmarked parking lot) and followed him on the detour route that was rocky, narrow in places, and rough but we finally made it to the 'house above the mountains'. As best we can tell this place, along with numerous farms and katuns (once referred to traditional shepherd huts but now more loosely refers to mountain houses and cabins) is actually in Durmitor National Park.

This is a scenic spot nestled against a small mountain covered with evergreen forest in one direction and a rolling field of tall pale yellow grasses in the other. While lovely it's not what we expected. One of the reasons we like coming to Zabljak is to drink in the spectacular views of jagged mountains but this spot, while scenic, does not offer the big views. We began wondering if we might want to stay two nights instead of three not only because of the lack of view but also due to the rough access in and out of the place. I know I sound picky but we want to make the best use of our finite days, and this place is pricier than anywhere else we've stayed (60 euros per night including breakfast and dinner).

In any case, upon arrival Zoran sat us down at an outside table and began pouring us (homemade of course) rakija. We introduced ourselves as best we could given our limited amount of shared language. We agreed he would serve dinner at 7.

The accommodations are interesting and pleasant in a rustic way. The cabin has several rooms with beds but we were the only guests and were able to select the room we liked best. We chose the one with views upon the rolling fields. The cabin walls are covered with a few thin tapestries but mostly with old wallpaper tacked loosely over the wallboards. When the breezes blow the wallpaper rattles due to wind sneaking in through the cracks of the cabin. There is no heat source in the cabin and while we were plenty warm under heavy wool blankets while we slept, we were pretty cold before bed when just sitting around. Many old photos of Zoran's family hang upon the walls. He is married and has a son (who speaks decent English) and mother, and in summer they are all usually at the katun to help but in fall they return to Podgorica and Zoran is left to host alone.

The bathroom is partially open to the outside. Zoran made the outdoor wooden sink situated between the doors to two toilet/shower stalls open to the fresh air in the upper part of the doors. Translated this means the toilet seat is cold at night and it's best to shower when the sun is still shining as at night the temps dropped into the low 40s. The good news is there is plenty of hot water. And thanks to our many visits to Kendra's over the years (in north Idaho where until recently there was no indoor bathroom) the experience of chilly toileting and ablutions was familiar and no problem.

Zoran serves meals in an unheated rustic room in a different house with views out over the field. When we arrived for dinner he poured more rakija and served a home cooked meal of chicken soup, fresh tomatoes, chard and potatoes, bread, cheese, and chicken breasts baked with millet in a tasty sauce. For dessert he brought out plums fried in dough, a traditional dish we've had a few times over here. It was all organic, home grown and delicious.

Next morning we ate at 8 (an omelette-type dish with potatoes, bread, homemade jam and honey, and cheese along with what I am guessing was very strong chamomile tea). The previous afternoon he served us another herbal tea made from a plant in the area that is supposedly great for digestion. He showed me the plant but I didn't recognize it. The leaves are a bit prickly like nettles but it did not look like nettles. I really liked it.

Jim ventured out with the car to meet up with a young local guy, Boris (former IT guy who quit his job to follow his love for outdoor activities) in town who rents out bikes. He ended up renting his own bike to Jim, 30 euros for the day. Jim had a wonderful 5 hour ride on trails and small roads in the mountains around town.

Meanwhile, after sitting in the field by our katun doing morning practices (and enjoying the playful companionship of the wind which would hint at its approach with a slight rustling of the grass then suddenly swoop in like a river creating a new path), I set off on foot down the overgrown road/trail in the direction Zoran had pointed toward a

scenic overlook of Tara Canyon. Zoran pointed the way as if the path would take me directly to the destination in about 3 km. I walked around the big field, passed a few katuns and came upon a gravel road with a choice to go right or left. I trusted my gut and chose right figuring, as Merton says, 'in any direction one might have a fine walk' but hoping my choice would lead me to the viewpoint. Soon I came to another spot where I again had to choose between right and left. I chose right again. I walked through forest until I came to a one lane paved road with another choice to go right or left. Again I guessed and this time went left. As I walked along wondering where the road was leading me two cars and a motorcycle passed me going in the same direction so I trusted maybe they were looking for the lookout as well, and indeed after about 45 minutes the road ended and I arrived at the viewpoint (Curevac) over the canyon. A sign pointing up a rocky trail indicated it was another kilometer to what I presumed might be an even better vantage point.

The trail follows the edge of the cliff so all along the way there are many spots to 'oo' and 'ahh' from while being careful not to go too close to the edge as the drop is a few thousand feet to the valley below. Finally I reached the highest point, Durmitor, with spectacular 360 degree views including the Tara River 4000+ feet below, steep rocky cliffs, high grassy plateaus, green farmland and orange roofed homes far below, and the grand rugged mountains to the west.

When I arrived there were only two couples at the top but within 15 minutes 15-20 more people showed up. I overheard various people introducing themselves and among the hikers were people from Israel, England, Germany, Russia, France, Australia and the US. I didn't mind the small crowd but eventually noticed another high nub nearby and walked over and sat there for a couple hours mostly doing nothing. The people cleared out eventually and I was alone for a while until I heard music coming from the spot where the crowd had been. I looked over and saw and heard a young man playing the traditional Serbian one-stringed instrument, the gusle, singing in a loud, robust beautiful voice what I guessed was a traditional Serb story-poem-song. I could only understand a few of the words but he appeared to be singing about the beauty of this spot. I felt grateful to receive this unexpected gift, a personal serenade. I wanted to talk with him and his two companions but they went down a different trail so they did not pass by where I was sitting.

After my hike and Jim's ride Zoran invited us down into his living quarters, a windowless small room with a couch, chair, table, tv and kitchen to hang out with him and his brother-in-law, Dragoje, while Zoran cooked our dinner. As is true for many Serbs, these guys were very physically expressive with us, not in any inappropriate ways, but rather conveying warmth and friendliness through their proximity and contact. Dragoje speaks no English but talked at us enthusiastically as the two of them poured rakia for us again and again as we chatted and laughed. My tiny Serbian dictionary helped a bit as did google translate but mostly we gestured and laughed. I learned the word for joke in Serbian (pronounced shala). They agreed that the region functioned better and was better for most people when the countries were united as Yugoslavia. Everyone was each others' brother or sister whether Serb, Croat, Bosnian or Montenegrin.

In addition to rakija Zoran served simply salted baby potatoes baked to perfection. Delicious. We had told Zoran we decided to stay only two nights instead of three and would be leaving the next day for Virpazar. He and Dragoje asked hopefully each time after pouring rakija and laughing about something with us, 'no Virpazar tomorrow?! You stay here!' They were enticing us not to leave. One thing Dragoje told us was when toasting 'zivjeli' it is very important to look at the other people in the eye when you toast.

At 7 Zoran sent us up to the eating room and served a delicious goulash, bread, and more of the baby potatoes we had eaten downstairs along with plums that he recommended putting in the goulash which was actually a great combo.

Jim and I headed back to our cold room where we sat bundled in layers and covered by wool blankets. We had noticed an old portable heater in the hall but weren't sure how safe or trustworthy it was so we did not try using it. Next morning for breakfast we were given eggs with special local tiny mushrooms Zoran had collected, and fresh tomatoes, fluffy homemade rolls and more of his jam and honey, and more local tea. Before leaving we gave Zoran a few of the apples from Ruzica's tree (we won't be able to eat all they gave us) and an organic Theo's chocolate bar and took pictures together. After taking a couple pictures he asked us to wait a moment and he retrieved a hat from his house that said 'extreme intimo' (extreme intimacy) on its front.

Even though the spot and facilities weren't exactly what we had been looking for we both thoroughly enjoyed our time there and would happily go back. I say this every time we visit but I really want to learn Serbian so I can communicate better with people here who don't speak English.



Scene from Jim's ride around Zabljak



Below- view from my hike along the way to the overlook



Zoran, our host in Zabljak

Zoran's place

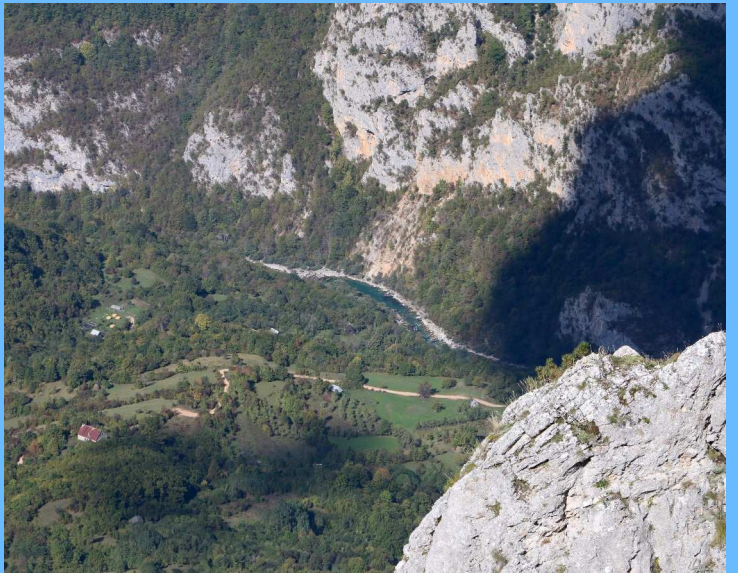


Bathroom with wood sink made by Zoran

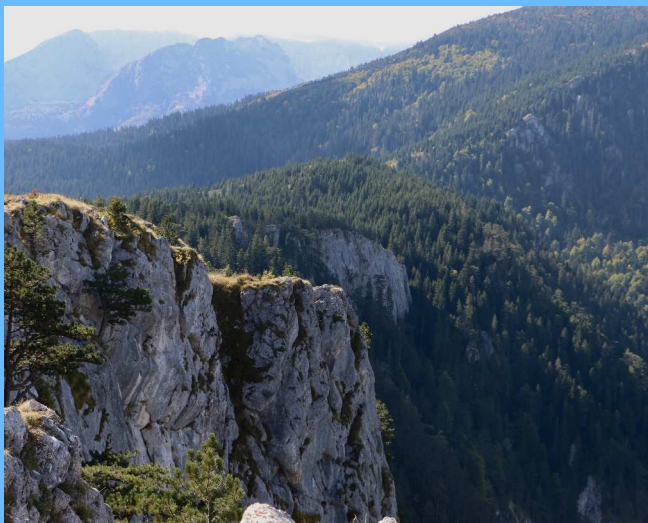




Scenes from my hike



Telephoto view of river far below





First things first- rakija



Breakfast



Below- our room



Zabljak to Kolasin Montenegro

We chose to backtrack through Mojkovac to get to the town of a Kolasin rather than trying a smaller more direct road since we weren't sure of the latter's condition. The drive was uneventful but spectacular with many more 'wow!'s and 'this is SO pretty!'. Leaves on some of the trees and shrubs were already red and orange.

Along the way we stopped at two places we'd been to on previous trips. One was the small Dobrilovina monastery near Mojkovac, where the same tall thin middle aged nun who opened the church for us last time unlocked the door again and gave me a long skirt to wear over my pants.

Our other stop was at a short trail near the monastery that led to a painted old metal bridge over the clear blue-green Tara river where we hiked last time up a small steep rough road that has since been widened. I again created a little offering to the place with colorful stones from the riverbank.

We had stayed in a Kolasin for a couple nights in a nice room by the stream when here in 2017 but chose a place on a different edge of town for this visit. We almost made it to the apartment without needing help but didn't see anything at the gps coordinates we'd been given that looked like the house in the picture. We stopped on the road and called the host for help and it turns out we were literally right in front of it. The photo they'd given was of the view of the back of the house, not the side that faces the street.

We were greeted by a sweet old dog with short legs (Lili) and a kind woman who looked to be in her mid 40s who speaks no English. Her teenage son was able to tell us in English some basic info about the place which is much smaller than I'd expected based on the description on booking.com. The main room (where we decided to sleep on a fold out couch) is of ok size but the bedroom, kitchen and bathroom are tiny. Once again there is no sink in the bathroom, but there is a washer, tub with no shower curtain, toilet and a water heater on the wall that I only hit my head on once. The narrow space into the kitchen between the corner of the small stove and the counter where the sink is requires careful maneuvering so as not to hit one's head on the cabinets. The space between the two small beds in the bedroom is about 6 inches and we thought it would be tough navigating our way through the kitchen to the bathroom at night which is why we chose to sleep in the front room.

Once we unloaded our stuff our host came over from her old stone house next door (that from the outside looks in need of repair) with a plate of warm fluffy freshly made donuts. We both ate 4 (in our defense they were small)! After doing a load of laundry that seemed like it would never end, and hanging our stuff on our host's back porch we walked about ten minutes into town where we bought some groceries and ate dinner at Restoran Vodenica, a place by the stream we'd liked last time we were here. Everything was good except for the potatoes which were dry and hard. Even with our 3-euro bottle of sparkling water our dinner came to only about 20 euros, more than we've been paying lately but still reasonable given the large portions.

Although our room and bed were comfortable (our host started a fire for us in the wood stove using 2-year old wood she was proud of) I had a terrible time falling asleep both nights there and was awake till about 3 am.

Next day after eating veggies with eggs and leftover donuts we drove a short way up the road behind town to the local ski area with hopes of finding a place to hike. There's a mega huge roadwork project happening all the way to the ski area and on up the valley so the road was busy with large heavy trucks and equipment and it was noisy and dusty. (We later learned they are building another ski area just up the road. Without knowing the details this does not seem like a good idea as the current ski area does not generate a large draw, and all the development in this previously quiet area will make it a less appealing place for visitors seeking quiet, hiking and staying at eco-katuns in the surrounding mountains). After some grumpy interactions between us we decided not to hike up the road but to see if there was a trail at the ski area. We began a steep ascent on a rough rocky service road after confirming with two construction workers that the road would lead to the top of Cupovi peak. We hoped the way would be obvious, which it was in most places. But it was STEEP! I kept hoping the view would be worth the 2000+ foot elevation gain, and indeed it was!

Quite a way up the road we encountered three guys with weed whippers stuffed into a Lada (a sturdy Russian car) that was somehow able to make it up and down this extremely steep road. We were impressed!

With every few steps our view got better. At some point the road petered out and we continued to hike straight up through brilliantly colored tall grasses, flowers and low shrubs bounded by forests with many bright yellow trees on both sides of the ski run.

Eventually we found ourselves above tree line amid grassy hills covered with low bright red blueberry shrubs. Two hours after leaving the parking lot and truck noise far below we made it to the windy top of the ski area and the top of Mt. Cupovi. We had vast views in every direction. It was not cold but very breezy and all afternoon dark clouds kept passing by but luckily the rains did not start until nighttime.

Once back in town we walked to a different restaurant, Konoba, where we ate a better dinner (20 euros) than the previous night. At my urging we sat outside despite the cool temperature. My legs under the table seemed to be

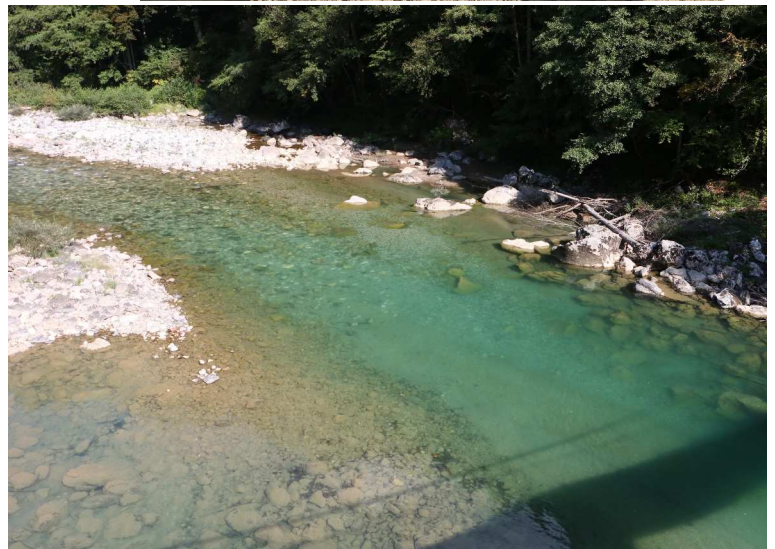
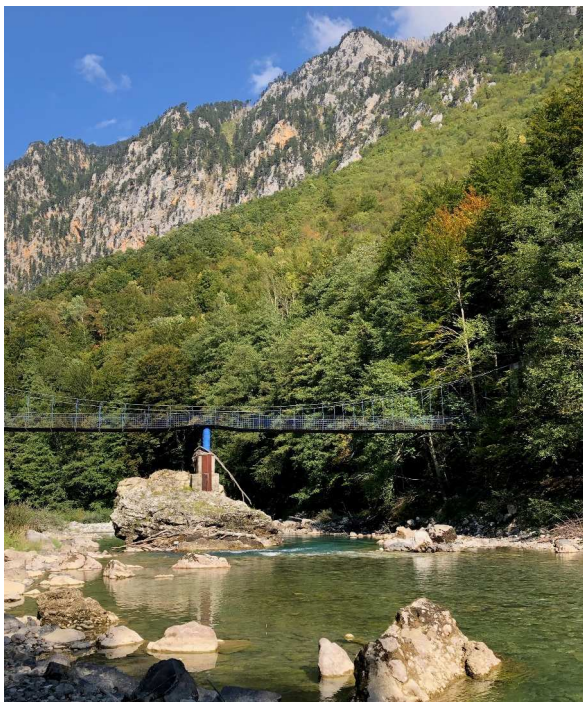
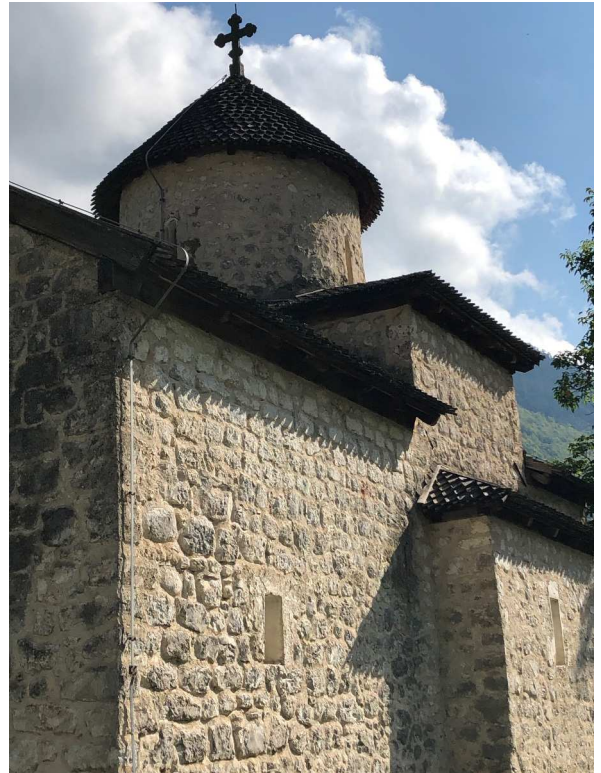
magnets for several stray dogs and cats.

We both were struck by how much busier the town seemed since we were there two years ago. There are still many shabby and dilapidated buildings but there are way more sidewalk cafes and open shops. We are glad to see the town is doing better but are a bit concerned about what the new big road might do to the ambiance of the place. At the place where we ate the first night we chatted with our young server who said he is happy to be a waiter and live a slow life but many people who leave the country come back with money and much corruption ensues and this is ruining the country.

