

Albania: Patricia's Diary

October 2011

Monday 3rd October	To Gatwick	<p>By car to Gatwick.</p> <p>Started at 10:30 and had picnic lunch at Beaconsfield services.</p> <p>Visited M&S there and bought salads etc. for a picnic dinner.</p> <p>Left the M25 towards Leatherhead and Mickleham and stopped in lower car park to climb Box Hill. Sat in bright sunshine on the top to admire the view (hazy). A good walk and steep down.</p> <p>To the Days Inn near Gatwick to park the car and stay the night. Ate the picnic on tables outside; it was still quite warm.</p>
Tuesday 4th October	To Tirana	<p>Shuttle bus from hotel to the airport where we were met by Anne and Oliver - and managed to log in for our flight: many thanks to Helen at Andante for sorting out seats together for us.</p> <p>A breakfast at the airport and flight BA 2648 to Tirana (a rather dull snack on the plane).</p> <p>Met the rest of our group and boarded the coach for our hotel in the centre of Tirana. The traffic was slow in places, and we had to make a detour around the square to reach the International Hotel Tirana, the largest building around. A nice room on the 6th floor, with an amazing view of Skanderbeg Square with the equestrian statue in the centre surrounded by a huge chaotic building site!</p> <p>Oliver and Ilya (our Albanian guide) shepherded us safely across the roads, for a short walk around the square, seeing the magnificent Ministry buildings, and walking back past the National Library and the Opera House (Peter and I were tempted to go to 'The Magic Flute' tonight, but resisted). A nice dinner in the hotel, and bed early for all of us!</p> <p>We were dismayed to hear that the road works outside didn't stop until after midnight - so window shut and air conditioning running.</p>
Wednesday 5 th October	Tirana	<p>A leisurely start this morning to explore Tirana.</p> <p>The Etham Bey Mosque: We all removed our shoes and the ladies wore scarves. Inside beautifully decorated with flowers, leaves, fruit, but no people or animals - not allowed in the Islam Religion (there are even pictures of cars but without drivers). The prayer niche, mihrab, faces towards Mecca; the staircase, minbar, acts as a sort of pulpit, the lower steps for the Iman but the upper steps only for Mohammed. The 100 names of God are painted around the cupola.</p> <p>The National Historical Museum: early history to 1992, after that now being reorganised. Led through by Oliver and Ilya. A welcome stop back at the hotel for coffee.</p> <p>The National Gallery: great socialist paintings.</p> <p>Good lunch at 'Taiwan' an upmarket restaurant. And we saw our first bunker!</p> <p>The Archaeological Museum: Walked down the Boulevard to Mother Teresa Square. A delightful museum with notable relicts.</p> <p>We walked back home. Dinner out at another small restaurant - no-one fell down the holes in the paths!</p>
Thursday 6 th October	Appolonia	<p>A long day in prospect today. We set off at 8:00.</p> <p>Drive to Apollonia via Durres which we will visit later. At first along motorways, but the road was not always good, and we had to slow to</p>

avoid potholes.

The Temple of Artemis: we didn't climb up but admired the view across the valley. To the Agora, the Theatre and Stoa, adapted by the Romans in the 2nd Cent. from earlier Corinthian structures. A walk round in hot sunshine (the remains of the theatre on a steep hill), and watched some excavation work by a French group, before we reached the Monastery of St Mary; some 13th cent. frescos in the narthex. The monastery suffered during an earthquake and the central cupola is no longer round. We boarded the bus to Vlora for a late but welcome lunch overlooking the sea. Katherine and I paddled on the shingle shore.

To Saranda: a long drive along the coast and over the mountains, stopping only on the top of the Llogora pass, and for a quick peek into the entrance of a submarine base tunnelled into the mountains.

Hotel Butrint overlooking the bay of Saranda.

Friday
7th October

Butrint

A full day at Butrint after setting off about 10:00. A special visit as Oliver has been working here for more than 15 years; it is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Starting in the Theatre area, we saw the remains of the Roman baths, then followed the path through the trees to the Triconch Palace; sadly the 3 apses were hardly visible, but a huge site, used several times.

The Baptistry is probably the most famous site in Albania. The mosaic remains *in situ* but is covered to preserve it from the elements (the area is subjected to flooding). Walking round the walls (5th to 4th Cent.) we reached the Basilica, a huge structure still standing, and on through the Lion Gate (more Hellenistic building, though the Lion Stone is likely to be more recent) and up past the cistern to the Acropolis and a reconstructed castle.

Here Anne and helpers had set out tables for a picnic for us. It was a splendid meal, we all ate well, probably drunk too much of the wine, and enjoyed the hot sunshine after a busy morning.

A visit to a delightful small museum beneath the castle - Oliver had a lot to do with this and it was well set out. I'm sorry to say that I slept a little! On down the hill to take the ferry (a platform powered by cables from the far shore) across to the Triangular fort. Interesting to see but we were unable to visit.

Home reasonably early to Saranda as there was no power at Butrint and so no coffee. The storm clouds were gathering and we were lucky to be back before the rain. Dinner in the hotel disturbed by the noise from the disco beneath. A ferocious storm was followed by another during the night, leaving a clear but wet day tomorrow.

