

**TRAVEL**

# Hiking Beyond Borders in the Balkans

By TIM NEVILLE MARCH 29, 2013

The seasons were changing fast, and the warmth I'd taken for granted had vanished as night mustered in the hills. I gathered the blanket around my neck and listened to the dogs barking below. It was now long past midnight, with only a few hours until the morning call to prayer.

Peter Grubb, the owner of an Idaho-based outfitter called ROW Adventures, sat in the corner flipping through maps under the lone working light bulb. We were in Room 305 of Hotel Rosi, a bright yellow block of a building in Gusinje, a predominately Muslim community in the former Yugoslav republic of Montenegro. South of here, a rocky trail climbed steadily into a vampiric maw of limestone peaks. Tomorrow we would follow that trail and slip virtually unnoticed into Albania.

That would have been among the stupidest things you could do had it been the 1980s, when Albania was the North Korea of Europe. From World War II until his death in 1985, the Communist leader Enver Hoxha hammered Albania into an oppressive hermit state. He extirpated dissent, outlawed religion and lowered the age for executions to 11. The "Great Teacher" hermetically sealed the borders and distanced himself from other Communists. "We have fought empty-bellied and barefooted but have never kowtowed to anybody!" he once howled at Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader.

Hoxha's final heart attack and the eventual collapse of Communism hailed the beginning of the end of Albania's isolation, and in recent years the once-tense border region separating Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo has become

the kind of place you'd want to visit. Aid money, remittances and relative stability have helped create a middle class, and tourism in the region is beginning to boom. Guides take groups kayaking under stone bridges in Montenegro, hiking around Albanian archaeological sites and even skiing in Kosovo. New hotels are pumping fresh life into stale Communist hangouts, even if the water isn't always hot.

"If you want luxury, sorry, go to Paris or New York," Kela Qendro, a 33-year-old Albanian working for a small tourism company, told me later. "You come here to see the real stuff. The shepherd. The old woman picking pomegranates. You go up to villagers and they will invite you inside their home for the joy of meeting you."

Mr. Grubb, who runs about seven trips a year to Croatia, had long been fascinated with this less-developed region of the Balkans. About a year ago he learned of an intriguing new way to explore it — on foot.

The Peaks of the Balkans Trail, a project coordinated by the German Agency for International Cooperation and involving dozens of other groups (including women's associations, tourism offices and environmental nongovernmental organizations), formally opened last year as a 120-mile trek designed to foster tourism and teamwork among historically quarrelsome neighbors. The path literally links Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox enclaves, as well as Slavs and numerous Albanian tribes in three adjoining national parks, each showcasing the border region's inestimable beauty. Towering rock walls scream for thousands of feet into an unimpeachable sky. Farmhouses gather like asters in valleys. Wolves and lynxes pad through landscapes soaked in green.

There would be no real roughing it, since locals have turned ancestral homes into rustic inns offering beds, homemade cheeses, meats and brandy. Even wandering across remote, unmanned borders is now legal, thanks to a new permit system introduced last summer. Mr. Grubb needed only some roll-with-it travelers willing to be his guinea pigs before offering the trip for real. Seven gregarious Texans and I signed up.

Now, sitting in the hotel room, Mr. Grubb put down the map and sighed.

He seemed restless. We were about to head deep into the Albanian Alps, better known as the cursed mountains, some of Europe's most glaciated peaks after the Swiss Alps and the highest summits of the Dinaric Alps. The whole trail could be hiked in about 10 days, but we had just 5 to do parts of it. Even so, there were big days and taxing climbs ahead. We would be among the first American-outfitted groups to wander into the maw, and in these parts, the order of things is more mystery than fact.

"This could be more cutting-edge than I thought," Mr. Grubb said, and he switched off the light.

**EARLIER THAT DAY** I had met the Texans at the airport in Podgorica, Montenegro's pint-size capital. Rainey Rogers, a former amateur boxing champion, was the youngest in the group at 49. Richard Dill, a retired pharmacy franchise mogul whom everyone called Dick, was the oldest at 73. Mark David, a real estate investor, had rallied the guys around the hike.