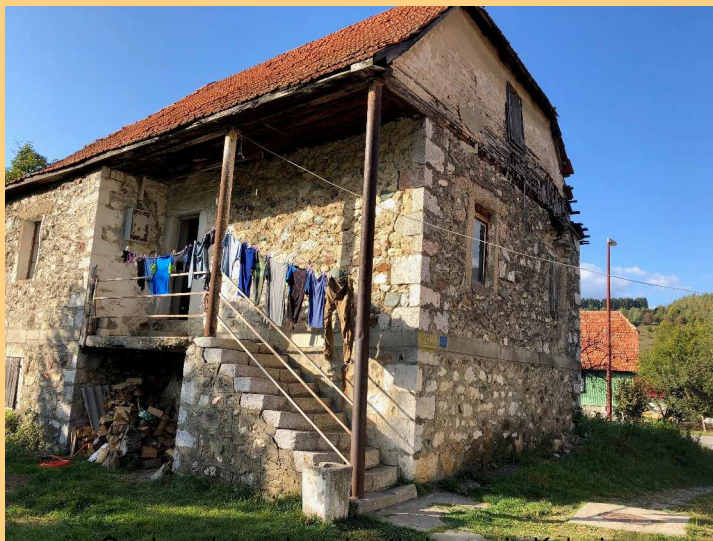
When we got back to our bungalow our host brought a pickled salad and freshly made 'cheesecake' which was actually a plate of savory rolls filled with cheese. Once again she had the fire going so our place was warm. When we left the next morning she bid us well warmly and mentioned how much she loves her guests which was very apparent to us. She charged us less than 25 euros per night but treated us better than we've been treated at US hotels that cost five times as much.



Dobrilovina Monastery and nearby Tara River



The Tara is really this color



Our laundry and our host's house in Kolasin



Above-Our cottage next door



Above-Kolasin, Below-some sort of partly abandoned but still in use government/ community building in Kolasin



Laundry and wood in Kolasin



Inside our cottage-notice the donuts

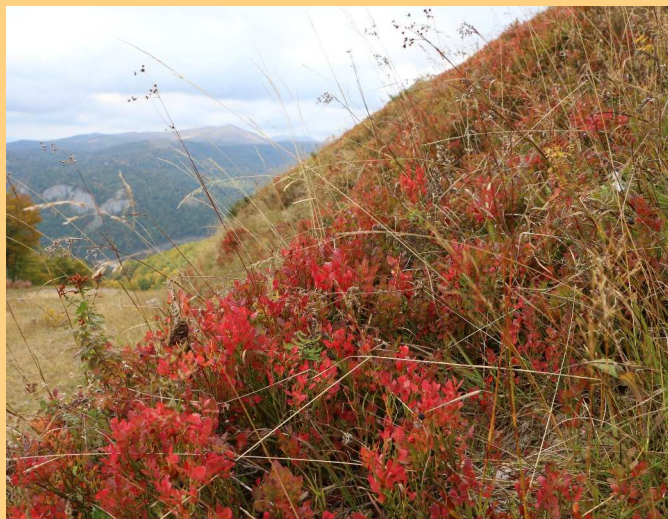




Crazy Lada driving down the ski slope

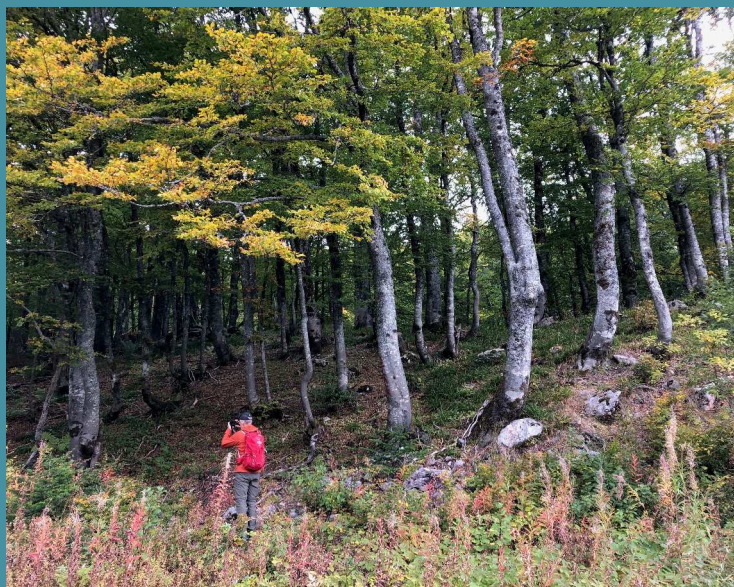
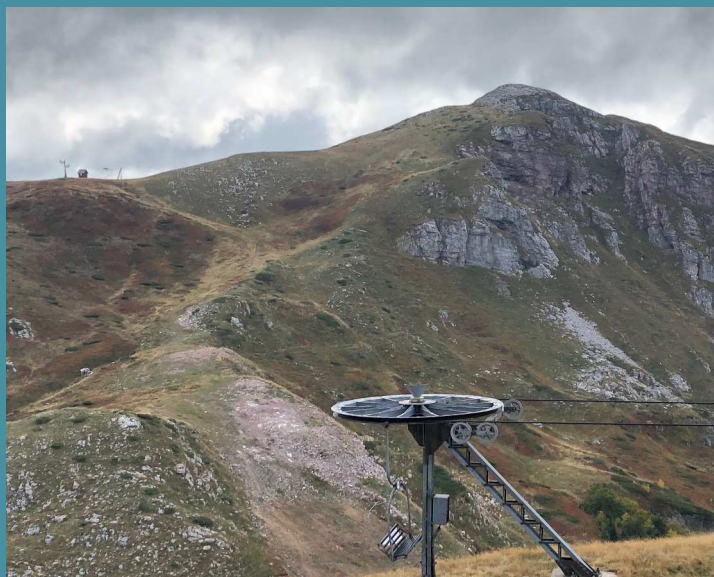
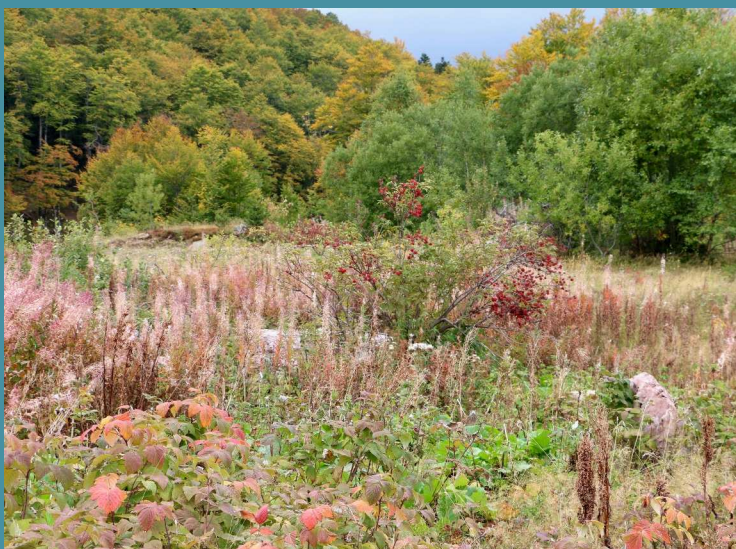


From our hike at the ski area near Kolasin



Berries!





Limljani Montenegro

We were looking forward to returning for our third visit to the village of Ljimlani 6 kilometers up the one lane road from the busy and touristy small village of Virpazar by Skadar Lake National Park.

On our way from Kolasin we stopped at another of our favorite monasteries, Moraca, built in the 13th century, which we had seen last year. Because its spectacular interior is still fully covered in frescoes and it is right on the way to Virpazar we stopped again and were no less moved and impressed. The grounds are lush and rich with productive gardens as well as dozens of bee boxes. When I looked at our photos later I noticed a small replica of the monastery tucked in among the bee boxes. Perhaps it provides a place for the bees to take refuge when they are feeling spiritual?

Further down the road we came to the Chinese funded huge road project that will leave Montenegro with crippling debt for many years to come. Many people are concerned that since the faster new road will bypass the villages the meager local economies will be further harmed.

We arrived too early to go to our place in Ljimlani so we stopped in Virpazar to buy a few groceries, get cash, and wander around the small one block town. I was hoping to buy a few more clay miniature houses from the local artist we bought some from last year but he was nowhere to be found. Instead we bought a few pieces from a friendly woman who offered Jim the use of the bathroom in her studio/shop. There is no longer a public bathroom in town and now most shops and cafes charge people to use their facilities, something this woman saw as yet another sign of the decline of the traditionally welcoming culture. Rain started as soon as we arrived and dumped heavily for a couple hours, complete with thunder and lightning. After standing under an overhang next to a shop for a while we made our way through the pouring rain to our car and drove the heavily puddled narrow road to our destination. When we arrived we said hello through Rayka's open door covered with lacy curtains and she welcomed us with her usual heavily accented, 'Tamara!', and 'Jim!', and urged us to sit down at the table that fills much of her two room space. Another woman was already there but only stayed a few minutes before heading out into the rain.

I asked Rajka, 'kako ste?' (how are you?) expecting a positive response but instead she furrowed, shrugged and said something that indicated she was not too good. Through gestures and google translate we learned she fell and broke her wrist in June, had a stroke in August that kept her in the hospital for 15 days (during which time her dog ran away), has heart issues, and still has pain from sciatica. When she broke her wrist the doctors just wrapped it in a bandage and shooed her off and now it is deformed and very painful but she doesn't want to go back for surgery because the doctors are 'mafia' and 'bad'. So she suffers. Her stroke did not cause any loss of mobility but her head bugs her a lot. As best we can tell I think she suffers from dizziness and vertigo.

After unloading our stuff in our spacious apartment upstairs we went back down to Rajka's room. She offered rakija, of course, and brought out a bottle of wine made by a friend, as well as coffee, bread, fresh tomatoes, hard boiled eggs, cheese and thinly sliced ham. We enjoyed the simple nice meal. Due to her heart condition she is drinking less but still smokes. She laughed a lot even though she didn't feel well. Because of her wrist and stroke her grapes and garden have been neglected, and she had to get rid of her cow. Her son still lives in Bar where he drives a bus and is father to a 6 and a 2 year old. Rajka much prefers the quiet slow pace and beauty of Limljani to Bar and hopes to stay here as long as possible.

After we ate, in between passing the phone around to read translated messages from each other we turned our attention to the tv where we watched various sport highlights, then that crazy reality tv show from Belgrade that we've seen before. This version of the show showed about 30 nicely dressed and made-up young people sitting around a long table in ornate chairs talking and arguing with each other. A distorted voice coming from a wizard-y guy pops up occasionally, as well as clips from past interactions, and people in spa bathrobes participating in a treasure hunt of some kind. We could not figure it out!

In early evening the rain stopped and Jim and I went up to our apartment. It was great having a more spacious place for a couple nights after several stays in rather cramped spaces. Rajka's apartment looks out over the densely treed valley and surrounding steep little mountains and has a big balcony as well.

Next morning we were unsure how to proceed. Usually Rajka provides coffee and breakfast for her guests but she had not mentioned anything the previous night so we thought maybe since she was not feeling well she would not cook for us. But we didn't want to cook our own food only to find she had prepared something for us. So I went down to ask her but her doors, windows and curtains were closed so I thought she was either not home or still sleeping. We waited a bit longer and finally decided to go ahead and make our own. I went down again to check in with Rajka and she was only just then (at 9:30) getting up and did not look good. She conveyed she was not feeling good at all yet she asked if we wanted coffee. I didn't want to trouble her so said we were making breakfast but could come by after breakfast before heading to the old capital town of Cetinje about an hour away.

We totally forgot about going down for coffee and made our way to the road google maps had directed us to only to find the road was one lane wide, twisty, rough in places, and had few places wide enough to move out of the

way of an oncoming car. Luckily the road was little traveled, but after driving a couple kilometers we decided it would be too stressful to continue in this way for 27 more kilometers so we parked in a wide spot in the road above a monastery and decided to walk the road for a ways and skip trying to get to Cetinje.

What a great decision! We encountered few cars and the road itself wound through lovely woods and open areas with views of surrounding mountains and Skadar Lake in the distance. After about 2 hours of walking gently upward we came to the small village of Utrg with its open beautiful view from its perch high on the hillside. We said 'dobar dan' to an older couple in their courtyard and they waved us in and asked if we'd like coffee, water or rakija and they ended up giving us all three!

We sat on low chairs drinking our yummy freshly made rakija, coffee and water while intermittently talking using google translate and gestures as they tended to the rakija they were making in their still on the patio. It was fun to see the process. They had numerous big buckets of purple grape mush complete with stems. First, they dumped out the old mush into a wheelbarrow (several loads worth) and pushed it up the road and dumped it somewhere. Once empty they meticulously scrubbed the inside of the large copper pot (using a wiry scrub pad and a stick), then lightly oiled the pot and dumped in the new buckets of grape mush. Meanwhile they fed the fire in the stove under the pot. They also tossed some salt into the mush to supposedly speed up the cooking process. There is a pipe that goes from the copper pot through another big pot filled with cold water and then out a nozzle and through a filter into a bottle. I typed into google translate 'magic' and Djoko laughed.

The wife didn't smile much but we didn't interpret that to mean she felt we were intruding. I think it's just her nature. The man, Djoko, was more social and friendly. We didn't learn much about them other than he grew up in the village but his wife did not, and they live there year around despite getting a fair bit of snow, and they have a grandchild that lives in or near Detroit, and that not many young people stay in the village.

After about a half hour we continued on our way up the road to a war memorial with a wide view. Eventually we turned around and made our way back to the car, happy that what initially seemed like a disappointment turned into a fun and special excursion.

But the day was not done!

We ate dinner at a restaurant in town then went 'home'. When I checked in on Rajka she still was not feeling well. She offered us wine, coffee and juice but I told her we didn't want to disturb her when she was feeling lousy. She asked if we wanted to go to Danka's and Slobodan's place to say hi. This couple lives in Slovenia half the year and in Limljani the other six months. We had met them at Rajka's the year before and spent time at their nearby place one evening. I wasn't feeling especially social but agreed to walk over and say hi. If we could walk directly it might take 5 minutes to get there but the path is overgrown and rocky so we had to take the road which took closer to 20 minutes.

They welcomed us warmly and enthusiastically. Danka's English is pretty good whereas Slobodan's is minimal. They served rakija, cookies and water as we sat on the terrace outside what was once Slobodan's grandma's house. We had a good chat about family, politics, and this and that. They reiterated what they said last year- that everything was so much better when the countries were united as Yugoslavia. They said again that Yugoslavia was never oppressive compared to eastern bloc communist countries. They could travel freely to Europe and the USA with just a passport, no Visa, and could own their own businesses up to 100 people, and everyone had good health care, good housing, good transportation and good education. None of that is true now. They again offered to host us in their large home in Maribor if we ever visit Slovenia.

We walked back home grateful for another rich and satisfying day.

Moraca Monastery

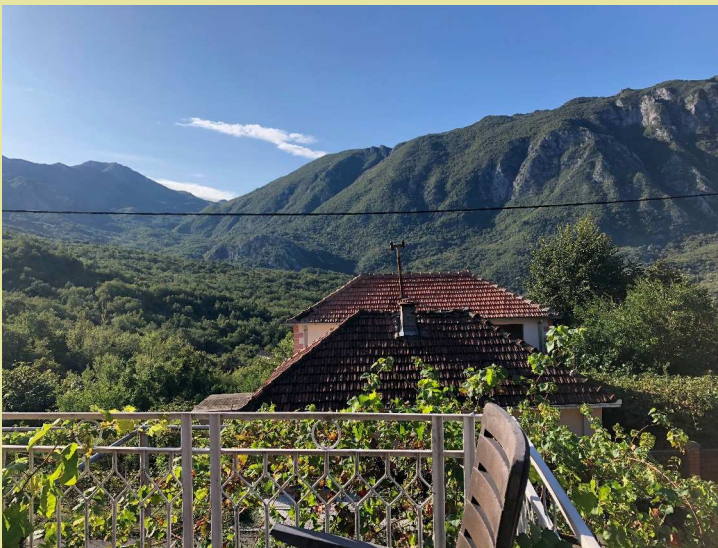




Part of China's Belt and Road project

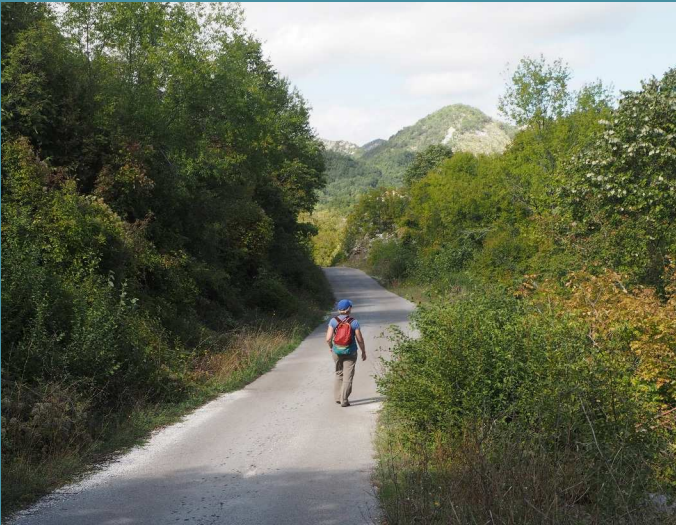


Moraca Monastery- above
Our usually laughing host, Rajka- below

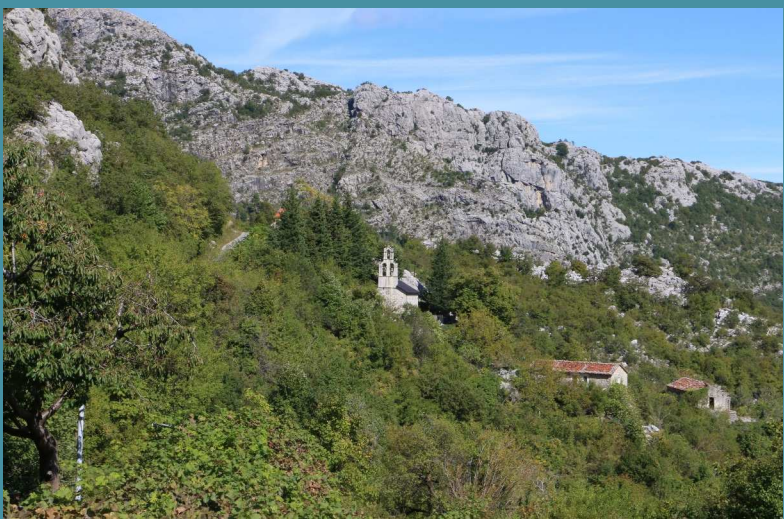


View from our balcony at Rajka's- above
Virpazar- below





We parked the car and decided to walk



We weren't sure how far we'd go but headed up



stopped at this church and cemetery

Below- village, Utrg, where we stopped for rakija



The views kept expanding- Lake Skadar in distance.
Below- a monument in the village





Getting ready to make another batch of rakija



Preparing the pot



Our host, Djoko



The mush, above, and stoking the fire, below





Djoko's house in Utrg



Not much traffic on the road through the village



Above- across the street from Djoko's



The 3 essential beverages- water, Serbian coffee and rakija



Duresic estates near Virpazar, Montenegro

I'm sitting on the bed in 'our' place just outside of Virpazar looking out the wall of sliding glass doors at green hills and mountains, wondering how I am happily able to get along with so little (clothes, books, and 'stuff') content with a little travel bag and daypack while traveling, yet when I am home I seem to need much more. While traveling I wear the same few clothes over and over with no detriment to my happiness or contentment. True, if I was staying in one place over here for an extended period I would want to purchase a decent knife, spatula, fry pan, large drinking glass, and maybe a couple other items but I would not want or need much more than we find in most places we stay. I think when I am at home I accumulate things out of boredom, perhaps, or an urge for new stimulation? In any case, each time I travel I vow I will go home and empty our house of at least half of what it contains. Even if I succeed in doing that I will be left with 5 times more than I need to live comfortably.

We left Rajka's at around 11 yesterday, sorry that she was still feeling so awful. I asked if she had friends who could help her and while I did not translate her answer on the phone I think the gist was essentially, 'what could they do for me?'. I also asked if she might see a doctor soon and I think her answer was 'maybe' but she didn't seem very enthusiastic about that option. Even though Rajka is about Jim's age (64) I would not be surprised if she is no longer here in Limljani (or maybe even on Earth) if we come back next year. I hope this is just a bad patch and she will recover her health, however thus far she has not quit smoking which all her friends keep urging her to do.

Our current place is just a 10 minute drive toward Virpazar from Rajka's. We ended up staying at this place, the nicest accommodations of our trip, because the host offered us half price for his recently completed 'nature cottage' up the hill from his family house and apartments. Brit (from Meanderbug) introduced us to Marko in May of 2017 when we came to Virpazar the first time and had a short boat ride with him. We liked him immediately. His family has lived here for centuries and he is bright, passionate, curious, warm and generous. He had thought about leaving the country after college for better opportunities but instead decided to embrace, preserve and share his heritage with travelers and in 6 short years has created a thriving guest house where he and his family make wine and offer delicious traditional meals for guests.