Saturday
8th October

Gjirokastra

A rainy day today. Over the mountains into the Gjirokastra valley and to the Citadel, built by Ali Pasha of Tepelena. Coffee was followed by a walk in the rain to a cold war tunnel built beneath the Citadel - a series of small rooms for officials and personnel (for us, reminiscent of our visit to the Maginot line last month).

We all set off despite the rain, up the steep cobbled street to the Citadel - a huge mediaeval fortification. Galleries filled with weapons from the 1st and 2nd World wars, with some more recent ones. The museum was also of armaments (Oliver seemed to know everything about them all) and we wandered through the prison (better not to dwell on what went on in there). Outside on the battlements for the view, the 'spyplane' and the clock tower.

Carefully down the hill (the cobbles were slippery when wet) to lunch at the hotel on the square, a great view from the terrace. Ate a selection of Albanian specialties as one of the courses.

Back up the cobbled street again (dry now) and across to the Zekate House, a Ottoman House built at the beginning of the 19th Cent. and showing many of the characteristics of these houses. It is empty now, but we were able to see all the rooms, both the family rooms and kitchen on the first floor, and the summer reception rooms on the third floor. Under the eaves at the top it was possible to see the wooden construction. Oliver is concerned that these houses are not well looked after, this one is looked after by an elderly man living next door - he felt that his sons would not be interested in it when he was dead.

Mesopotam We stopped at Mesopotam on the way back, the old Monastery Church of St. Nicholas - a beautiful old building, sadly boarded up now and, hopefully, being restored. Some interesting medieval carved stones in the surrounding wall.

Dinner this evening at a restaurant on a hill overlooking Saranda and the sea.

Sunday 9th
October

Byllis

Off early across the mountains again and north up the Drinos valley. Passed Tepelena, rather a forbidding place, with a citadel that we skirted in the bus.

We crossed the Mallakaster Hills from the Vjose valley, on a bad road, to the oil region, an area of remains of small oil wells, some still working. The road to Byllis has now been made, and so we were able to drive up in style by bus. The walled city stands out with fabulous views all round. Nice lunch at a new restaurant on the top of the hill..

Byllis - a lovely site, 4th Cent. Hellenistic city, used later by the Romans and in medieval times. The theatre could seat some 7000. We walked along a later wall running on the top and down towards one of the Basilicas, B. The Episcopal complex contained a Baptistery and several mosaic pavements, all covered up for their protection.

Continued our journey northwards over into the valley of the Osum. The road was really awful, deep in water to mask the numerous deep potholes. Finally we reached a better road and made good time to Berat and an old Communist hotel, Hotel Tomorri. Late dinner of assorted pizzas in the cafe at the top of the hotel.

Monday 10th
October

Berat

A day exploring Berat. The lower city is predominately Muslim, while the Citadel on the hill above largely Christian.

The Kings Mosque built in the 15th Cent. There is a Women's gallery and an early painted ceiling. The Teqe of the Helveti has a fine gilded ceiling, and was used as a prayer school.

The Bachelors Mosque in the middle of the old town. Richly decorated with clocks painted around the walls to show the prayer times.

Coffee was welcome before taking the bus up to the Citadel; there was still some walking to do up into the town.

We set off up steep cobbled streets to the Cathedral of St Mary and the Onufri Museum. We had a detailed description of the Icons in the screen which was very beautiful, went round the Museum with more Icons and behind the screen to the Holy of Holies.

We walk round the Citadel admiring the Ottoman churches (unfortunately, as it was Monday, none of them were open, a disappointment!) and the view. Round to the 'Hand Me Up' tower with a view into the old town and the river.

		<p>Most of us walked down the steep cobbled street into the old town for lunch.</p> <p>We visited the Ethnographic Museum in an old Ottoman house, showing us many artefacts of life in those earlier times.</p> <p>Dinner back at our hotel.</p>
Tuesday 11 th October	Durres	<p>The coach this morning to Durres, mostly on motorways and good roads. Durres is a bustling town choked with traffic. We walked round seeing the Roman remains within the city, including a large circular colonnaded piazza.</p> <p>The highlight is the 2nd Cent. Roman Amphitheatre, the largest in the Balkans. We walked round and down into the arena, seeing a small mortuary chapel with 10th Cent. mosaics on the wall. The architecture of a huge vaulted entrance was most impressive.</p>
	Tirana	<p>A fish lunch, starting with mussels, was also impressive.</p> <p>A quick walk down to the sea confirmed my view that it was a dirty and unkempt beach, not even nice for a paddle!</p> <p>We then returned to the hotel in Tirana, this time we were on the 10th floor with a magnificent view across the square; quite a lot of work has been done since we were here, an outline of gardens around the Scanderbeg statue are now obvious.</p> <p>A last dinner in the hotel.</p>
Wednesday 12th October	Kruja	<p>All packed and ready to go, and we drove north to Kruja, for the last visit - to the Scanderbeg Museum in the Citadel.</p> <p>The museum is a new building, with impressive paintings and carvings of the myth of Scanderbeg. Some of us visited an Ottoman house, and then walked down into the town through the bazaar, for some last minute shopping.</p> <p>A 'Thank You' to Oliver, Anne and Ilya concluded our visit and we piled into the bus for the last time to the airport.</p> <p>A final cup of coffee in Albania and we were off home.</p>
	To Gatwick	<p>A comfortable flight home, we said our farewells, then set off for our car and the drive home, arriving late, tired but pleased to be home..</p> <p>A splendid holiday!</p>