It was dark when we arrived in Gusinje, but the morning dawned bright and warm. Mount Rosi, the hotel's 8,274-foot-high namesake, rose to the southeast, while the 8,838-foot-high pyramid of Mount Jezerca lorded over the south.

Around 9 a.m. Enes Dreskovic, the newly minted director of the Prokletije National Park, one of the three border parks, roared up in a hunter-orange Pinzgauer, a military transport vehicle, to take us to the trail head. The bench seats in the back were too small for all of us, so I stood on the rear bumper and clung to the roll bars as we bounced down country lanes. Women in head scarves snapped upright from their fields to watch us, while Rainey hurled Blow Pops to children who stared from the side of the road. A gentleman in a pinstripe vest steered a horse cart groaning with firewood.

We were alone when we ground to a halt in the Ropojana Valley, a fairytale scoop of swaying pines and scalloped ridges that even the Pinzgauer could not penetrate. The trail began in earnest here. An Albanian from Theth, our goal 12 miles away, had supposedly left the village at 3 a.m. with horses to carry our luggage, but there was no sign of him.

"Well, welcome to the 'A' in adventure travel," Mr. Grubb said, scratching

his red beard. He proposed the only logical Plan B: to stuff what we needed into our daypacks and rendezvous with our bags two days later. The Texans seemed less annoyed than antsy to get romping through the magnificent landscape.

“Let’s repack and get after it,” boomed Paul Pogue, a pilot.

Rocks as white as marble complained under our boots as we marched toward a broad meadow in the midst of a beech forest. A griffon vulture performed lazy 8’s overhead. Shards of silvery-gray limestone shot into the sky like missiles. Of all the images I’d had of the region, none were as beautiful as this.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Mark marveled.

By early afternoon we had crested the Peja Pass, a treeless scab of rock and wind with an elevation of about 5,000 feet. Ghostly stone barracks stood guard with tattered burlap billowing in the window frames. Inside I found a pair of size 9 dress shoes and rooms reeking of ungulates. Dome-shaped bunkers with machine gun slits and roofs splintered like blooming onions fortified the high points. Fearing an invasion from all directions, Hoxha had built an estimated 700,000 of these death pods around a country smaller than Maryland.

“Welcome to Albania,” bellowed our 28-year-old Montenegrin guide, Semir Kardovic, mimicking gunfire.

The 2,600-vertical-foot climb to the pass had been difficult but the 4,000-vertical-foot descent into Theth was brutal. Down and down we plummeted along a series of knee-smashing switchbacks into an enormous glacial valley. By dusk, pointy houses with orange light seeping from the doorways winked through the forest. We made our way toward one, a medieval-looking guesthouse with squat windows and stone walls.

“Good evening,” said the keeper, Pavlin Polia, greeting us. He was in his early 30s, tall with midnight hair and a Roman nose. His Kosovan wife, Vlora, fetched some glasses while his brother, Nardi, shook our hands. We did our best to ignore his black eye. “Fight,” Nardi shamefully explained.

Inside the main room a slender stringed instrument called a cifteli hung

on the wall above a barrel filled with bowling balls of cheese. Rainey limped in and lay his head down on a long wooden table while Dick collapsed onto one of the 15 beds upstairs. I slugged two shots of plum brandy, convinced we had wandered back in time.

Like many Albanians, Mr. Polia had fled the country as soon as he could. He worked in construction in Italy and still remembers his first Pepsi. He returned to his family home in Theth a decade later and converted it into a guesthouse that opened in 2009. Now 300 people a year stay with him, the equivalent of half the village, each paying about 25 euros, or about \$31 at \$1.25 to the euro, for a bed and meals.

“In Italy I had lots of opportunity to make money, but that was not my passion,” he told me over wild marjoram tea.

I headed upstairs to wash but Mr. Polia stopped me.

“Don’t forget your luggage,” he said.

“You have my bag?” I asked, incredulously.

“Of course,” he said. “I brought it with the horses.”