This summer after 3 years of working on it and spending 3 times what he expected Marko completed a lovely two unit 'nature cottage' up the hill behind the family house which is where we are staying. Usually he charges 85 euros a night but he has given it to us for 45 which is a great deal as it is the nicest place we've stayed on our trip both in terms of view and the space itself. The large studio includes a kitchen area, bath, terrace and a wall of sliding doors. Everything in the place is handmade except for the couch. It is clean, tasteful, uncluttered and made with environmental impact in mind. The stones are salvaged from centuries old buildings on the family property. If there is a drawback to the place it is that it is a 'one-minute walk' from the house and parking area. Marko fails to mention in the descriptive blurb online that the one minute walk involves climbing a set of stairs, continuing up a path, climbing a set of tiered railroad ties, continuing up on more grassy path, climbing up and down a concrete ramp over a low wall, continuing up more grass to the final set of 16 new stone stairs. We are pretty fit and find it a good workout but I think many people might not make it even if Marko were to carry the luggage. But we don't mind. I'd stay here a week if I could.

After settling in yesterday Marko instructed us on hiking options. He used to guide hikes himself (for a fee) but now uses the maps.me app and pins locations on the guest's phone which is what he did for us. He warned us the road was narrow but said not to worry, drivers here are good and careful. Hmmm. That has not been our experience but we figured we'd give it a go and set off for the first hike he suggested. I found the driving stressful with many tight blind curves on a road wide enough for 1 and a quarter cars and steep drop offs in many places, with no guardrails other than boulders placed strategically in some areas but not others. We finally made it to our start point where we hiked down past waterfalls and clear pools, ruins, and many small water mills through an almost abandoned village (some say it's the oldest in Montenegro) where we encountered one guy outside his old stone house who seemed ambivalent at best about the small trickle of hikers passing through his territory. At the lake edge is a small rustic stone café (not open) and terrace. We followed the faint trail beyond the cafe until it petered out in a marshy area at the edge of Skadar lake where we spoke briefly with an old guy fishing.

We enjoyed our hike but decided not to drive further to the next one on Marko's list because we were unsure how long it would take and there is NO way we wanted to drive home on that road in the dark! So we came 'home' and then drove into town for a mediocre dinner. While eating we had a brief chat with a passing cyclist from Belgium who said the world is crazy but he has hope. He also said he feels large governments are obsolete and each day or each week people should just get an email with choices regarding decisions that need to be made and vote directly on issues rather than through political representatives.

When we got back Marko showed us their wine making space (his dad was actively stirring the huge pots when we were there) and then led us into his beautiful wine tasting cellar. Marko is not an artist by trade but he clearly has a great eye for what is pleasing. He then shared their wine with us as well as two types of rakija including one mixed with goji fruit from trees they grow on the property. This was one of our favorite rakijas with its complex layered flavor. We had a good chat. Marko said he loves most of his guests but about 5% are bad which supports his notion that about 5% of people in general are bad. He can tell within seconds of meeting someone if they will be a good guest or not. He spoke of the problems here and in the world at large but he is an optimist and thinks things will improve somehow.

Leaving Montenegro

I'm sitting on the patio in the chilly clear morning air waiting for Marko to bring up our breakfast. A cat is snuggled against me purring on my lap. I am not a cat person. I don't dislike them but I'm happiest when they are at a distance or come by for a brief visit and are on their way. But I figure I'll let this cat sit on me till breakfast arrives. I appreciate its warmth and its unapologetic assertiveness in getting what it wants. And this cat is clean, healthy and not flea bitten.

As I have been sitting here watching the morning sun gradually illuminate the valley I feel sad about leaving Montenegro. I feel much more at home here and in Serbia than I do on the touristy coast of Croatia where we are headed. Croatia is stunningly beautiful but the culture is different enough and has been more compromised by tourism and EU influences and dictates that I was tempted this trip to not even go there. But the idea of sitting on a balcony overlooking the turquoise sea won out so in a couple hours off we will go. I am sure we will enjoy ourselves and find much to appreciate.

I feel a little disappointed that my writings here have been almost entirely limited to reports of our activities and interactions. I write about these things so as not to forget them. But I've written little about my musings and feelings. I'm hoping I will have more leisure time these next few days so that I can write about things other than our daily goings-on.

One thing I love about Montenegro and Serbia is the slow relaxed pace of life. People aren't lazy; they are often building or repairing things, chopping wood, making wine or rakija, canning, working in gardens, cooking, cleaning, repairing fences, etc., but there is no sense of being ruled by a clock. When cousin Djordje was in Pittsburgh last June he made a comment about Americans being rich materially but poor when it comes to lifestyle because we are too enslaved to our watches. He joked that in America restaurants close according to strict closing times but in the Balkans they will stay open all through the night as long as there are people ordering food and drinks and enjoying each other, and if the chef doesn't have what is wanted he will go out and kill and butcher an animal so he can give you what you want. That may be an exaggeration but it captures the spirit of what I am talking about. And they are quick to take breaks and chat with passers-by. It's not an idyllic life. Money is tight, and governments corrupt. Young people are fleeing. Weather is rough and intense at times. But as I've said before, people here still know how to do practical things with their hands that most urban westerners do not. When Marko was talking about building his house I asked if he had been trained in building. He said, 'living here you just know how to do things'.

Boat Trip on Skadar Lake

Yesterday after breakfast on the terrace (prepared by Marko's family) we headed to town with Marko's friendly cheerful younger sister Marina. She is 22, Marko almost 31. She learned to drive when she was 11 and drives like a local (fast, assertively and with confidence regarding how many inches are between her and whatever she is passing).

After parking in the small but crowded lot by the boats we carefully wended our way over random ropes, lines and cables crossing the path that look like they are set to intentionally trip people. We boarded Marina's boat, Old Bridge, given to her by her mom to entice her to work in the family business. Until a few years ago Marina had said she would never be part of the family guest business but for three summers she has led boat trips on the lake and finds she really enjoys it and makes decent money and it doesn't usually feel like work. In addition, her English is pretty good even though she has basically learned it on the fly from her guests. Her university does not offer English as an option. She finished her studies in Criminology but still needs to take her exams. But since no jobs await her in Montenegro she ultimately plans to leave the country.

At the wheel of the flat bottom boat was their driver and family friend, Boban (Bobo), a friendly, warm, weathered man probably in his late 50s who speaks no English. In summers he drives the boat and in winter he fishes.

We told Marko we wanted to see one of the monasteries on the lake which he said would be a 3 hour trip but Marina said he always underestimates and it really takes 4, so we agreed to splurge and go for it at 25 euros per hour. Had there been others on the boat the cost would have been shared but it was just us.

The weather was warm and not too breezy, and skies mostly clear. We enjoyed taking turns sitting on the front of the boat. Marina gave just the right amount of info about the lake, birds, plants, history, etc. while leaving much time for us to simply take in the beauty. Bobo insisted that Jim and I each take a turn driving the boat. His only instruction was, 'like auto'. I laughed and laughed as we zigzagged through the channel as I inexpertly overcorrected way too much each time I turned the wheel. Bobo stopped the boat a few times so Marina could lean over and collect various plants. With the water lilies she made me a necklace. With the leaves of it she made Jim and me hats, and then she also picked another water plant and peeled it and told us to eat it. She did not know its name in English and it was nothing like anything we had tasted before. It was somewhat radish-like in

texture. It tasted of lake. She also carved that same plant into a little smiling devil head (which we kept on our dashboard for the rest of our trip and it now sits among stones and shells on one of my 'altar' shelves in the living room).

The monastery (Kom) we stopped at is on an island and Marina knows the sole monk (in his 30's) that lives there. He has a wind generator and solar panels, many bees, some cows, and a big garden all in a fabulous spot with an expansive view of the lake and mountains. He was not there that day, however. The old small church was built in the 14th century and is the best preserved of any we have seen. All of the original frescos are intact but again we could not take photos inside. There have been no renovations. Despite its poor accessibility it gets many visitors although we only saw a few people when we were there including a woman who sang/ chanted a prayer in Russian with a beautiful voice. Marina was happy to linger so we could enjoy the feeling of the place. She did not grow up going to church regularly but is a believer. She asked if we believe in God and I said yes (without expounding upon what that means to me) and she said in her three summers of guiding boat trips we were the first people to admit to believing in God.

Skadar lake is the biggest lake in Europe and has many old villages and other monasteries in difficult places to reach. We would like to explore the region more some day. We were happy to learn that the developer's plans to build a huge resort in the park on the shore have been foiled, at least for now.

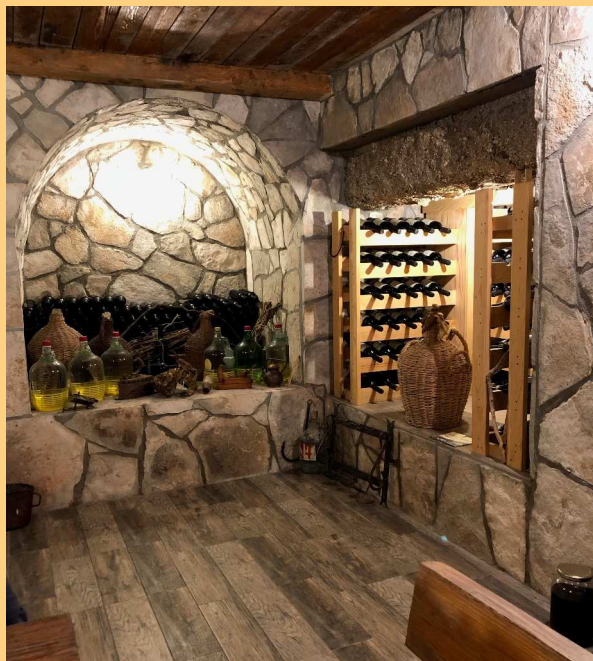


Marko's 'cottage' and view from inside and outside

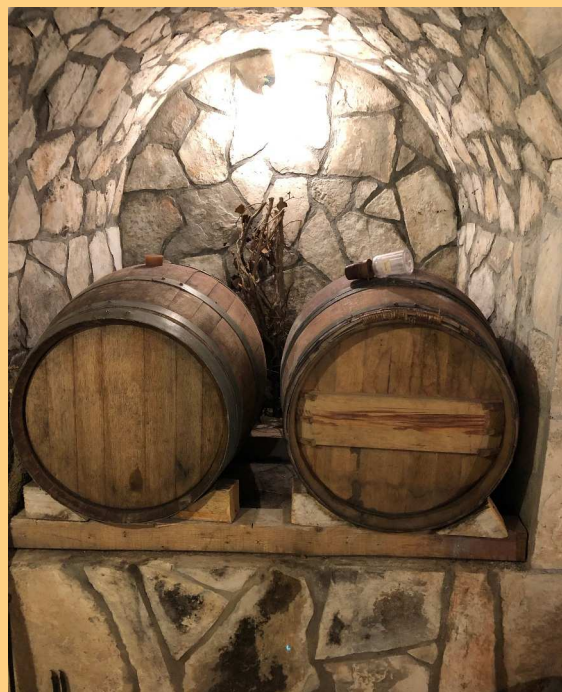
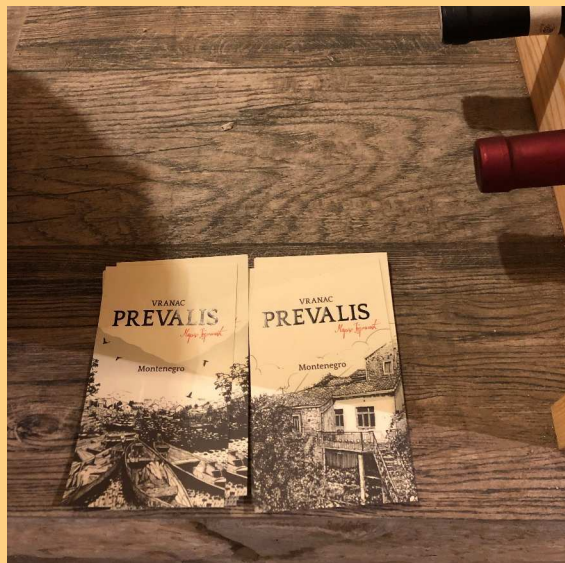


Breakfast on patio at Marko's





Marko's tasting room

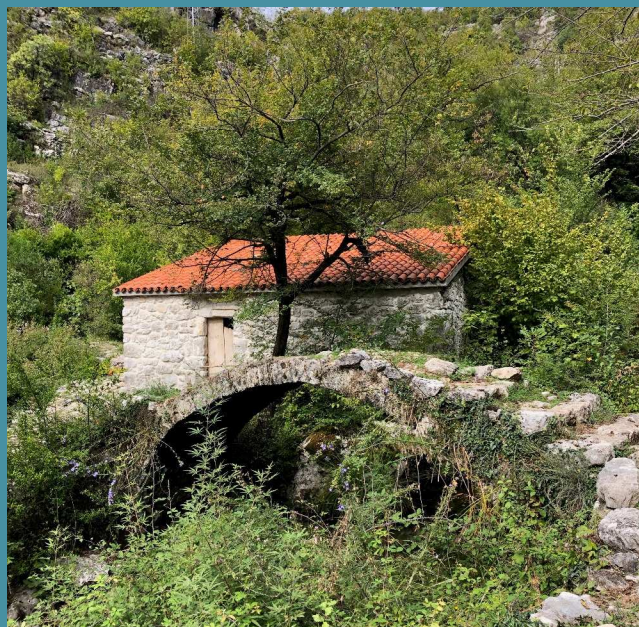




Unnerving road to and from hike



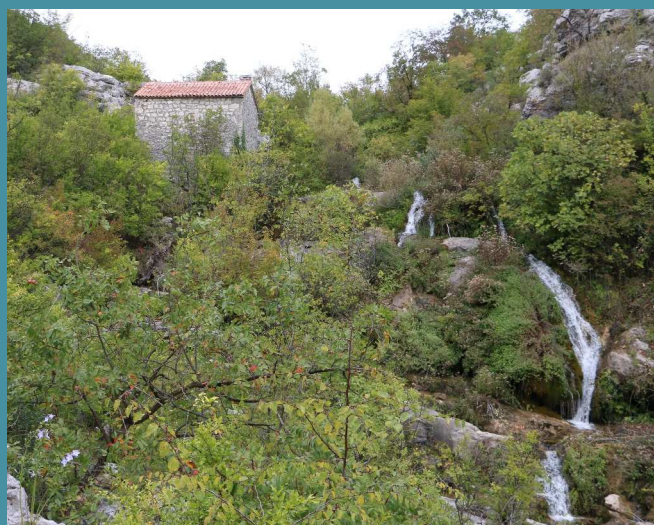
Hike near Lake Skadar

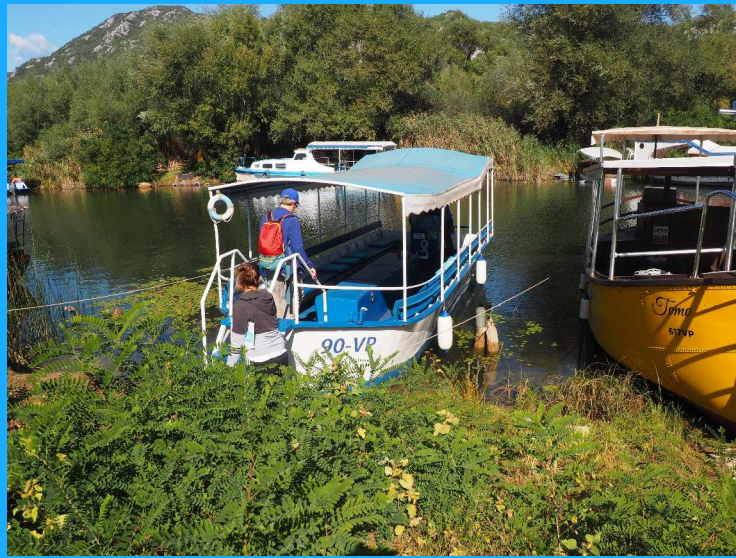


The property below is for sale...



Below- view of Virpazar

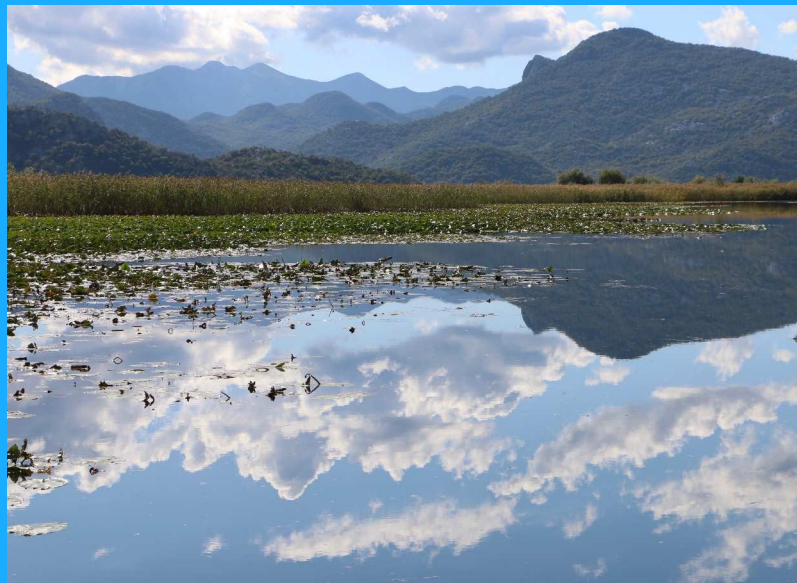




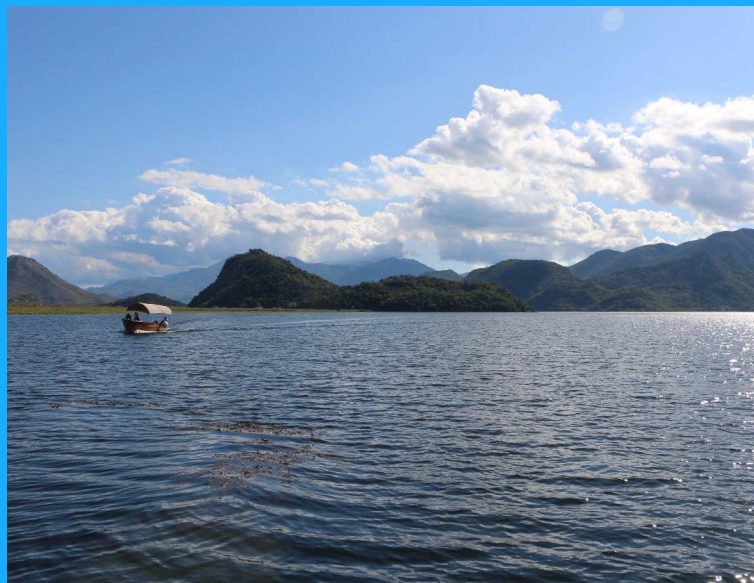
Lake Skadar boat ride and monastery visit

