



**OTTOMAN
BEACHCOMBING:
EXPLORATIONS IN THE
BALKANS, TURKEY,
ISRAEL, AND EGYPT,
1983
PART 1**

**BY
STEPHEN M. BERER**



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I. DESCENT

Beograd.

Snow capped peaks jut above the clouds.

The plane descends to Beograd. Though my body thinks it is still in New York, my mind is swirling between no expectations and no limits. I pass through customs without even stopping to remove my pack. The controlled atmosphere ends.

Now the peaks are hidden and I'm in a muggy lowland. I stand on the platform outside the airport awhile, sweating in the unexpected heat, and the excitement. Buses come and go. I finally choose the bus I think is correct. It briefly passes through new sprouting farmland and fields of spring wildflowers, white and pink and winter-brown, and then into the city outskirts and its poured concrete apartment buildings, one after another. The bus I'm on turns out to be, in fact, the correct one, and as it passes the central bus station, I clamber out with my pack and shoulderbag, lost and rather blithe.

It is the morning of Good Friday and all of Beograd is on the move. Or perhaps it is like any Friday and all of Beograd is on the move. There are 30 ticket windows, each for a different area of the country, and every one is mobbed.

Yugoslavia has six distinct language groups within its borders, variously using Latin, Cyrillic, and Greek alphabets. I scan the signs above each arching little ticket window, seeking my destination. Perhaps four of them include names vaguely similar to the place I want to go. There is only one solution.

I humbly walk into the tourist information office next to the bus station. The questions I have for the young man inside are all answerable. I find out the bus, the ticket window, the times of departure and arrival. It seems too easy. I'll test him. I'll go, and try to buy my ticket.

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He is a man to be trusted. Burying my ticket in a deep pocket, I batter my way through the crowds to the platform where my bus is due in fifteen minutes. I am looking forward to the bus ride and escape from this mad hubbub. I expect to arrive in a quaint village by sunset, where I can watch Easter being celebrated with prayers, processions, and traditions that want no explanations. I expect to wind along a road unknown to tourists, where the folk-soul of Yugoslavia has not been ruined by scrutiny.

While an hour passes I watch Turks, Serbs, Gypsies, orange-haired punks, fat women in black dresses and black babushkas, and stone-faced men wearing patched, limp, sport coats, as they bump and barge their way to their ever-departing buses.

During a second hour I discover no one speaks English or German here, though I was assured in the US that language would be no problem. I begin learning relevant Serbian phrases, like "What time is it?", "Where is the bus station?", "How many dinars?", and "Where is my bus?". About every five minutes I practice this last phrase on



someone. They look at me. They look at my ticket. They look up at the platform number. They look at their watch. Then they motion with the flat of their hands, pushing down on the air -- sit, sit. People are watching me and talking. Fortunately their buses keep coming and I am relieved from their stares for a few minutes, until another group gathers and notices the never-leaving foreigner. I feel like I have become a symbol of the new internationalism.

During a third hour my sleep deprivation of the prior two nights begins to bleed through my fine glazed surface of optimism. Perhaps I have chosen a bus to Nowhere, and everyone is afraid to tell me. It is clear that something is wrong, but I cannot discover what it is. It is clear that my beautiful exploration through the folk-soul of Yugoslavia will take place wholly at night and I will arrive quite late in a place unprepared for foreigners. Finally, someone tells me in sign language that I am waiting for my bus at the wrong platform. It is very curious that he is the only person in the world with this opinion. He must be some kind of free thinker, so I try his advice. I am on a bus ten minutes later.

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No. I am not taking the tourist route. The tourist route is an awful road that stretches from Italy and Austria in the north, to Greece in the south. It is a road strewn with wrecked cars, buses, and trucks; blemished with inhospitable rest stops; inundated with travellers who generally are going as fast as they can, to get somewhere other than Yugoslavia. In the past, I too, was always rushing through Yugoslavia to get somewhere else, and so I too, had learned to hate that road.

I had heard a few whispers that things are different once off that main road: that it is exotic, beautiful, friendly, inexpensive.

So I am not taking the tourist route this time.



II. MOVING FAST

Prizren.

Sometimes, moving fast is the only way to stop feeling lost. You outrun it.

I'm going as fast as I can go. As the scenery around me keeps changing, a delusive thought swirls: "I must be getting closer to where I want to be." But that place is always one town out of reach. There is a demon chasing me, or a siren singing, imploring. I have to keep running. The dirt road is shaking this bus to pieces, but it only lulls me. I must be losing that demon in the dust. I must be getting closer!