**THAT NIGHT FATIGUE** sloughed off my body into a pile of warm blankets and I awoke to the prickly scent of roasting peppers. After a breakfast of eggs, curds and jam, Mr. Polia bade farewell as we shouldered our packs and stomped off toward the village of Valbona, about eight and a half miles east. We passed a stone chapel set in a pasture. The area is so rugged that the Ottoman Turks, who were Muslims, were unable to control the region as they did most of the Balkans for 500 years. As a result, both Theth and Valbona are still Catholic.

Mount Arapit, a 7,274-foot peak with a southern face as sheer as Half Dome at Yosemite, seemed to size me up as I crossed a wooden bridge and began to climb through maple, ash and hornbeams. It was not yet 10 a.m. but already muggy. Less than two miles in I collapsed. We had gained 800 vertical feet. Only 3,000 more to go.

There had been debate the night before about how many horses to bring in case someone needed a ride. The men seemed too tough to admit to wanting any, but the Day 1 damage was clear. Rainey had pulled a hamstring. Dick had

taken a tumble. In the end, Mr. Grubb hired one extra horse, which was fortunate when Richard Abernathy, a 60-year-old lawyer, began to hint that his heart was acting funny.

“I’m fine,” he countered. “Richard, get on the horse!” Paul barked, and Richard reluctantly climbed into the saddle atop a small, flea-bitten gray.

He wasn’t riding for long, though. Soon the trail fell some 2,500 feet into a broad alluvial basin. A van waited for us at the start of a rocky road that joined an asphalt street poured only a few weeks earlier. The effect was rattling. New Colorado-style lodges with exposed timber beams seemed to be going up everywhere.

“A lot of locals are moving back to the area, which is very encouraging,” Antonia Young, a British research fellow who has worked for more than a decade to create an international peace park in the region, told me later. “The danger now is that tourism gets too big before they can cope with it.”

Kol Gjoni Jubani had seen it all change so fast. He met us in the courtyard of his guesthouse, a concrete chalet built in 2005 next to a destroyed stone hut in which he had been born more than 50 years ago. Mr. Jubani looked like a Balkan cowboy with jeans and a glorious Sam Elliott mustache. His son, Ardit, 19, showed me upstairs to a room with five beds; I claimed the one with a Disney blanket in the corner.

“What do you think of Albania?” Ardit asked me after a dinner of chicken, lamb and spicy peppers.

“For such an old place, something about it feels refreshingly new,” I replied.

“Maybe that’s because it is new,” Ardit laughed. “We are still growing up.”

**TO BE SURE**, Albania has had some wobbly moments on its new capitalist legs. In 1997 Albanians lost \$1.2 billion of their life savings in pyramid schemes that sparked a rebellion against the government and resulted in about 2,000 deaths. A 2012 report by Transparency International ranked corruption there on par with Niger, where soldiers in 2011 were arrested for plotting to murder the president, who had recently begun investigations into corruption. Even tourism, which has nearly tripled in six

years from about 1 million foreign tourists to 2.7 million in 2012, according to Albanian figures, has been unable to escape certain prejudices.

“Albania is a great place to score plenty of illegal narcotics — a ‘must have’ for any Albanian holiday!” commented an anonymous reader of a June 11, 2012, *Southeast European Times* article about the country’s booming tourism trade. Another commented that Albanians themselves would rather flee to Greece or Italy than stick around.

“You cannot have an image problem if that problem is real,” said Ilir Mati, who in 1992 sold his Fiat, one of the first private cars allowed in the country, to buy a fax machine and start an adventure tourism company called **Outdoor Albania**. Mr. Mati was at the guesthouse with clients, and I sat up late chatting with him in French.

“You know, you were once my enemy,” he said, tugging on a cigarette. “My friends thought I was crazy to leave the military and go into tourism. But I had a dream that one day I would be sitting around a table like this talking to people like you.”

The discussion continued the next morning when our plan to hike from Valbona back into Montenegro was altered. After two days the trek was too much for our group — 16 hours at least — and the trail had been washed out. So instead we drove to a spot just above the village of Cerem, where we loaded our luggage onto fresh horses and headed out for an easy two-mile stroll. Along the way we passed the remains of an Opel Frontera that only a few months ago had struck a land mine.

“Don’t worry,” Semir said, demonstrating a wry sense of humor. “It was an anti-tank mine, so you have to be really heavy to trigger it.”