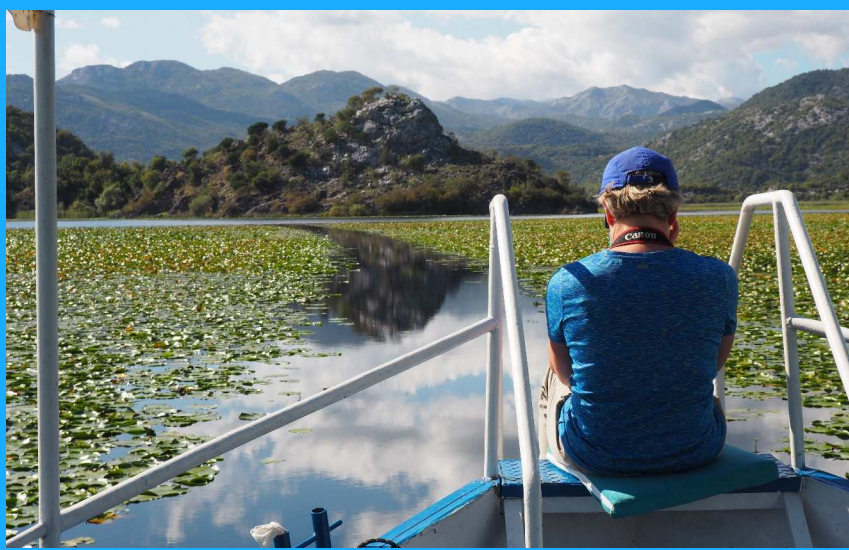


Our guide, and hat designer, Marina

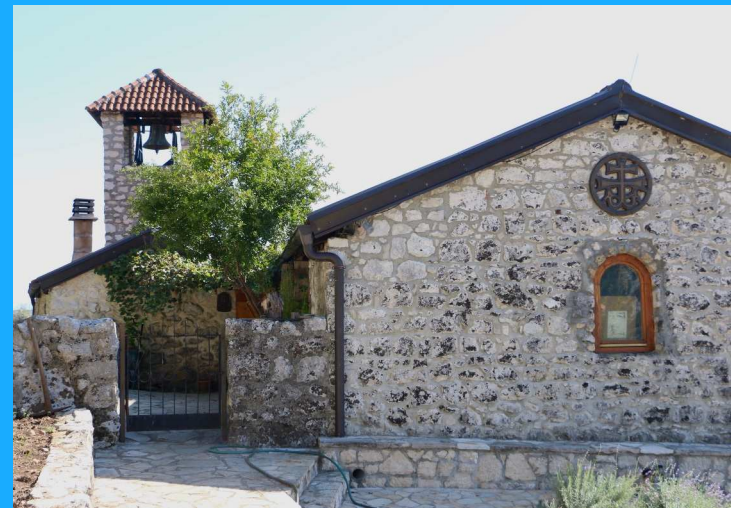


Our boat driver, Boban
Below- marsh people

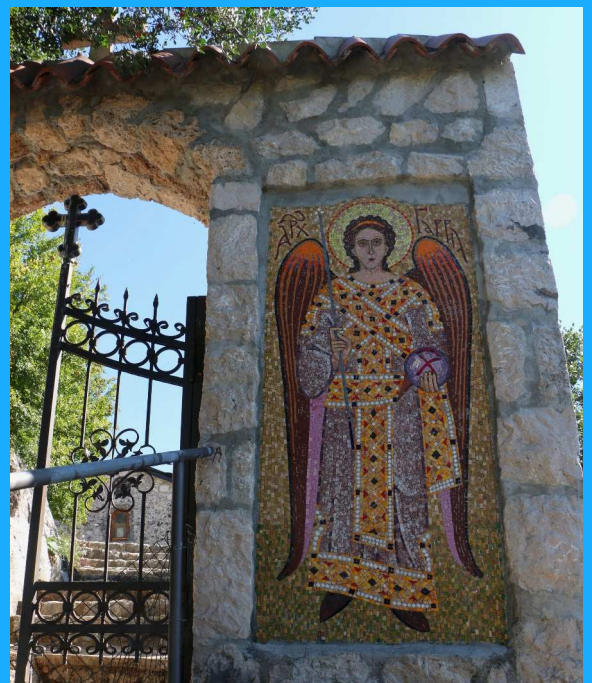
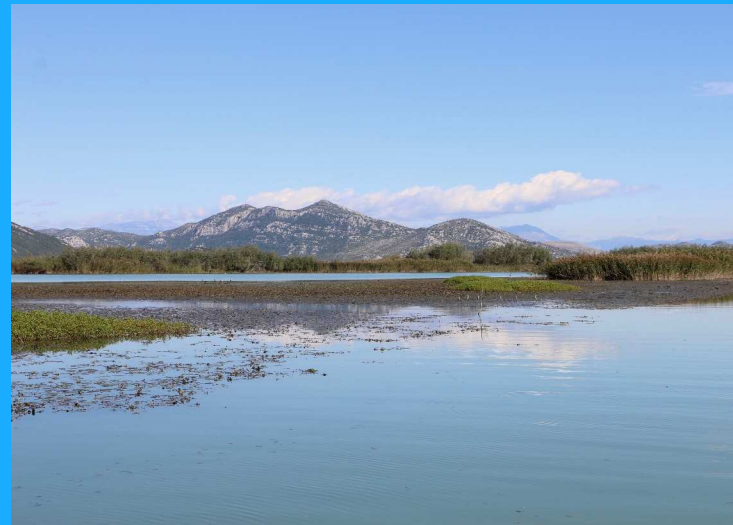




Crazy boat driver



Kom Monastery on an island on Lake Skadar



Cavtat Croatia

I'm sitting on the balcony of our apartment (our home for two nights) wearing my fleece jacket as my shirt while the laundry hanging in the cool morning wind slowly dries beside me. The sunlight looks like it will reach us soon. A lone wasp keeps making brief hovering buzzing visits like a drone checking me out. The wind has died down somewhat after a noisy rowdy night of blowing but there is still a strong breeze that I both feel and hear out over the sea. I also hear the vigorous fluttering of sails coming from the boat passing by down below. I would be happy to stay in this spot for several more nights but Jim wants to be in a place with more options for hiking. He is not one who likes to sit for long in one place unlike me who can happily have a very long good sit for many days in a row.

We left Marko's yesterday at around 11 after another breakfast on the terrace cooked by Marko's family. We chatted again briefly with Marko and learned that for now he likes this business of hosting travelers and plans on making a second house next to the one we've been in, but eventually he will want to do something different because this work is demanding and he is always on call which is not good if one has a wife and kids which he very much wants. He does not know what he will do but he will always be at least part time in Montenegro. He loves Montenegro but sees it being ruined as development increases. He is also an avid traveler and wants to continue traveling throughout his life. Most recently he has been spending time in Jordan.

Marko also confirmed that while business is very good for him the unbridled growth in his village and country is not all good. He appreciates aspects of capitalism but also sees how it changes people and cultures for the worse with too much emphasis on money and greed as the most important things rather than relationships, community, generosity and balance. And natural beauty and resources are irreparably destroyed. But he is a happy peaceful soul and has hope for the future nonetheless.

As we were departing we met other guests, a couple in their 50s from Sweden on their honeymoon. He is a musician currently doing very well mostly writing film scores for children's movies, and she is a surgeon in endocrinology. I told her I'd had parathyroid surgery and she said yes, she had noticed my scar. When she asked how I felt afterward and I said my head felt so much lighter and open she nodded and said that is very common and this is her area of specialty. She keeps a photo of Banksy's painting of a girl with a bucket over her head on her desk to remind her of how people often feel when they have a parathyroid issue. It is an apt image.

Jim and I decided that even though it was a slower route and entailed driving a narrow road along the water's edge with no guardrail part of the way we would stop in the village of Prcanj on the Bay of Kotor to try to say hi to our dental assistant's sister who has a cafe there. We visited once before 4 years ago but not on more recent visits and we heard her sister had been disappointed so we wanted to make the effort this time. When we arrived at their cafe, Cafe Lukisi, she was not there but her husband was sitting outside with a couple friends. He speaks no English but when we mentioned America, Seattle, and Natasa he understood and phoned his wife to come downstairs from their apartment. He gave us coffee (espresso, not Turkish) and after waiting a bit his wife arrived. I have a hard time recalling her name but I think it is Boljana. She welcomed us warmly and looked less haggard than when we saw her last. Her English also seemed better. We had a nice chat for about 45 minutes. Her kids are both in school in Belgrade, one in med school and the other studying psychology. Life in Prcanj is still tough, business slow. They do not reap any benefit from the large cruise ships that come to Kotor just around the bay. When talking about languages she said English people always make an effort to learn Serbian, but never do the Russians. She does not like the Russians (seems few people in Montenegro do as they are demanding, unfriendly and rude guests for the most part). We also learned her husband's family came from a village near Virpazar. We were glad we stopped by and it seemed they appreciated it too.

Jim was less stressed driving the narrow road this time and we made it to the ferry with no problem, had no wait at the border, and arrived in Cavtat by 3:15. We had a mix up with our host who was not here to meet us at apartments Manuela and had to wait about 45 minutes for the host's husband (Luka, a driver of big commercial boats) to come after we found a neighbor to call them for us. When he arrived he said Manuela had left the door open for us (without telling us). He said if we wanted to stay a second night we could have it for 40 euros instead of 50. In any case, the apartment is new, clean, sparsely furnished and has an awesome view of the sea. We are on a hill and there are no homes below us. We can see Dubrovnik in the distance. We are near the end of a road on the edge of town so we get none of the noise or bustle of the touristy town about a 20 minute walk away.

After settling in we walked to town, got SIM cards for our phones and found a place to eat by the water. We were astounded by how much busier this town is compared with four years ago when we came with a Kendra and Squeak. When we were here with them in mid September the place had mostly wound down for fall. Many places were closed and tourists were few. This time nothing is closed and the place is full of tourists. There are more apartments, a new large parking area and an expanded marina. We much prefer how it was four years ago. It's a beautiful attractive spot close to Dubrovnik which we hear is miserably overrun. Cavtat is not yet miserable but I can imagine it might be in a couple years. Prices are higher than in other places we've been. Our dinner (2 entree and a salad) cost about 26 euros which is comparable to Seattle but about 10-14 euros more than in Serbia, BiH, and Montenegro.

Last night the sunset was spectacular. In the evening I spent way too much time trying to find a place to go next for

4 nights that will satisfy both Jim and me. I finally hit on what might be a good option which is the island of Brac. Meanwhile, today we will take a hike and I will lounge on the balcony.

...

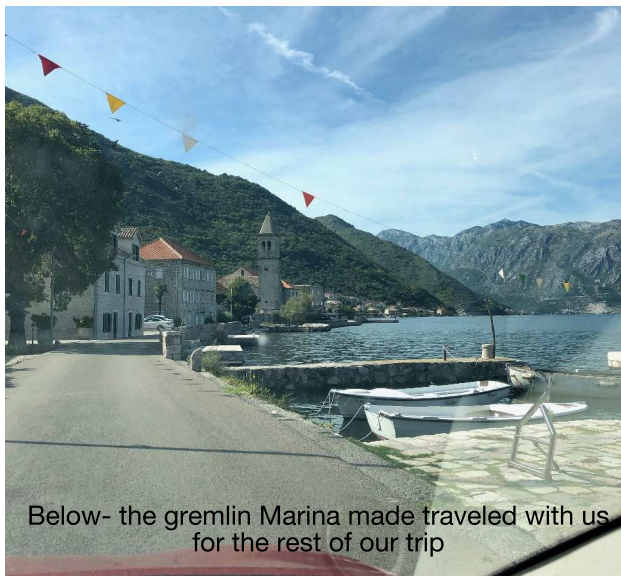
We took a short hike up the trail that starts at the end of our dead-end road. The day is sunny, skies clear, temps probably in low 70s although the sun makes it feel hotter but the breeze keeps it from being too hot. I walked with Jim on the path between old stone walls as far as the shrine to Mithras that we would have not found had it not been for google maps. The shrine is listed on the hiking maps, and there are a couple signs that get you almost there but no sign at all as to how to access it in the old village where it is located. We finally found a faint overgrown path between a couple houses that led to the grove of trees and grotto. There is one large stone above the grotto that shows Mithras slaying the bull but it is well worn and in nowhere near as good condition as what we saw in Jajce. But it is still cool to see this old place and to wonder about the people who created it and gathered here so many centuries ago.

Jim headed further along the path and I turned and came home so as to have a couple hours to savor the breeze and exceptional sea view. Our next spot supposedly has a sea view as well but not as good as this one.

Maybe I would get tired of looking at the sea if I saw it every day but that is hard to believe. I like views upon just about any kind of water whether stream, lake, river or sea, but views of water that have no land visible on the horizon carry a much different sense than those where I can see land. I like the spaciousness as well as the simple straight line that divides water from sky although of course the reality of the water, light and atmosphere is not simple at all. But it looks simple and invites getting lost in one's thoughts or losing one's thoughts (and self) altogether, temporarily.

When Jim returned from his walk we both went into town to take in all the changes since we were last here. The improvements and development are mostly tastefully done but hold little appeal for us, but the early evening light created contrasting shadows and made the colors vivid and we enjoyed ourselves. We inadvertently ate at the same mediocre overpriced restaurant.

We enjoyed another spectacular red orange sunset from our balcony.



Below- the gremlin Marina made traveled with us for the rest of our trip



A quick stop in Prcanj to see Natasa's sister

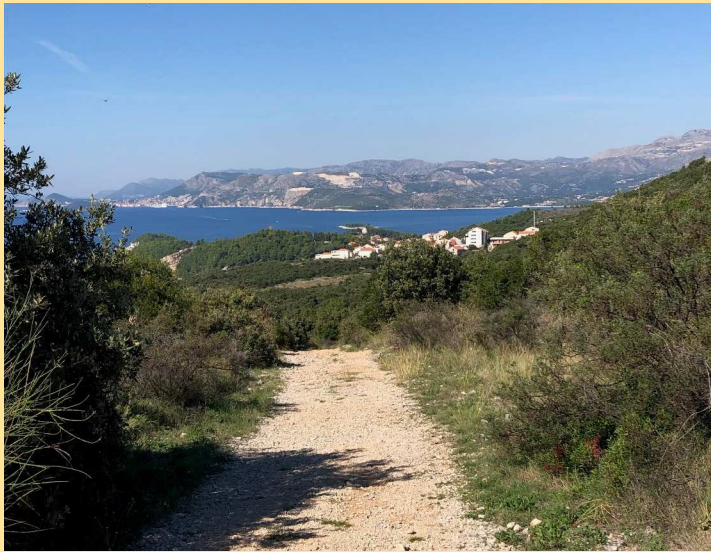




Above- View from our place in Cavtat



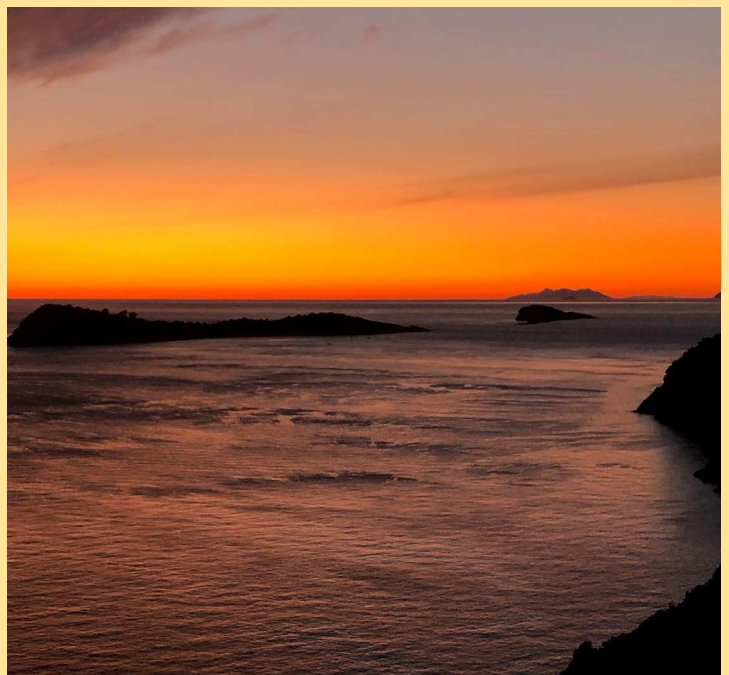
Our trusty red Clio in front of apartment



Above- heading home from hike
Below-Heading home from town after dinner

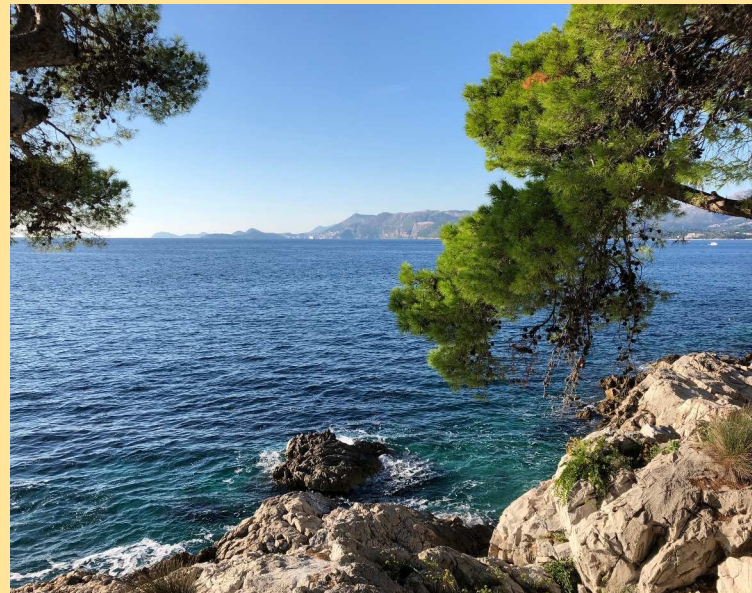


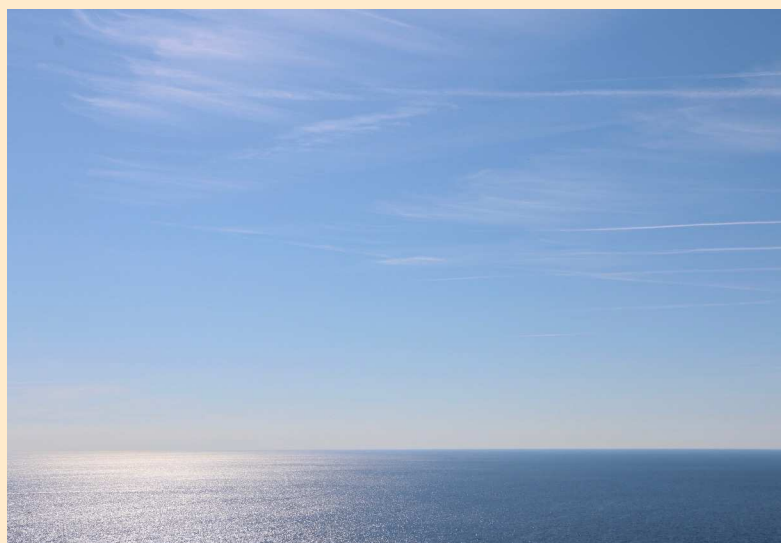
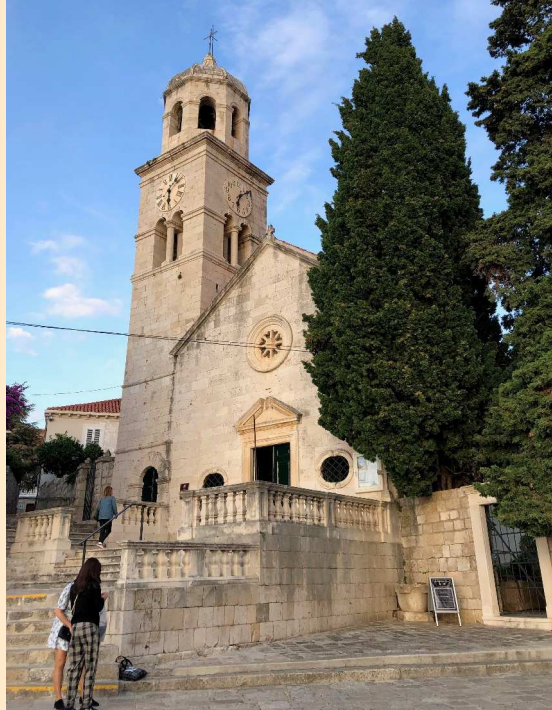
Olives in front of our apartment



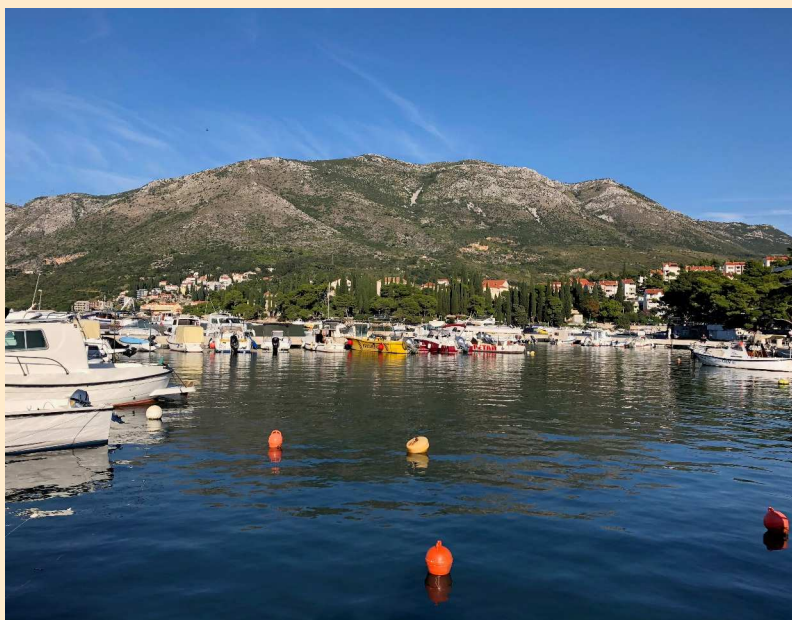
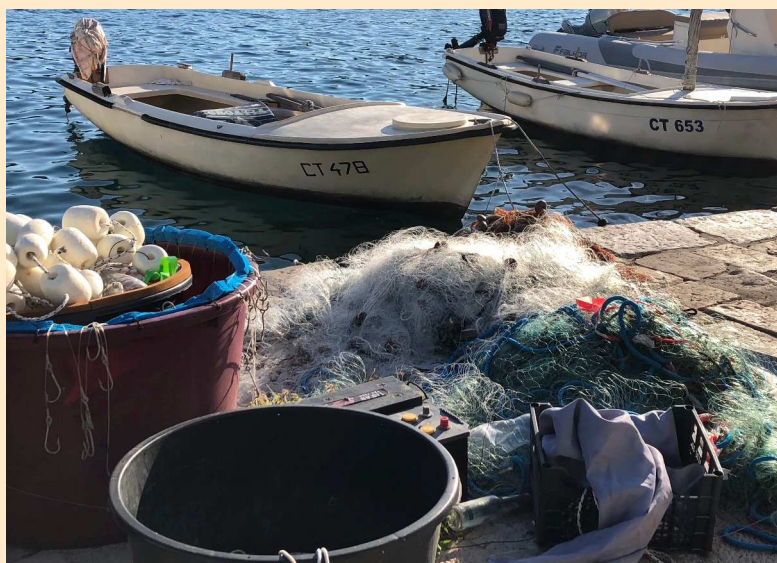


Cavtat, Croatia





More from Cavtat



Bol, on Brac island, Croatia

The drive to the ferry in Split took about four hours on Wednesday morning and the ferry ride to Brac island was another 50 minutes. The ferry cost about \$30 for the car and the two of us. While Croatian ferries are fairly similar to Washington ferries (except the car deck-ends draw upward rather than being open), the atmosphere is more social and noisy with people laughing and talking. And alcohol can be consumed anywhere on the boat.

