

THE EMBASSY GOT IT WRONG

'Its fine to travel – no problem', said the man at the Embassy. I'd just bought a cheap, motor caravan and planned to drive the length of the Croatian coast, then climb inland, through Kosovo and Montenegro, to Greece. One woman and her van. A taste of freedom after years of being pegged to a desk.

Crossing the border at Trieste, I drove to Dubrovnik. It was just a few years after the end of the Croatian War of Independence. Houses gaped roofless to the sky, bullets holes riddled the walls of shops where widows in black sold handwoven white lace doiles. Further along the coast I came to Montenegro. Poverty was tangible, here - and hostility too. Prostitutes with bare feet and dirt-shagged hair jeered at me, and kids in rags flicked bits of paving at me, or at each other

The Bay of Kotor, a hoof-print filled with water the colour of anti-freeze, was a pleasant reprieve. Here I swam, then lazed on the driftwood-cluttered beach watching clouds drag their fluffy nets over Our Lady of the Rocks, the blue-domed church that was built on an islet in the middle of the bay after fishermen found an icon of the Virgin Mary here in the 15th century.

Unease settled in again as I left the coast and started my drive up into the mountains. Podgorica, with its single string of lights and prostitutes, seemed civilised besides the black, wind-whistling void that followed. On either side of the road there were stony fields and more stony fields filled with stone-faced sheep and shaggy, Yeti-stacks of straw with white-hanky topknots. There were hardly any cars. From time-to-time a heavily-loaded lorry careered past, horn blaring; once or twice I was overtaken by mud-splattered KFOR jeeps. Higher along the winding mountain road there were groups of men. They wore ragged clothes and warmed their hands over fires lit in battered oil drums. Their avaricious eyes said that maybe my motor caravan with peeling paintwork and dodgy brakes was pitiful back home, but out here it was a Porsche.

By 11pm I was hallucinating dangerously, swerving to avoid imagined dangers along the dark, lonely road. I stopped for food in a café by a river. There were three plank tables, a single light bulb and a lanky waiter who couldn't take his eyes off this girly apparition who ordered pork kebab but didn't eat it;

throwing it instead to the snakes who swam up in excited coils from the bottom of the river to catch the gristly lumps.

Around one in the morning I corkscrewed up a steep road and popped out at the Cakor pass where Montenegro crosses into Kosovo. There was barbed wire across the road and a soldier with a machine gun in a toilet-sized sentry box. "What in Gott in Himmel's name are you doing here?," one fat finger tapped to his head silently added: 'you screwball!'.
I told him what the Embassy had said.

"But there have been kidnappings here -many, many foreigners kidnapped!" he sputtered. "Don't turn right don't turn left and don't stop until you get to Macedonia!"

After three more checkpoints I was on the road to Pristina. There had been no petrol stations since I'd left the coast and I was nearly on the reserve. Cutting the motor, I freewheeled into Kosovo's largest city. Site of some of the worst war atrocities, Pristina was in total darkness - only the flicker of candle light in windows patched with cardboard said that anyone was still alive. On the outskirts of town the road vanished. I was on the edge of a bomb crater - and it was recent.

The adrenalin of fear kept me awake. I drove all night, one eye on the petrol gauge, one eye on the road unwinding like an endless liquorice coil ahead. At 5am, close to the border with Macedonia, the horizon lit up like Las Vegas. What now? A fire? An explosion?

It was a road lined with petrol stations, restaurants and girly bars. An explosion of light after hours and hours of pitchy darkness. A bite-sized Apocalypse Now, with soldiers on their bellies in the dirt on either side of the road guarding these strategic targets. With AN/AVS-6 vision goggles on their heads these soldiers were terrifying; inhuman. Mile-after-mile of alien crickets with green-laser-lit guns pointing at the road - pointing at me.

In Skopje I parked in a lay-by just over the border, crawled into bed and slept for 22hours. I was woken by the phone ringing. It was my mother. "Where were you last night?" she said. I tried to call but you didn't have a signal."

"I think I was crossing a war zone."

"But the Embassy said..?"

"The Embassy got it wrong," I said.