I am headed for Kraljevo (crawl-YAY-vo), three hours out of Beograd, due south. I imagine it to be quaint, simple, untouched, with plenty of cheap hotels. I'll lay over for a night, catch my breath, and then hop a bus to Pec (rhymes with wretch). Pec is a village 20 kms. from Albania, in the Mokra Gora Mountains, and I'm sure the sirens are singing



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from there. I passed through it in 1970 on motorcycle and I don't remember the first thing about it. I was running to Afghanistan then, and Pec was nothing more than a dot on a map to me. But since then it has been intruding into my fantasies. So I did some research, read some history, discovered some pictures. It's architecture has been untouched for hundreds of years. Deep gorges, waterfalls, forests, and mountains sculpt its landscape. A medieval Serbian monastery broods just outside the town. Sirens are definitely singing there.

The bus rattles its way into Kraljevo's desolate bus station. The sun is setting over a railroad depot and coalyard. A few soldiers and an older waitress stand around, bored, in the cafe adjoining the poured concrete ticket office. It's anywhere. It's the first scene in a 1930's movie. Everything looks normal.

I ask, and someone points in the direction of a hotel. I ignore the lone taxi, and stride off into the quarter mile wasteland of depots and tiny factories, the air fragrant with diesel, urine, and horse dung. Truth is, no town looks good from the bus station, so this is nothing more than the normal rite of passage.

But this time the rite isn't working its magic. Kraljevo has only one hotel, quaintly called the Turist Hotel. It fronts the central plaza of town. In the center of the plaza stands a larger-than-life statue of a frowning man packing a semi-automatic weapon. The statue stands on a pedestal, about twenty feet in diameter, that is randomly decorated with stone and mortar extrusions. I think to myself an old and comforting thought: 'modern sculpture has much in common with industrial waste.'

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Worse even than bad sculpture, a young and thoroughly drunk fellow has latched on to me, and with a bit of a struggle obtained my handbag. He seems personally compelled to present me to the clerk at the Turist Hotel. The clerk is frowning, much like the statue outside of her hotel. She curtly tells me in German that rooms are 965 dinars (nearly \$13.00!). So it is my turn to frown, and I say fluently and snidely, "Nein, danke," and try to leave. Life is not so easy. The drunk demands being kissed on both cheeks before he will return my handbag. I hold my breath and swallow my pride, and the handbag is promptly returned. Traditions!

Back outside, I realize how crowded the streets are. People in western clothes promenade, casually chatting and watching each other. Minute cars struggle their way through the pedestrians. However, there is nothing approaching an Easter procession, or any other ancient tradition (outside of kissing drunks). I look closer. The town reminds me of an early twentieth century German village. The houses are white stucco and timber, with terra cotta roofs. All is clean and organized, even well preserved. But I am looking for 1750 or earlier. I don't want a trace of modernity. I want to step outside my life; far outside. Out of the corner of my eye I think I see a demon.

Back at the bus station, I have two choices. I can take the bus to Pec and arrive there at 1:30 A.M., tonight. That is impossible; not even Pec is that important. Option

two is to go on to the next town on my itinerary, Prizren. The bus will arrive there at 6:00 A.M., which is manageable. Of course, this will be my third night in a row sleeping in a seat. And worse, I'll miss some highly touted scenery. But to counterbalance, I'll be lulled by the motor of a bus in motion. When you're lost, nothing feels quite so good as running.

As we pull into the bus station, the sun is rising over a railroad depot and coalyard. Prizren, too, has only one hotel. A man who befriended me on the bus has taken me to it. The horizon is still red as we drink a cup of Turkish coffee and two shots of schnapps, toasting each other in German, Serbian, and Turkish. He leaves me and I'm alone again.

The hotel costs a bit more than I had hoped: 450 dinars (about \$6.00), and the room won't be ready for three more hours, but suddenly the thought of running seems a bit old. I look around. The demon is nowhere in sight. I hear singing. Prizren is amazingly beautiful!

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III. NEXT BUS OUT

Prizren.

Two nights of sleep in a warm bed, and three days in an undiscovered oasis, and I'm ready to start running again. It's like that when you travel with a retinue of demons on your tail. Familiarity is your enemy. The travel literature is for the moribund; it says: 'find something new; go for motion, for excitement.' I don't need to be convinced. I'm a sensitive guy; I can feel the heat, by degrees, rising, and I know the demons are closing in. So I never unpack. It helps me stay cool.

Still, this time it caught me by surprise. I found myself reading a Greek phrase book; for pleasure. Talk about a sixth sense! I looked up and slowly turned to the window. Yep, there were demons out there. I immediately threw on my leather jacket, and strode from my hotel to the bus station. I'd be clever; I'd get my ticket the night before, to avoid delays. It was 7:30, dusk, and the streets were packed with promenading people, much like Provincetown on any August night. But here it was different (and I'm not referring to sexual preferences). As far as I could tell, I was the only tourist here, and certainly the only Westerner. I slipped thru the crowd and across an arched bridge built of river stone, to the other side of the white water stream tumbling thru Prizren.