We arrived at the dock in the small town of Supetar and then drove 45 minutes up and down curving roads across the scrubby island to the small town of Bol on the southwestern side. We had no trouble finding our apartment (for a change) which is on the top floor of a 3-story small building. Josip and his family live on the first floor and rent out two units on both the 2nd and 3rd levels. Ours is a 2-bedroom unit with the best kitchen and bathroom we've had on the trip and our balcony view allows us to see both sunrise and sunset. I know this because I woke at 5:30 this morning and could not get back to sleep so I went out and watched the sky turn pale pink, orange and yellow as I listened to the birds sing morning songs. I hope that if we move from Seattle our new place will have good views of sunrise or sunset or both. The return of the light each day still feels like a miracle even after living for six decades on this dear Earth.

Yesterday we explored Bol a little bit then found a place to eat. My chicken risotto was tastier than a similar dish I ate in Cavtat. I enjoyed sitting on our balcony when we returned home listening to a soccer broadcast pouring loudly out of a nearby open window, a group of young sounding women laughing, singing and joking, an old man venting passionately about I don't know what, another group of guys farther away singing drunkenly, a dog barking, a lone cricket, and our German neighbors on their balcony beyond the partition between us eating something crunchy. I love how people here spend so much time outside. I tell myself I will sit outside more when I get back to Seattle, but even though I love the rain, when the rains come, temperatures drop and the days get short it is easy to fall back in the habit of staying inside.

Yesterday after breakfast on the balcony (we are making our way through the big jar of homemade apricot jam that Rada gave us a few weeks ago, as well as the big bottle of rakija given to us by Kristina's mom, although we have this at night, not with breakfast), we drove back across the island to the small old village of Skrip. Much of this hilly island is fairly dry and covered with shrubs and low trees and the land is used for grazing sheep (the island is famous for its lamb) and growing olives and grapes. Honey and lavender are also abundant. The land is extremely rocky so one sees large piles of rock and many rock walls all over the island. In Skrip the old house are all made of stone. There is a 16th century church and fort in the village as well. The old woman who lives in the fort offered us fresh green figs (eating mine was one of the high points of my day) and a taste of fig rakija which was so yummy we bought a small bottle to bring home.

From there we drove an excessively curvy hilly road to Pucisca, another village, this one by the water. This town is known for its school of stonemasonry (Klesarska Skola Pucisca). Brac is famous for its white limestone which has been used to make many famous buildings since Roman times including part of the UN building in New York, and part of the White House (although one article I read said this might not be true, but most say it is). We took a nice walk through the sleepy town (such a nice change from Cavtat) and onto a dirt road that passed through gnarly twisted pines alongside the turquoise blue water. Something about the colors of the water here makes me almost giddy with appreciation. I look and look and look again at the colors and say 'wow' and 'yum' repeatedly in my head, and often out loud.

We went inside the 16th century Catholic church and were not impressed. Somewhere along the way it was redone in a Baroque style with gaudy chandeliers and a ceiling that looks like it belongs in a ballroom, not a place of worship.

Before leaving town we perused the half dozen booths selling crafts made of the local stone. If the stuff was not so heavy we would have bought more!

Last evening we ate good pizza at a pizzeria near our place (we only have a few nights left to try 'tuna pizza'), then sat on our balcony watching the sunset then enjoyed seeing the moon progress across the sky while reflected in the dark waters of the sea. It is warm enough to sit comfortably in short sleeves even after dark.

(Written 11/9)

When I saw this little boat in the harbor in the village of Pucisca on the island of Brac in Croatia last month I thought of my friend and took a photo to send to her. I thought receiving the photo would make her smile. Instead it made her uneasy and she asked me to write a story about the boat. But I cannot demand a story from the source inside me that writes stories. Stories come of their own accord when they want to be told.

What I can do is write about what arises in me when I look at the photo.

Even though the boat is the obvious center of attention in the photo I am most drawn to the clear blue-green

water that the boat floats upon, supporting it and giving the boat a medium to move through, to travel across, and to reflect it.

This day, the day of the photo, the water was calm and its movement slow and subtle. The water was so clear I could see scores of fish swimming around, simply being fish. Some are visible in the photo.

It's not only the substance and properties of water that I love and cherish but also the colors of water. I don't know how many times I exclaimed aloud on our trip, 'wow', and 'I love that color', and, 'its SO beautiful' when I saw water in lakes, rivers and sea. Looking at the colors of Balkan waters was like drinking in with my eyes the best healing medicine that touches and feeds something deep inside of me.

That lucky little boat gets to see variations of these colors every day, and feel its cool healing properties on its belly, and hear its whispers and songs and stories, and be buoyed and rocked by its waves.

When I imagine being this boat I am reminded of how I feel any time I give myself over to the Source and Sustainer of my being.



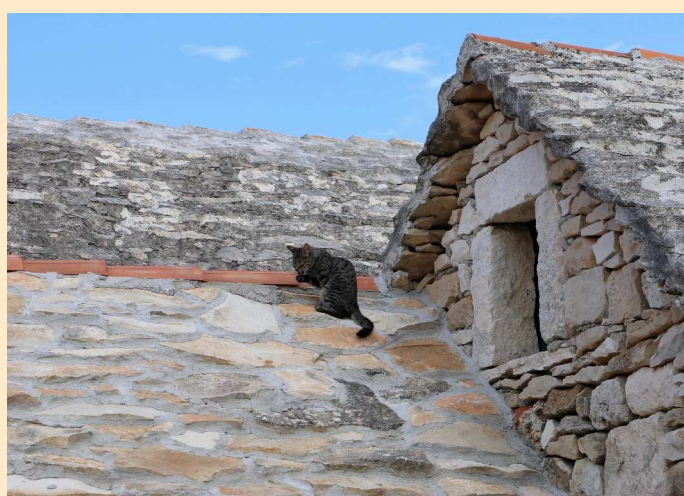
Ferry from Split to Brac Island
Below- view from our apartment balcony



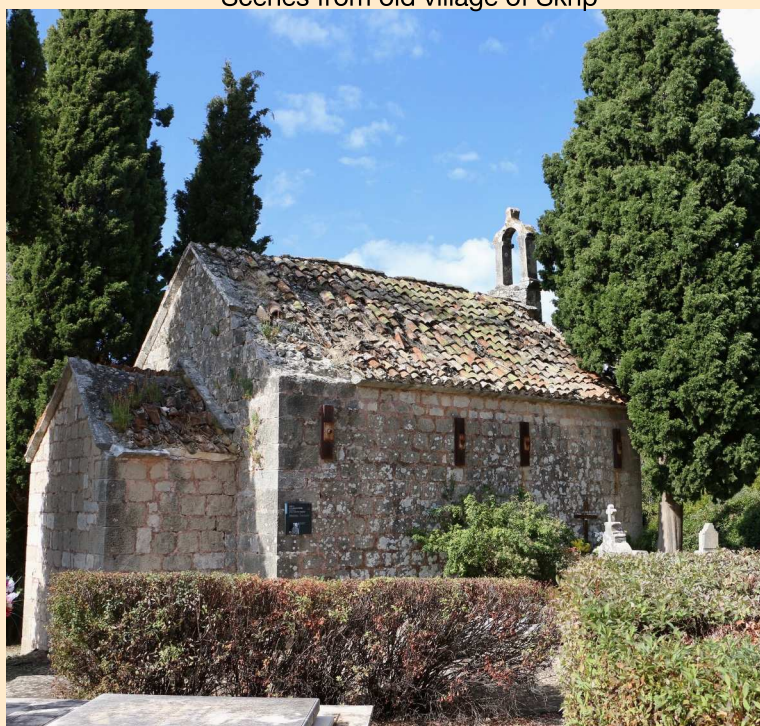
Our apartment was on the top floor to the right.

Inland view from apartment in Bol





Scenes from old village of Skrip

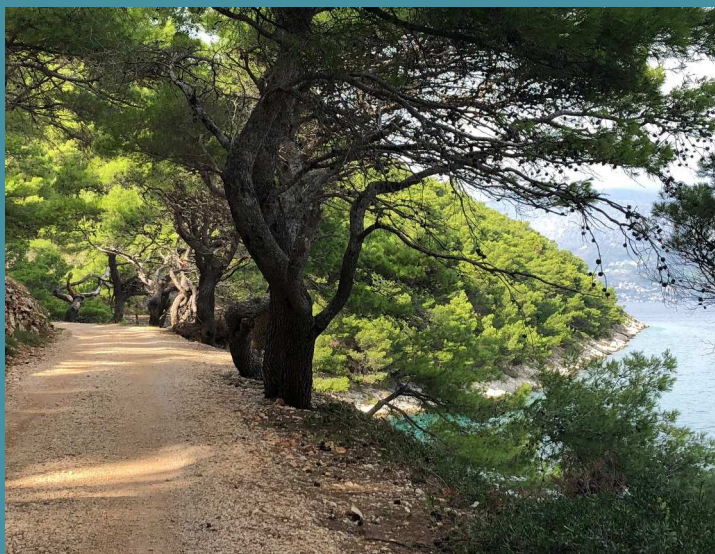




Pucisca



quarry on the edge of Pucisca



Below- stone masonry school



More Brac

Today for a change we had no plans! Finally! My only hope was to perhaps go into the sea, and indeed I succeeded.

After breakfast on the balcony and waiting for the washer to finish cleaning our clothes we walked west along the promenade shaded by big old twisting pine trees by the turquoise sea. The wide polished path is paved with the local stone. Local crafts people and purveyors of cheap stuff manned a dozen or so small booths set up along the walkway. Numerous white pebbly beaches are accessible from the lengthy (1.5 miles?) walkway, and some large private homes and a few large hotels line the inland side. Eventually the buildings peter out and give way to undeveloped treed parkland and orchards. On this clear warm day there were a fair number of people strolling (and biking) but it was not crowded in the least. I am interested to see if the crowds swell tomorrow on the weekend. At this time of year I am guessing it won't be too bad. It seems most tourists here are German or British.

After a while the paved way turned into a dirt path and Jim and I followed this until the trail ended at yet another beach where we joined about a half dozen other people, most of whom were nude. While swim suits are required at the popular beaches in the center of towns in Croatia, nudity is allowed everywhere else. There was one couple with suits on so I put my suit on as well not for reasons of modesty but because I don't want to get burned on parts that are usually covered.

Jim is not much of a beach loungeur and was not interested in going in the water but he laid upon the stones and dozed while I arranged stones into a design hoping to get hot enough to make me want to go in the water. Finally I was ready. I waded in up to my knees and stood there for some time. The water was not too cold, and the air was warm, but there was a breeze that kept me hesitant for a while. I never understand the process before diving into cold water. I KNOW I will be diving in eventually yet I stand there waiting as if the water will somehow warm up while I wait.

Finally I dove in. The temperature was not shocking at all; it was cold but refreshing. I swam back and forth in the little cove a couple times but did not venture too far from shore. Even though I am in decent shape and an experienced swimmer I am always a little afraid of big open water. I know that the forces of currents, waves, tides and wind can easily overcome even strong swimmers, so I play it safe and stay near shore. With my goggles on I was able to see a surprising number of fish investigating my legs. The largest was about 15 inches long and had a green-blue body with an orange-red stripe running from head to tail.

When I emerged from the water I sat on my towel and resumed working on my little offering of stones, then Jim and I set off for the long walk to our apartment.

During our trip my hips and right upper leg have sporadically bothered me and the pain has been worse in the past day or so. I'm not sure what the issue is but it makes walking uphill or climbing stairs quite uncomfortable. The pain isn't severe but it is bad enough that I do not want to hike up to the highest peak on the island even though the views are wonderful. Instead tomorrow I plan on spending our last day here lounging and going for another swim while Jim goes for a mountain bike ride.

Before dinner we walked the other direction through town along the water to a 16th century Catholic monastery. The church was locked but it is surrounded by mature palms and conifers in a nice spot by the water. We had dinner (outside of course) at the best place we've eaten since returning to Croatia. Food here continues to be pricier than in the other countries we've visited (\$36 for chicken, chevapi, grilled veggies, fries, mineral water and a salad).

We've not eaten many of the apples that Lazo gave us and I didn't want to have them go to waste so we bought some honey from the little market near our place and I made an apple crisp using the oats we've been lugging around. It turned out great despite not having cinnamon and not knowing how the oven worked. Even though it doesn't always have what we want (cinnamon, for example), we've intentionally been going to the tiny market by the house instead of the market in town that is a chain store because Josip told us the locals like to support the woman who runs the old little store.

The moon is almost full and lights up the landscape. I enjoyed watching it and its light reflecting on the water. I also love listening to the nighttime sounds in the neighborhood- especially the sounds of people chatting and laughing coming unseen from open windows, balconies and garden terraces.

Last day on Brac

I'm sitting on the balcony under clear skies once again, waiting for my personal chef to finish cooking breakfast. We have a toaster at this place which is a real treat, as well as a decent pan, knife and spatula. Soon it will be too bright to stay out here, not due to the temperature which is just right, but because my eyes are too sensitive to the light bouncing off all the white stone surfaces.

When I woke this morning I felt a fleeting pang of sadness that today is our last full day of leisure on our trip. Part of me would like to continue traveling for another month. I don't feel ready to go back to work or to the hassles of city living. On the other hand I look forward to seeing Callie and sleeping in the same place each night. I am SO grateful I have a comfortable home to return to and that I live in a beautiful place and have a job I like and all my needs met. So my brief sadness quickly turned to gratitude.

.. We ate breakfast. Jim is on his bike ride, and I sit here at 10:25 trying to sense how I want to spend this time alone. I notice a feeling of urgency to choose wisely how I spend my time, my last day on this island. I want to savor each moment here, just as I try to do any day no matter where I am or what I'm doing. I consider doing yoga but I can do that any time and any place. What I cannot do any time or place is swim in clear blue waters next to a pebbly beach. I am lucky to be able to sit on stony beaches near my home in Seattle, but the water is too cold there for an enjoyable swim. So off to the beach I go...

... Even though I could have chosen a closer beach I decided to walk 40 minutes to the same beach I swam at yesterday. I like the walk amid the fragrant twisty pine trees and I like that 'my' beach is the farthest from town on this bit of coast. In contrast to yesterday when there were about 8 sunbathers, today I had the beach to myself for about 90 minutes at which point an older German couple and an older German guy showed up. All 3 removed their clothes which seems to be a common way of doing things in Croatia (and I guess much of Europe). Again I chose to wear a suit. I didn't want to get burned, and I don't like tiny pebbles sticking to my butt!

I sat and drank in the colors, sounds, sights, and warmth from the sun and without forethought once again began arranging stones into a design. Even when my finished design is simple and unoriginal I find the process of creating designs with natural materials in nature to be very meditative and satisfying.

Eventually I felt warm enough to go into the water. I stayed in longer this time, swimming, floating, and communing with the fish that once again gathered around to investigate me. I don't know much about fish and how much they travel but I saw what seemed to be the same batch that I saw yesterday- several smaller varieties and that one larger blue-green one with the red stripe. I couldn't help but wonder what it's like to be a fish.

I stayed in the water even longer my second time in, understanding better why some people love swimming in the sea. Historically it's not been something I've been strongly drawn to, but when conditions are perfect like they've been here I enjoy it. I like that this salty water allows me to float effortlessly. Several times I gave myself over to the elements and to the buoyancy of the salty water and floated on my back, listening to the sound of my breath in my ears below the water line, feeling the warmth of the sun and savoring the beauty of the blue sky.

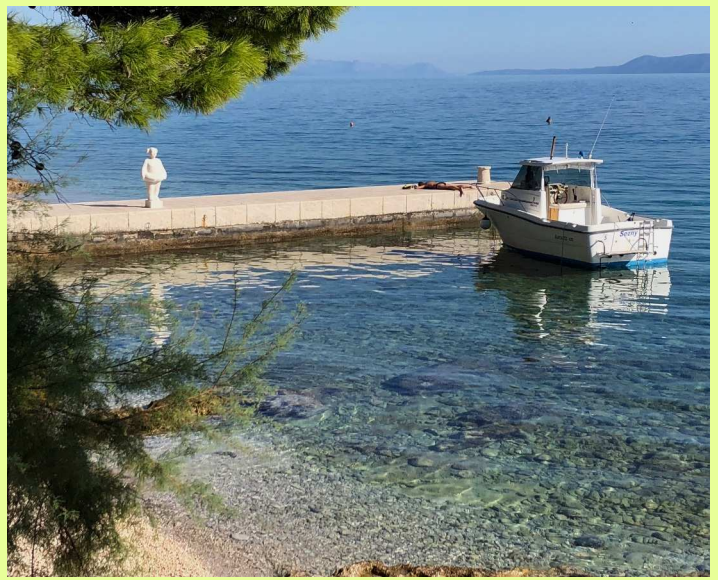
When I got out of the water the second time my head felt weird for a while, not exactly dizzy but kind of off kilter and vertigo-y. It took about 15 or 20 minutes for my head to feel relatively normal again. I'm pretty sensitive to light and motion and I think the patterns of shifting light under water triggered this icky feeling. Or maybe I was a little seasick. But it was mild and worth it. I created another little design amid the stones on the beach.