We leapt over a ditch and landed in Montenegro, and soon the Pinzgauer arrived. A white Land Rover with “Policija” emblazoned on the side accompanied it. I quietly panicked, hoping the new permit system was truly in place.

The officer showed zero interest in our paperwork. Instead, Inspector Gutic had come to offer us a more comfortable ride into the town of Plav, the largest town in a district of about 13,100 people, which felt like a thrumming

metropolis after Albania. We sat in a cafe with Wi-Fi, bought chips and chocolate and explored an old stone tower where families once targeted in ancient blood feuds could better defend themselves at night.

We still had two days on the trail, and both of them blew by. On Day 4 we hiked six miles from huts outside Plav to a road that led to a one-lift ski area called Boga, an Albanian area in Kosovo that had been leveled in the 1999 war with Serbia and then rapidly rebuilt. We spent the night in new A-frame cabins at the base, and I discovered that in winter it cost just 1 euro to ride the lift. On the last day we climbed 7,880-foot Hajla peak and wandered along its long, narrow summit ridge, where I put one foot in Kosovo and the other in Montenegro. I could see the plains of Serbia far to the east and the Sharr Mountains framing Macedonia to the south. The cursed range rose to the west, looking no less formidable than it had from Gusinje.

We spent our last night as a group in Dubrovnik, Croatia, which we reached after a long bus ride from Rozaje, Montenegro. The old city was gorgeous — shiny ramparts against a shimmering sea — but there was nothing to discover. The streets were too polished, the menus too refined. I turned on the faucet in my hotel room and flinched when the water came out hot.

All told we hadn't hiked more than 35 miles, but the Peaks of the Balkans Trail isn't about distance so much as interaction, and with that one bus ride I'd crossed the most obvious border of the trip, the one between traveler and tourist. Despite wandering through a place of such hardship, the trail had introduced me to a rare part of Europe where the very idea of walking freely between worlds is still a gift as sweet and momentous as your first soft drink. A whole new Europe, a gracious and wild one, had presented itself, and to experience it I just needed to lace up my boots.

That all may one day disappear, too. And so the next morning after everyone left for Texas, I jumped in a taxi and drove south until we could drive no more. Then I hoisted my pack and walked back into Albania.

## **IF YOU GO**

### **Getting There**

The Peaks of the Balkans Trail has trail heads in Montenegro, Albania and



Kosovo. Flying into the Montenegrin capital, Podgorica, allows you to rest pre- and post-trip along Lake Skadar, about a half-hour out of the city. Expect at least a two-hour drive to a trail head near Gusinje. Pristina, Kosovo, is the closest city to a trail head west of Peja — about 66 miles — but the smog makes it a less pleasing place to get your bearings. Getting to trail heads in Albania (Theth or Valbona) from Tirana, the capital, can be long and complicated, and you'll miss some of the most spectacular hiking into those villages. Connecting flights land in Podgorica (airport code TGD) from Paris, Zurich, Frankfurt, London and Rome, among other European cities.

### **Getting Around**

Hiring a guide is not obligatory but highly recommended, as trails, though mostly marked, can still confuse, and many locals speak minimal English. Guides can also arrange pack horses, accommodations and airport transfers, and assist with permit applications, which need to be submitted at least 15 days before the hike begins. The Peaks of the Balkans Web site ([peaksofthebalkans.com](http://peaksofthebalkans.com)) lists guides who have been trained by the German Alpine Club and provides information on where to find maps, how to contact guesthouses and apply for permits, and what to expect on the trail each day.

### **Outfitter**

ROW Adventures of Idaho is offering two departures, in June and September, for eight-day trips into Montenegro and Albania that combine kayaking on Lake Skadar, riding a scenic train and hiking portions of the trail around Theth and Valbona, two of the more spectacular areas in the Albanian Alps. (\$2,090; [rowadventures.com](http://rowadventures.com); 800-451-6034)

Tim Neville, who lives in Oregon, writes frequently about the outdoors.

A version of this article appears in print on March 31, 2013, on page TR1 of the New York edition with the headline: Balkan Promises.