After a few hours I headed back and met up with Jim at the bike rental place along the promenade and we walked the rest of the way to our apartment together. This evening we ate at the same place we ate at last night and got to witness the moonrise which was a real treat as the moon looked huge when it first popped up. This evening we sat on the balcony again, sipping our rakija and then tea, watching the moon and its reflection on the dark water. It makes no sense but I would swear that the moonlight on the water creates music just outside the range of hearing.

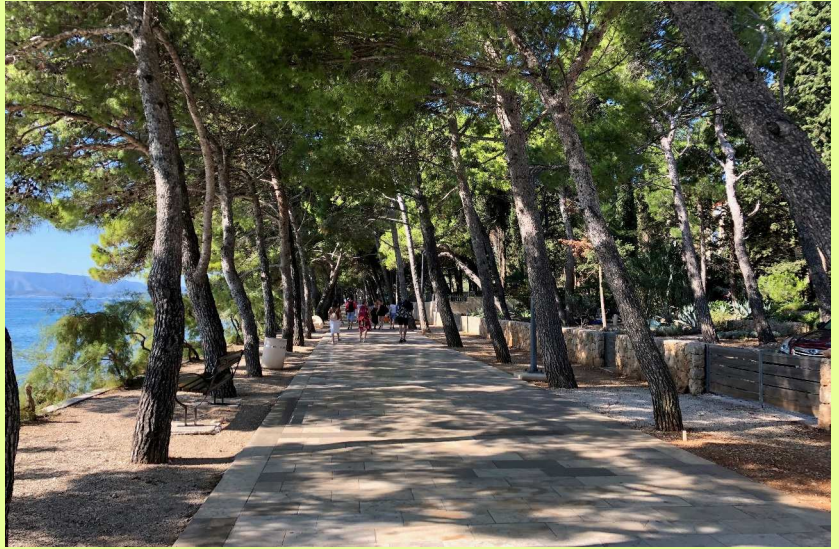
The next morning I woke at 6:15 and was lured to the balcony by the very slight lightening of the predawn sky. The eastern horizon became deep orange-red and reflected upon the sea. Gradually the colors muted and the sun rose. I love the dawn and am grateful when I'm in a good spot to watch it arrive. Morning air feels softer than later in the day. The birds chirp enthusiastically. Here I hear an occasional scooter, a small delivery truck, a man's voice, and brief crying from a young child, and now, church bells in the distance, always a reminder to thanks and praise God for my life, and for this moment. But mostly I hear birds. The air is still although if I could see such things I'm sure I would see streams and currents of slight breezes all around me.

I've not written in much specific descriptive detail on this trip. Most of my writing has been a recounting of our activities. I'm sorry I've not written much about my inner processes. While I have found time to be quiet each day overall we have been very active on this trip, walking, driving, hiking, exploring, and visiting with people.

As we prepare to return to Seattle I wonder what is next for me. Will we move and if so, where, and when? How do I want to live out my remaining days? Some part of me wants to live with the spirit of the hour around dawn. Dawn is usually a slow, quiet, relaxed and hopeful period, a time of many possibilities. It's a time of making space for guidance, nourishment and encouragement to carry on in connection with my deepest self and God within me. Sitting quietly in the early morning is somewhat akin to standing calf deep in the water, knowing I will dive into the day but collecting myself as I wait for the right moment.



Sights around Bol

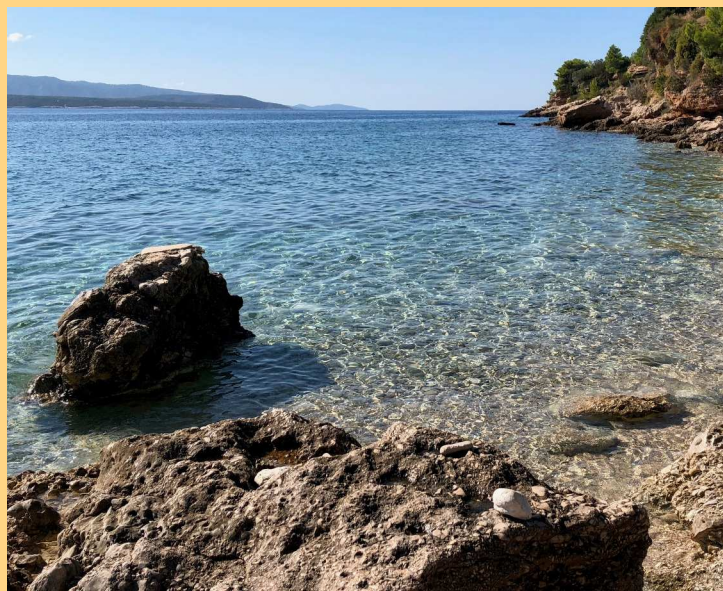




Above and below- 'my' beach



Moon rise in Bol



Sunset from balcony





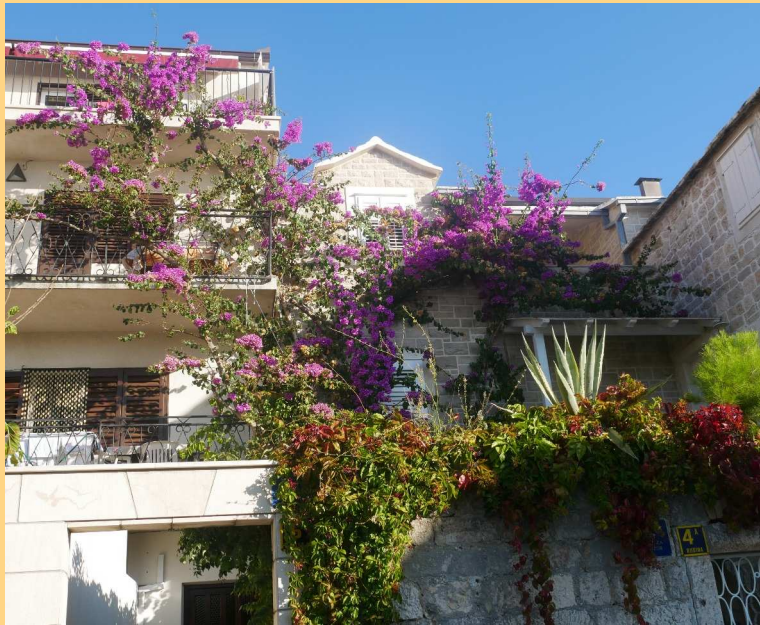
On the way to the beach



Below- view from balcony



Left- garden below balcony



Brac to Zagreb

We left Bol and were grateful to get to the ferry in Supetar early enough to get on the 10:30 boat to Split. The ferry was packed with the majority seeming to be German tourists. We sat outside on the top deck where a large group of Germans who were part of a tour sang German drinking songs accompanied by an accordion. About 30 of them line danced through the aisles. For a few moments I found it festive and entertaining but they went on and on for over half the ride which Jim and I found slightly annoying, not so much the sounds but the somewhat imposing and presumptuous attitude as if this was their country and their boat. One interesting thing about this ferry is the ramps to the upper side car decks fold up and down.

Our 4+ hour drive to Zagreb was uneventfully beautiful through a vast stretch of rocky dry uninhabitable scrubby territory, past high treeless mountains, through 3+ mile long tunnels and back into rolling forested high hills (fall colors were glorious) and farmland speckled with orange roofed homes.

Our timing was good arriving in Zagreb because we were able to miss the marathon and its road closures by about a half hour. We made it to our apartment, the same place we stayed when we arrived in Zagreb, with no trouble other than difficulty finding parking.

After a brief rest Zora and Mike picked us up and took us to a pizza place (right by Mali Bar where we've eaten with them before a couple times) and then we went to a movie theater to see a new film called, The Diary of Diana B, created by one of Zora's former clients. This movie is based on the true story of an Austrian woman married to a Serb who through her determination was able to save over 10,000 Serb children from death in Croatian Ustashi run concentration camps in Croatia during WWII. It was well done, moving and sad. After dinner we moved to a different room and had mistletoe rakija and more good conversation. Zora affirmed that it was bold of her friend to make this movie at this time when Nationalism is on the rise in Croatia and the government actively denying and erasing its relationship with the Nazis and complicity in confining and killing many Serbs, Jews and Roma during that war. On a related note she confirmed what we'd read about the government and Catholic Church still being very cozy with the government- giving the church 8 billion kuna (over a billion US dollars) per year, and requiring 'religion' classes' (only Catholicism) to be taught to all children in the public schools. Despite its modern and European look (especially in the bigger cities) it has become increasingly conservative in its policies.

When we parted I gave Zora the yoga mat I bought at the beginning of the trip that I only used 3 times despite my intention to use it daily.

Zagreb continued

We enjoyed being back in 'our' spacious apartment (apartment Jagodic) that has just about everything we want or need. We ate our last breakfast of the trip out on the balcony, including our usual eggs with veggies and some good pekara items. We came close to finishing the huge jar of apricot jam given to us by Rada. During the day we also finished the raspberry juice (we've been putting a wee bit in our bubble water each day) and bottle of rakija given by Kristina's mom. Sadly we had to give up the big jar of raspberry jam given to us by her mom when we tried to carry it through security. You know how dangerous a jar of jam can be in the hands of malevolent people. We knew this might happen but we figured we'd try because neither of us could squeeze it into our heavy bulging travel packs.

Anyway, after breakfast we walked a couple miles to Maksimir Park. The huge mostly forested park does not have dramatic scenery but has several manmade lakes, a zoo, and some fabulous huge old trees and is very peaceful and good for 'forest bathing'. On our walk home we were on a quest for safety pins that Jim hoped to use to keep his torn suitcase pocket from tearing off in transit. Each place we stopped (craft store, hardware store and pharmacy) said, 'try NAMA', the old Yugoslavia era department store that has just about everything and at low prices. Indeed we found some in the sewing department.

We spent the afternoon sorting, discarding, consolidating and packing then walked a mile and a half to old town where we roamed around until time to meet Lynn's work acquaintance, Dragana, for dinner. Dragana is from Belgrade but lives in Belgium where she works for an environmental policy ngo. Lynn says she is extremely bright and might some day be appointed to a high position in government. We met in the lobby of Hotel Dubrovnik thinking it would just be the 3 of us but when she emerged from the elevator and introduced herself she asked if we minded having dinner with her 5 Nature Conservancy colleagues visiting from the US. Of course we said we did not mind although I knew it meant not getting to converse with Dragana as deeply as we would if it was just the 3 of us.

All 5 of the crew are involved in energy policy and development projects internationally, and all were friendly and good conversationalists. We had a fun dinner (outside) of great traditional food. It was a nice way to end the trip. All of them, especially Dragana, urged me to urge Lynn to come to the Balkans.

Jim and I walked home in the dark under the full moon, surprised by how busy and lively Zagreb was on a Tuesday night at 9 pm, but I gather that is how most European cities are. People tend to eat later and socialize and walk more than in most US cities. Cities are arranged in ways that make it easy to not have a car. Zagreb has a tram line that is cheap and easy to access and it has numerous car free streets. Scooters and bikes are plentiful. I've commented on this during past trips but I love being able to walk about at night with no fear of being robbed, raped, or accosted. And how nice it is to walk around without encountering drug addicts camping on the streets (so prevalent in Seattle).

Once back at our apartment we finished packing and went to bed although it took a while for me to fall asleep. Our alarm woke us at 4:05 and within 20 minutes we were out the door and on our way to the airport with a quick stop at a gas station. We wondered where the numerous young women we saw walking about were going at 4:45 am.

The only thing weighing on us is we wonder if we might have been scammed during our wait at the Amsterdam airport. Hopefully we are being needlessly paranoid, but when we get home we will change passwords for various accounts just in case, and keep our fingers crossed that nothing bad happened. What happened was this- we were charging devices at one of those charging stations (we know now it is better not to use those but instead to just plug into a regular outlet). A guy came by with a charging adapter in his hand saying the adapter didn't have the right configuration and he needed to charge his phone to make some sort of flight change. In the moment it did not occur to us that he could be trying to access our devices. He did not ask to use our adapter but Jim invited him to plug in his phone into our adapter. The guy sat down and chatted for 10-15 minutes. At one point he showed Jim a photo on his phone of his brother playing football at UNM. Meanwhile Jim's laptop was open, both our phones were on and my iPad was sitting there. I was in and out, checking on the info screen down the hall but something about the guy seemed a little off. He wasn't good at making eye contact and seemed slightly awkward. When he left it occurred to me he might have been trying to access our devices. Fingers crossed our data and accounts are not compromised. It's kind of weird that the day we left on our trip I was scammed by phone, and the day we returned from our trip we might have been scammed again. Sadly we need to be much more careful and vigilant and less naively trusting of people when it comes to the security of our accounts and devices.

I must reiterate how lucky I feel to have been able to visit the Balkans again, and am grateful we stayed healthy and safe on this trip. We drove a lot of miles on a lot of less than optimal roads among less than optimal drivers. Every place we stayed was interesting and beautiful, and our visits and conversations with people touching, informative and nourishing. And the food was mostly great! Perhaps we will be able to go again in a year or two...?

When I think about whether or not I want to return to the Balkans a 6th time I have mixed feelings. While I love this place and even fantasize about moving here part of me does not want to come again. I feel sadness and pain from witnessing the growth, increased tourism and 'progress' that entails ruining the natural beauty here, as well as the fading away of traditional ways of living including the strong sense of community. This pain is perhaps the price I must pay for the privilege of visiting. If we do return I might skip going to Croatia other than maybe going to Vojnic, Istria or an island again. I'd like to spend more time in Montenegro, Serbia and BiH, and I know Jim wants to see Slovenia, and I'm open to going to Greece or Italy, but as I list these places I feel weary and tell myself- NO! Don't go to so many places. Just pick a few spots and stay put longer in each place. That's what we thought we'd do on this trip but alas our curiosity won out and we hopped from place to place every 2-4 days. I have no regrets, but traveling this way is not overall relaxing due to needing to research where to go, where to stay, and what to see, and driving 1-5 hours between places. I don't feel I MUST come again, but if our health is good and we can find good dog care I would like to return.





Fresh market in Zagreb with lots of meats



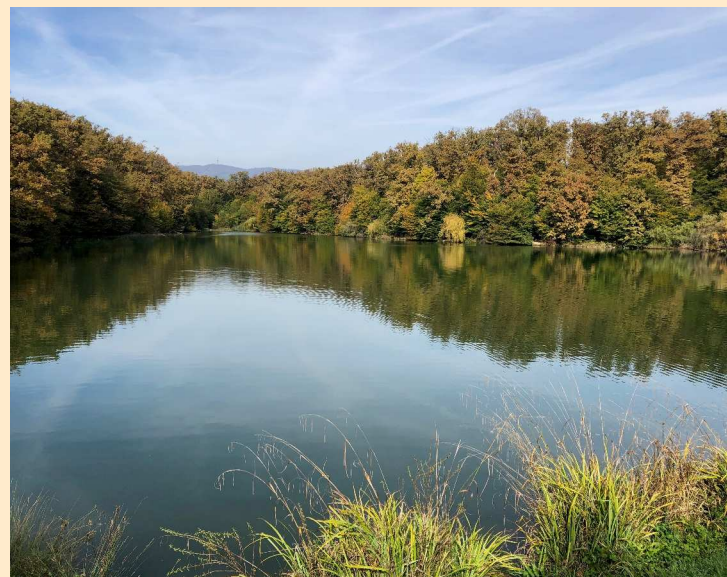
Zagreb's Ban Jelacic Square



Above- Jim and Mike after the movie
Below-Maksimir Park



Dragana and one of the TNC guys





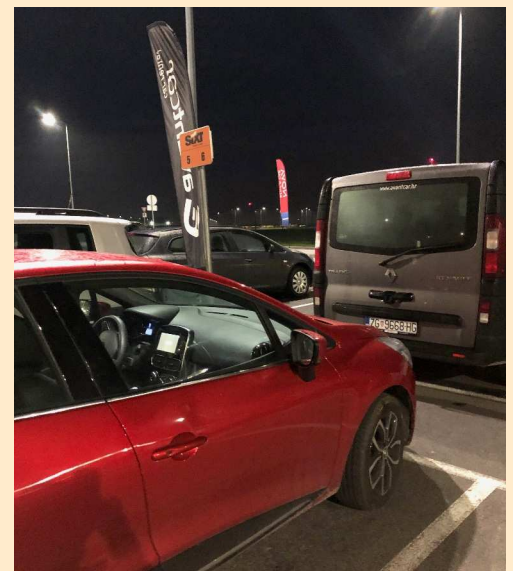
Bookstore above, food vendors below



Above-Last meal on the trip
Below-sign in the movie theater sums everything up!



Below- early morning return of our faithful Clio



Back in Seattle

We arrived home Tuesday late afternoon, on time after an uneventful trip home. We arose at 4:05 am and were out the door by 4:20. We stopped for gas, drove to the airport, deposited the car in the rental lot and checked in to our flights and sat groggily for 2.5 hours waiting to board the plane. We spent \$28 on breakfast at the airport which included a \$5 bottle of fresh squeezed orange juice. We were able to sit next to each other on both legs of the trip home. After getting off the plane in Amsterdam I realized I'd left my ipad in the seat pocket in front of me! Luckily I realized it right as we started walking away from the gate and the cleaning crew was able to bring it to me a few minutes later. I've never left anything on a plane before and this experience coupled with leaving my ipad and journal at the house in Miliva makes me wonder if there is a meaningful process behind my carelessness. I could conclude that maybe I should give up writing and leave it behind, or, maybe I need to put my writing out more into the world where others can see it, or, maybe I simply need to be more mindful of my possessions when I am traveling!

The 10 hour flight to Seattle was fine but the legroom was less than I ever remember suffering through. We were very uncomfortable but as I said to Jim, I'd rather be cramped on a plane for ten hours than confined to a boat for two months, or however long it used to take people to cross the sea.

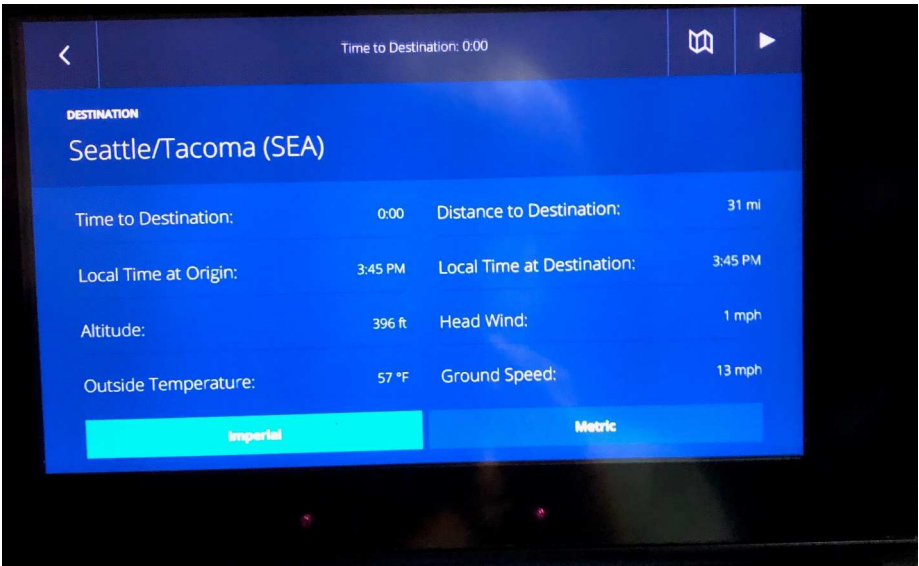
Cedar met us at the airport. During the ride home I felt sleepy, confused and displaced but happy to see familiar sights, especially the beautiful yellows, oranges and reds of the fall trees. I felt mostly ambivalent about arriving home, glad and relieved to have returned safely, grateful for a great trip, grateful for our familiar little house to come home to, and grateful to live in a stunningly beautiful place, but viscerally I didn't feel the way I would like to feel about coming home- excited, comforted, welcomed and relaxed. Instead I felt the reality of not being part of any intimate or close community of friends here, of my return not really mattering too much to anyone. Of course some of my clients are glad to have me back. And a few friends are probably glad I'm here, but honestly I don't feel my presence here matters much on a day to day basis, quite a contrast to what I witness in the Balkans where relationships and frequent interactions and support are of primary importance. While I appreciate the freedom to follow my interests and dreams in the US and our high material standard of living (for many of us), I think our emphasis on individualism and viewing 'success' primarily in economic and professional terms take a heavy toll on many of us.

But Callie was thrilled to see us! She ran around and whimpered happily and received our attention with great joy. And I was happy to see her. She looks good, much better than when we returned from our trip a year ago, although a little thin under her big thick coat.

Cedar appears to have taken care of the house relatively well. Having him here meant so much to me during our trip as I was mostly able to not think or worry about the house or Callie at all.

Settling back into life here has been fine although I am still waking way too early and not sleeping enough, and I have yet to resume swimming. I am happy I lost about 4 pounds but I'm not sure how much of that is muscle.

Contrary to Jim I am appreciating the cool grey moody skies and rain (with sun breaks now and then). It's hard to grasp that a week ago I was sitting in the warm sunshine on the pebbly beach by the clear turquoise waters in Bol and taking dips in the sea.



More photos from here and there...



Above my bed in Zabljak



Another sink-less bathroom (Kolasin)



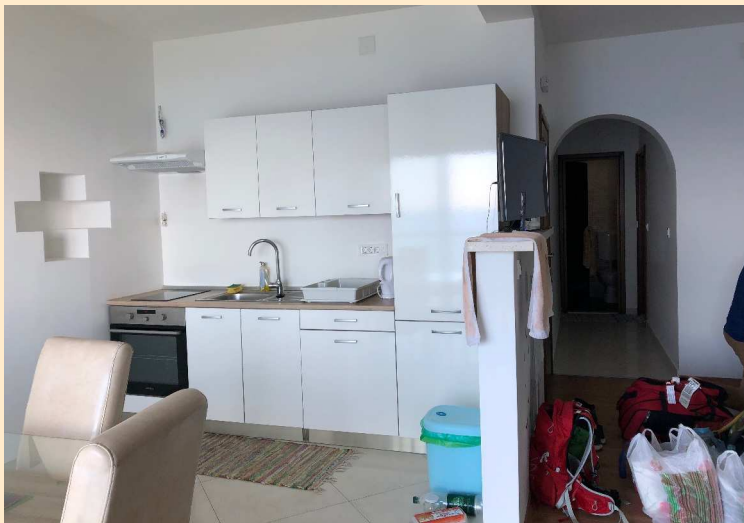
Apartment in Zagreb

Apartment in Cavtat



Marko's cottage near Virpizar

Apartment on Brac island in Bol



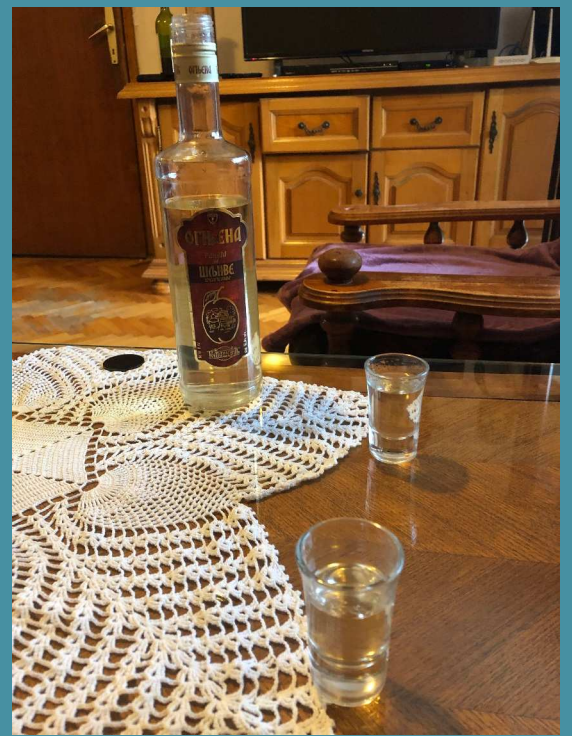


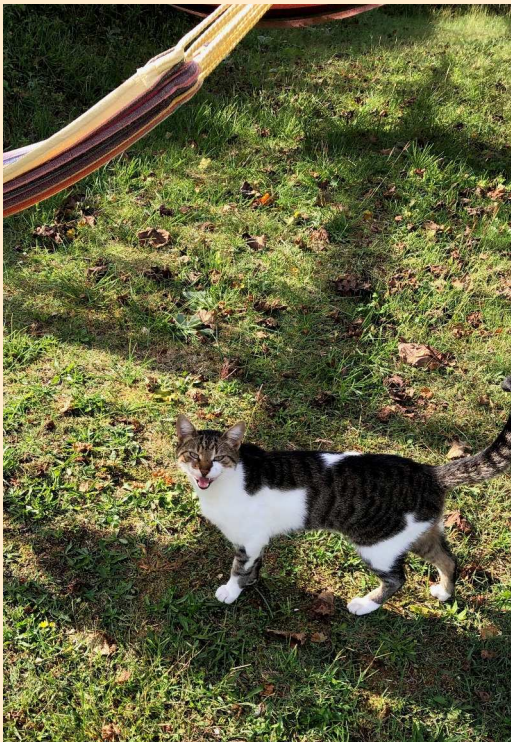
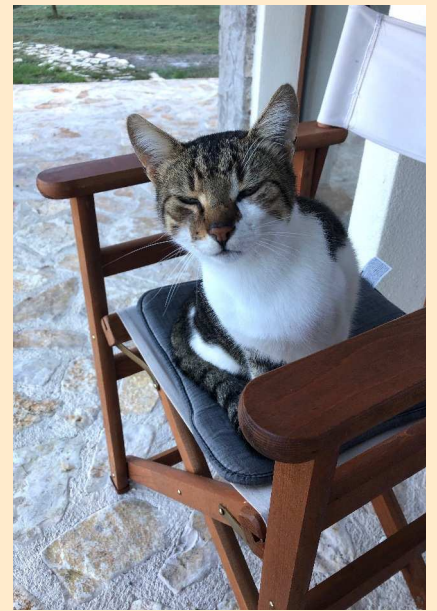


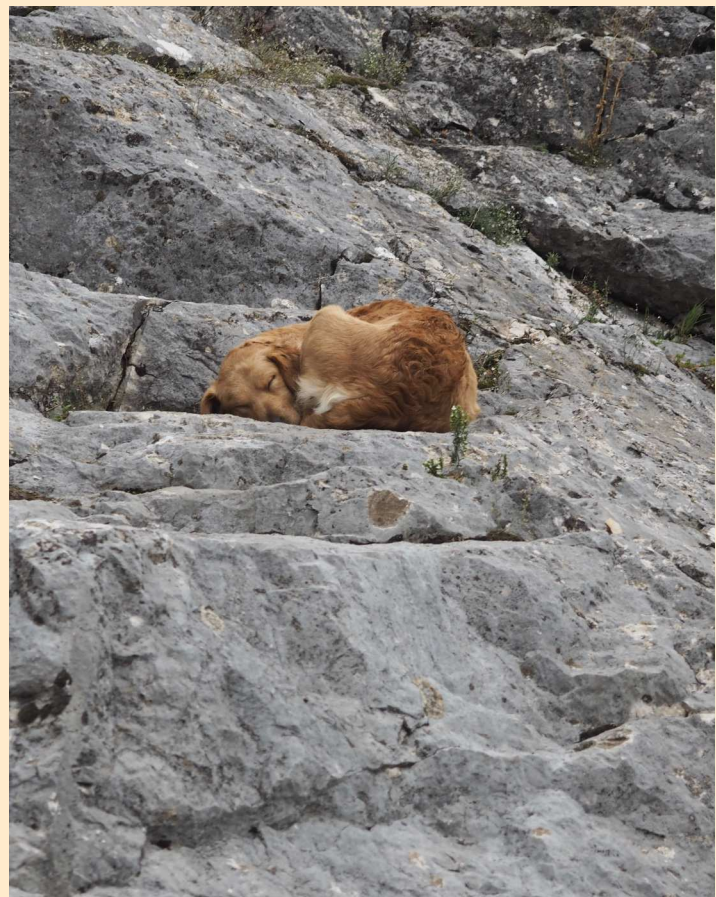
This page-Food and drink in Polje at Kristina's parent's house.
Opposite page-Food and drink from here and there.

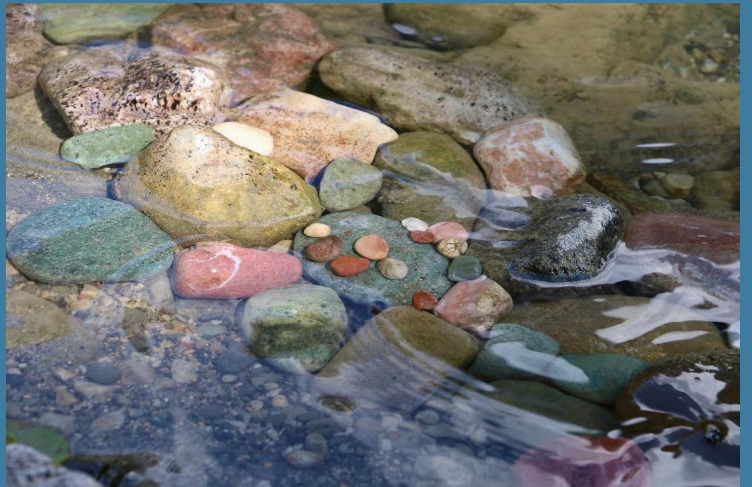


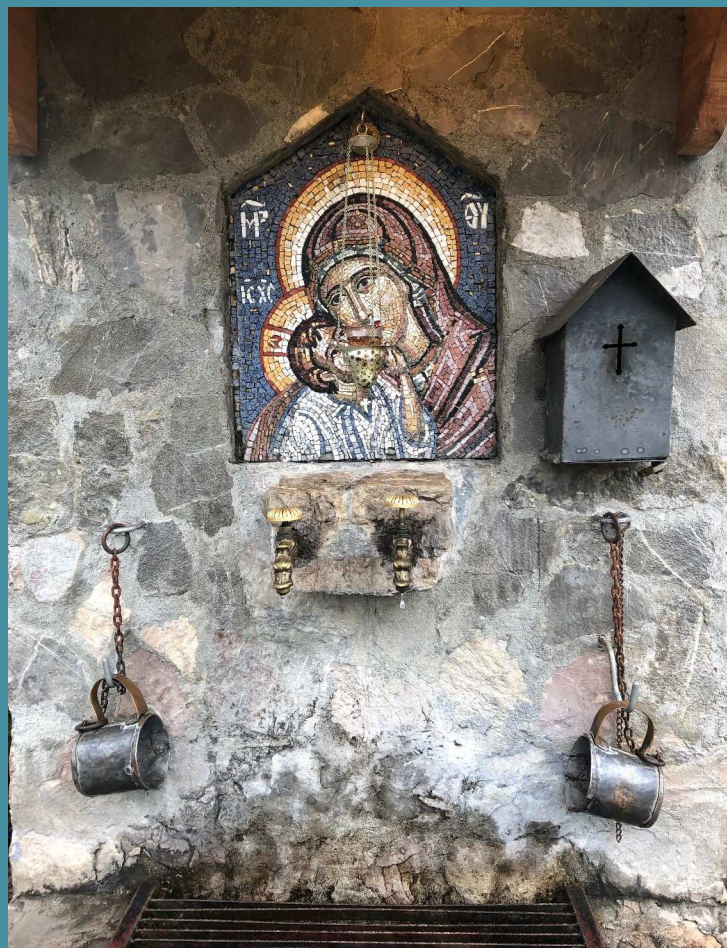


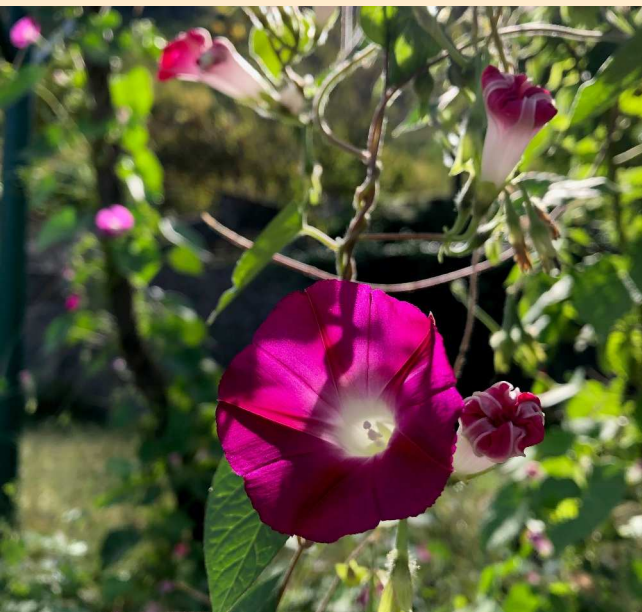


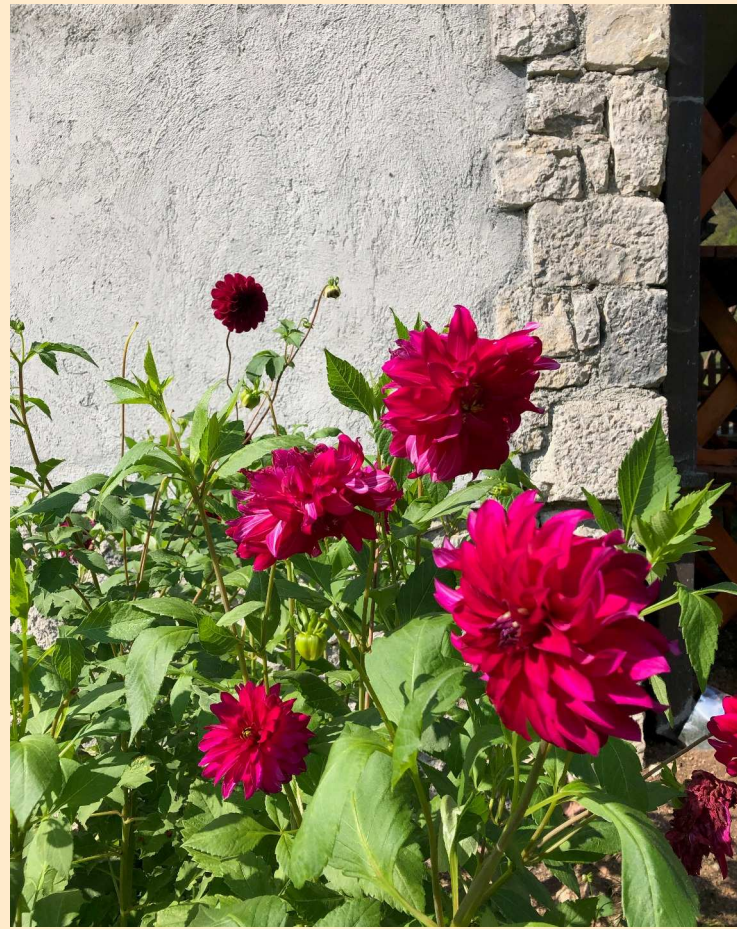


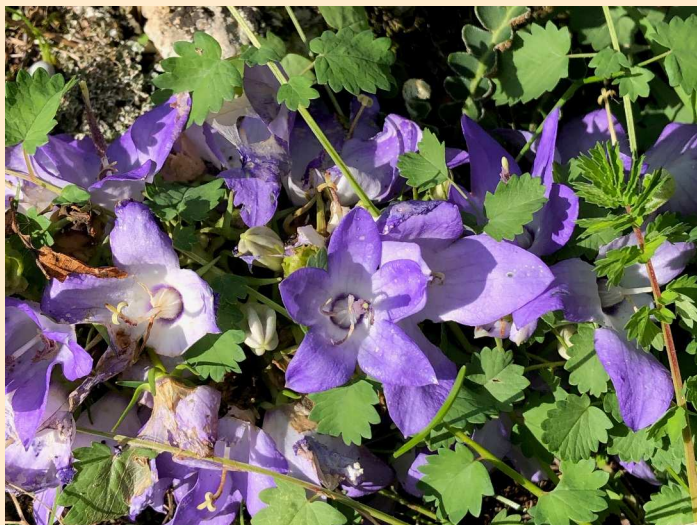
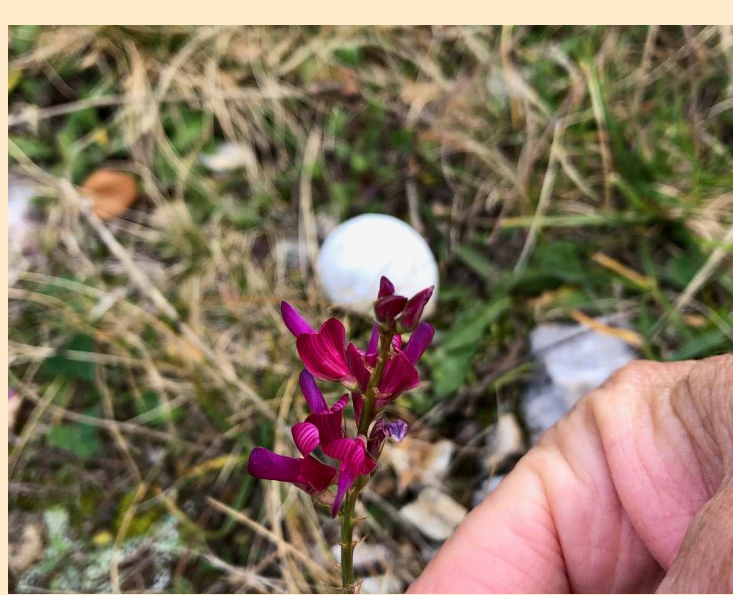




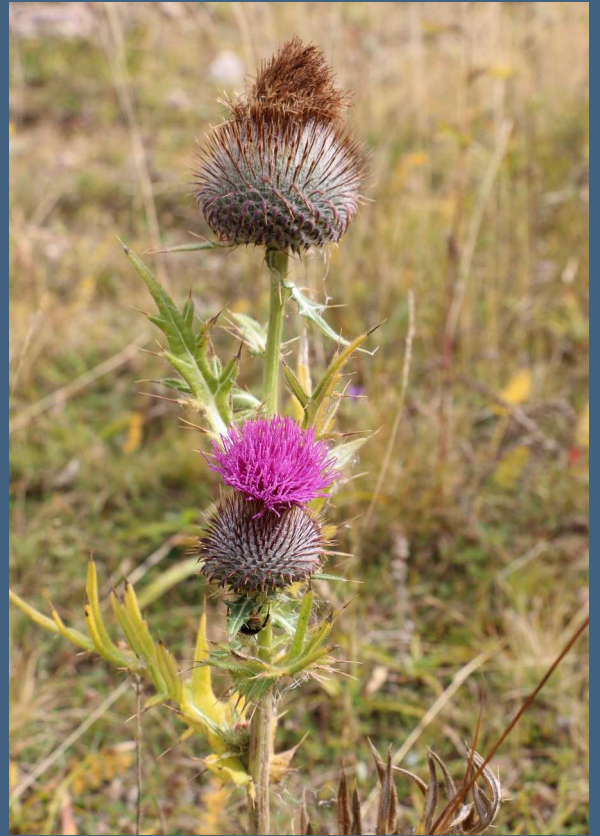
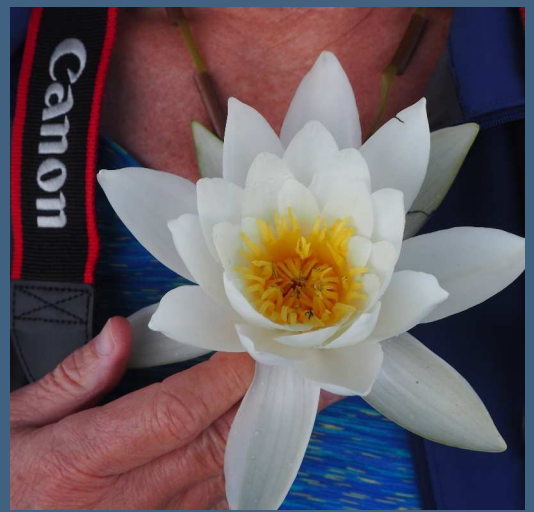


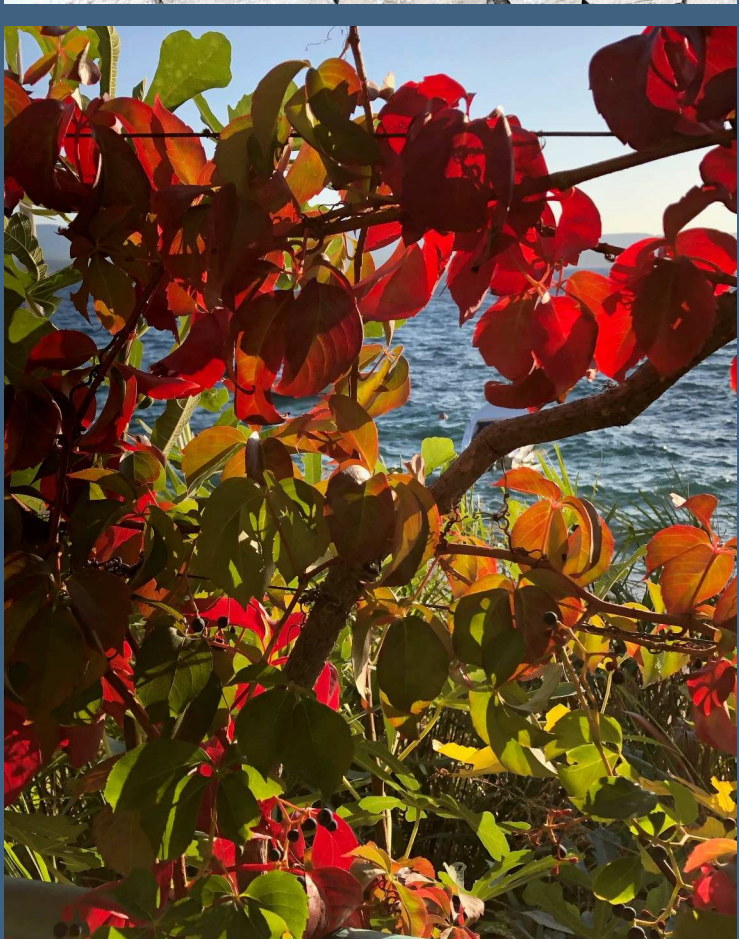
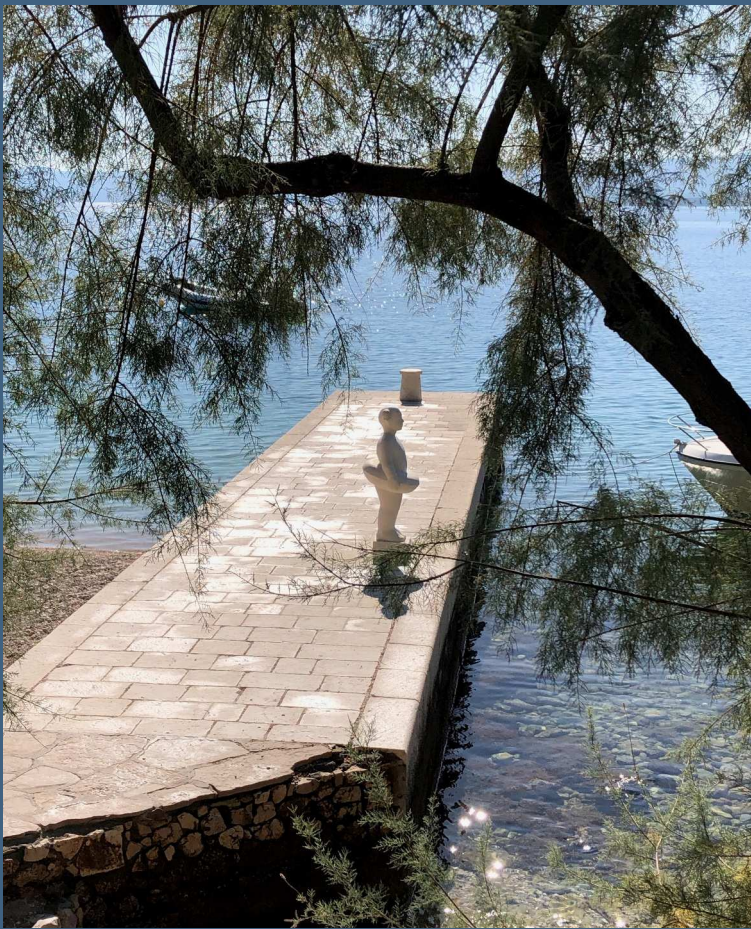


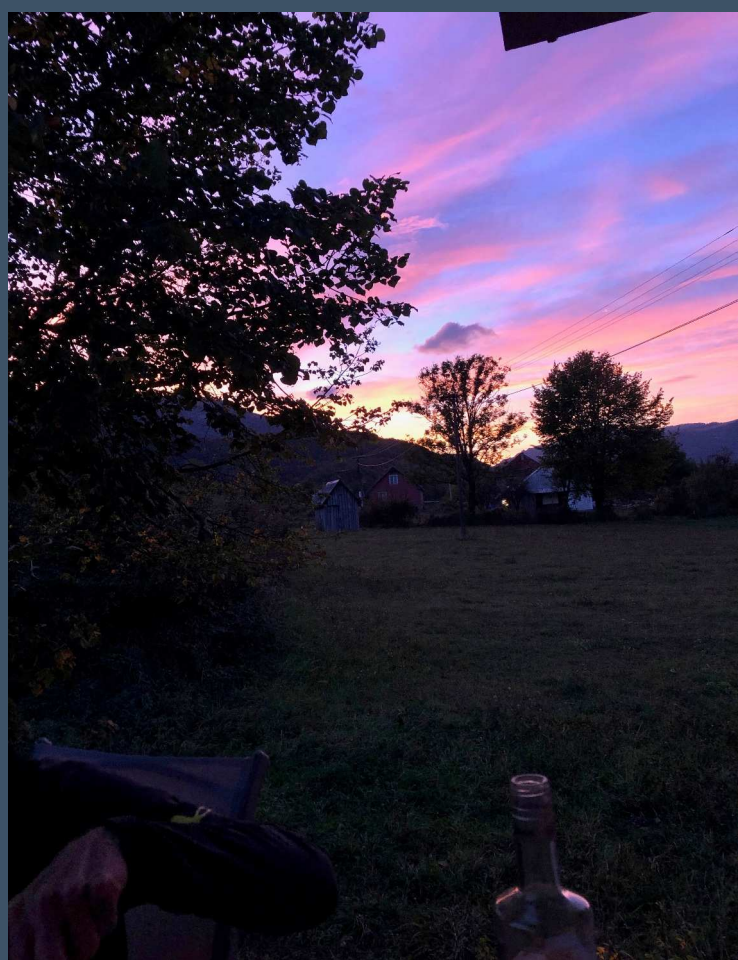




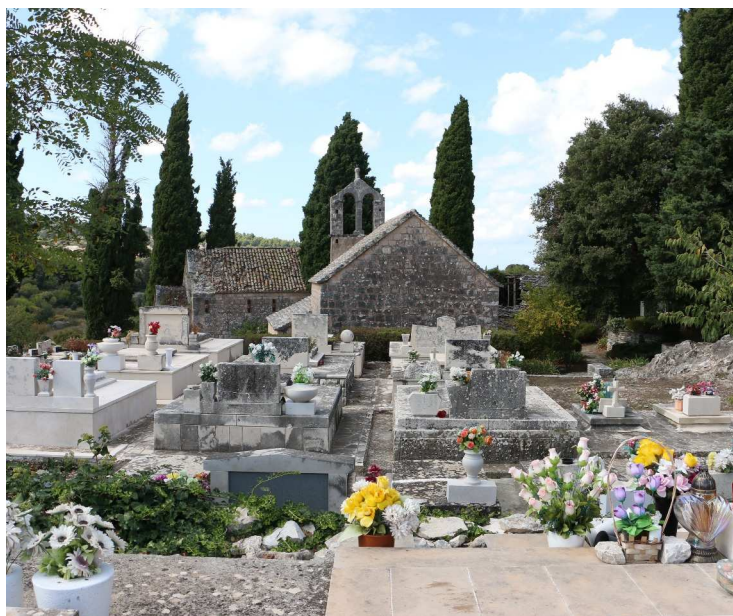


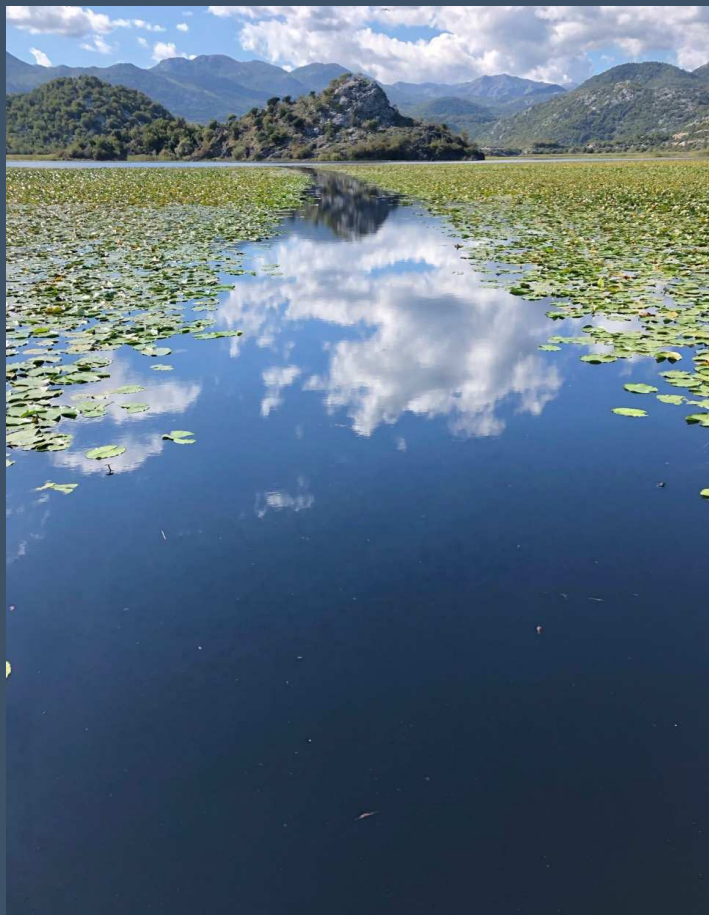


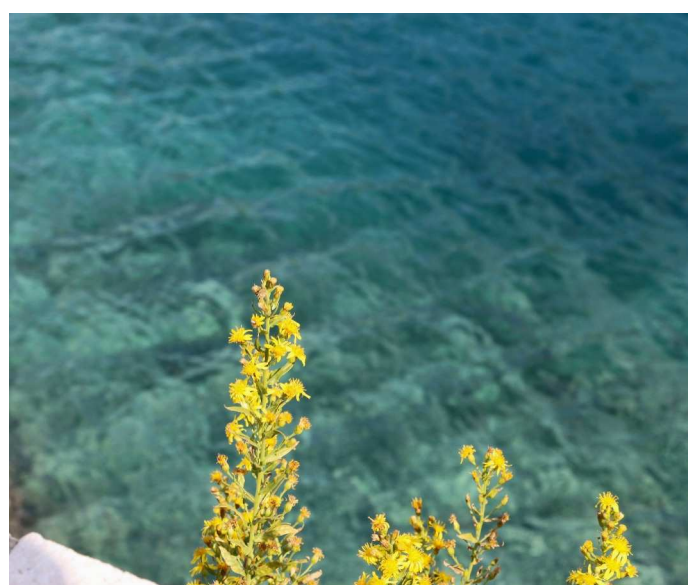


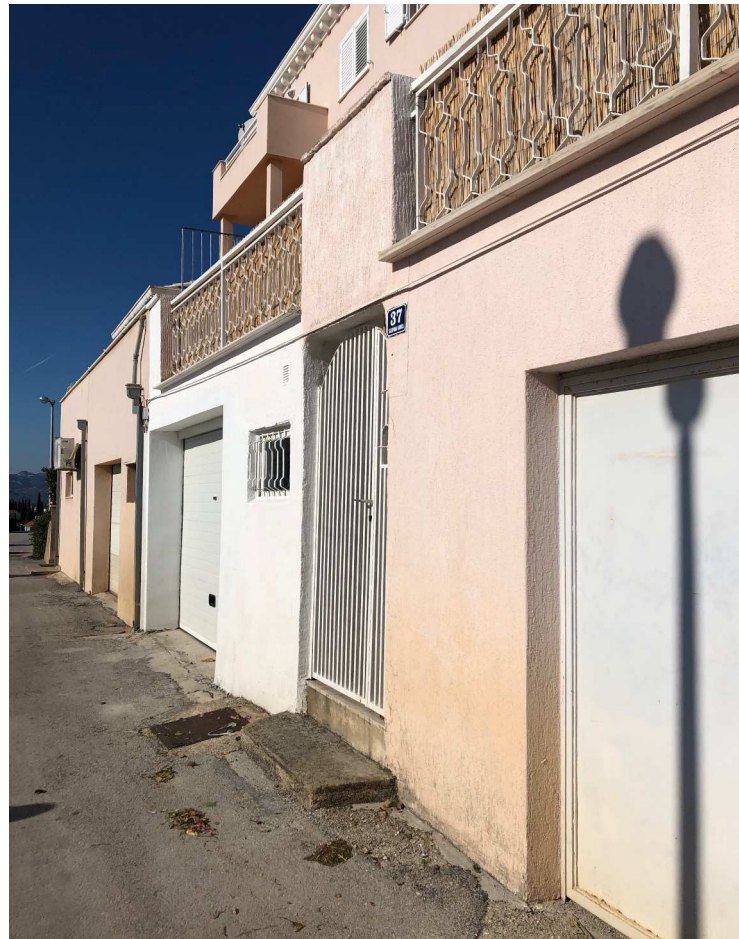






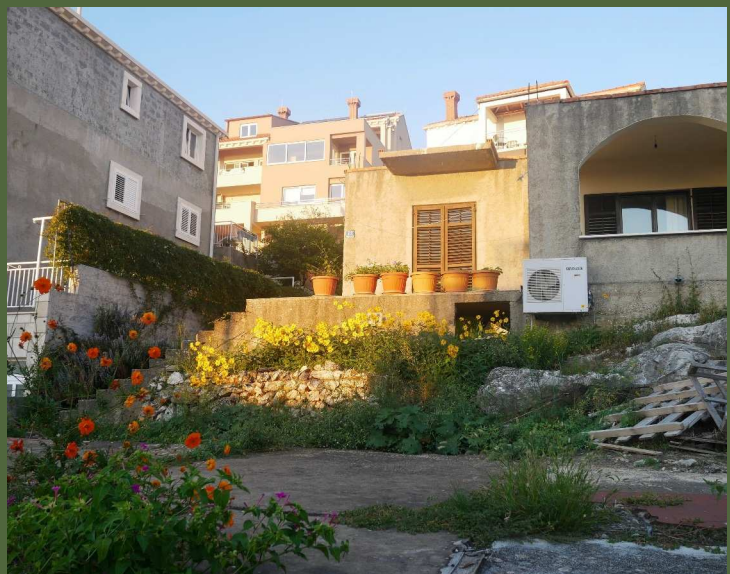
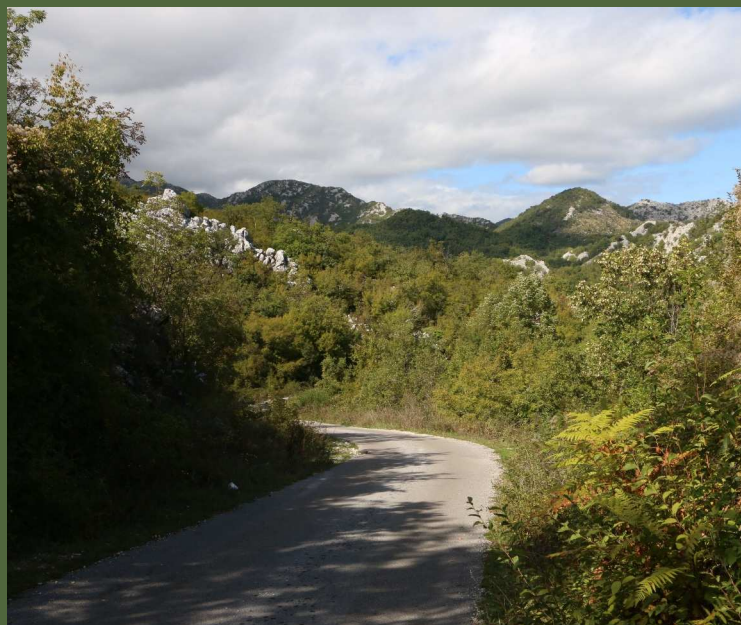
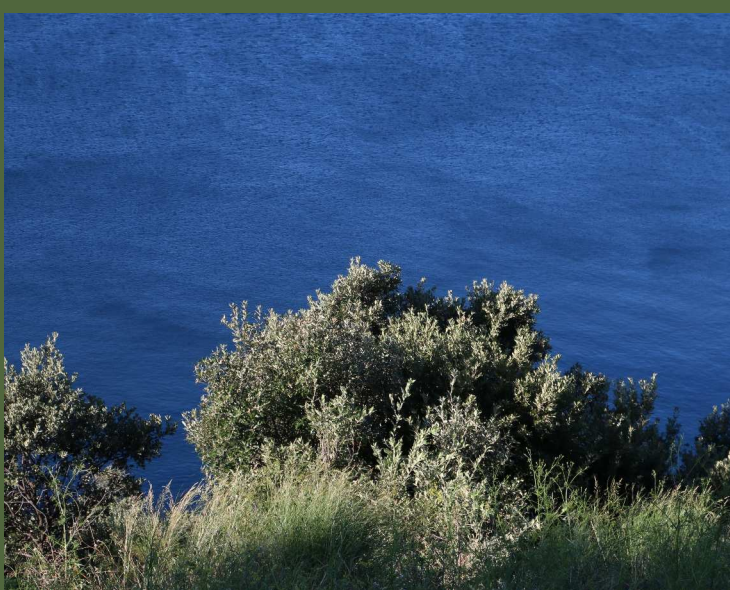


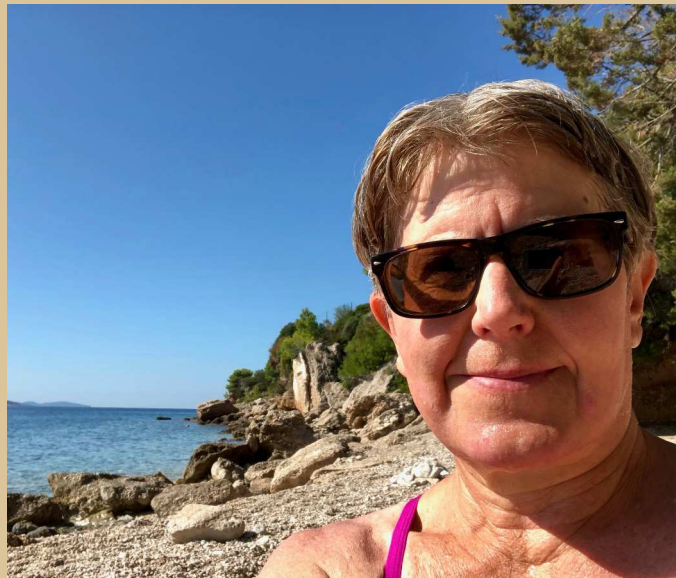












I put together this book, and books from prior trips, largely for my own pleasure and to help keep alive some of my many wonderful memories of my travels. But I also created these books with hope that those who read or look at them will sense my love and respect for these places and their people, and in turn might become a little bit curious about these or other places and people around our precious Earth.

You can find some of my other books, viewable online or as pdf downloads, if you google my name on Blurb.com

Please contact me with comments or questions at: tscarlettlyon@gmail.com



(St. George was my family's patron saint which they celebrated on May 6 each year)

This book includes journal entries and photos from my fifth trip to the Balkans, the region where my paternal ancestors lived. Each visit has expanded and deepened my immense love for the land, people and cultures. I hope by sharing my appreciation for the region others will be inspired to learn about or visit this beautiful land with its rich cultures and history.

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