The trees were beginning to bud. Early spring flowers were in bloom. The air was quite cool and clean. I retraced the route I had first taken on the morning I arrived in this town. I remembered how the odors of kebab and dung and diesel had mixed; how the muddy alleys and crumbling mud brick houses had quit resisting change; how the girls and women in puffy pantaloons, the unshaven men, the horse drawn carts, all reminded me of



Afghanistan. But Prizren was much nearer to the West in every respect.

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I passed one of the many butchers who hang whole goat carcasses in their windows. They skin them and hang them by the hocks of their back legs, and the blood drips from the tips of their noses into little puddles on the clean white tile sills. Then I passed a jeweler, one of many here who specialize in filigree. His store front could not have been more than three feet wide, and in his window he displayed a spare but tastefully arranged assortment of his work. He stared as I walked by. Actually, they all stare as I walk by. I'm a stranger, an obvious foreigner in this town where faces are all familiar. A modern hotel is going up just around the corner from him. It is very flashy, with copper cornices and window mouldings; in fact, copper everywhere, copper and glass. I don't trust their building techniques, their plumbing, their electric, their finish work. But in any case, it will be done soon, and ready for a stream of tourists. This place has been earmarked for tourism by the government. There will soon be brochures and bus tours and crowds of yawning wallets with legs attached to them. Then these people will stop staring at strangers. They will be worrying about where their children are, instead.

I passed beyond the main shopping district, past the last of the numerous fabric shops and tailors, the shoe stores, the minute private groceries and the modern government supermarket. Now the Turkish character of this town became more obvious. House fronts run right up to the alleys or narrow sidewalks. This is, in fact, an illusion. The homes are set back, but the private space is walled off in traditional Turkish style, leaving an uninterrupted wall to front the streets. Behind each splitting and muddy double door, not a foyer or garage piled with junk, but a lovely little yard is hidden, with flower gardens and vegetable plots, colorful clothes drying on lines, dogs and cats, babushka-ed women and women all in black, and at least one shady tree. On some of the white-washed walls a black cloth had been hung. I gathered this had to do with Easter, and was a part of the Orthodox custom here, but it was the Ottoman architecture that set the mood.

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I passed a tiny mosque, gutted and being repaired. This afternoon I had been given a tour of two large mosques, by a woodworker who befriended me. I had stuck my head in his shop, and curious, he motioned for me to come in. Like many of the people here, he spoke Turkish and had Turkish roots. We talked in his language, and he offered me a tour of the two main mosques. They had been locked when I had gone on my own, but he explained: they were only open during the five calls to prayer. They are, in fact, unexceptional compared to any of the monuments of Istanbul, and yet in this town they are striking. There are, perhaps, six or eight mosques in all, plus a Turkish bath, a hamam, but they seem omnipresent. In sharp contrast there are only two churches here, ancient, Byzantine. One is a ruins above the last house on the mountainside; the other is the primary church of the town. There is also a Roman fort on the mountain overlooking Prizren. Roman, Byzantine, Magyar, Ottoman, Serbian, Albanian, Croatian, Austro-Hungarian.... This place has been claimed by many kings and princes.



Soon it will be claimed by tourists.

As for myself, when I got to the bus station, it was closed. Who knows what will happen tomorrow, but me and my army of demons are evacuating.



IV. SALONIKI, ALMOST

Gevgelija.

My intention was to go from Prizren to Skopje to Saloniki, a city 70 k's inside the Greek border. It would be a very long day unless my connections were good.

I woke at 5:41 to catch a 7:00 AM bus, and it was easily done. I reached Skopje by 10:00. However, there was no bus leaving for Saloniki till 2:30. I could get a direct bus at that time, but it would be four times as expensive as taking a bus (or train) to the border, walking across, and getting another bus in Greece. That's the way it works in these here parts. So I walked to the train station and found that the next train to the border was at 3:30. In spite of the hour delay, I decided on the train. I had been told it was more convenient. I checked my bags at the very modern Skopje train station (the old one had been shaken down in a 1961 earthquake), and set out to explore. A tourist map showed an art gallery, 300 year old mosque, and a caravanserai clustered fairly closely together and about a 20 minute walk from the train station. The district I was exploring also had a wonderful, large, open air market. It consisted of a number of picturesque winding alleys built into some Ottoman ruins, filled with an unending assortment of shops and goods. I especially noticed some antique jewelry shops with exceptionally fine old filigree work. In fact, I had never seen anything nicer, but then again, I'm not a regular at Sotheby's. I drank little glasses of tea in two tiny, wood panelled 'chai' shops as I wandered around the antique alleys.

Just outside the market was the caravanserai. This was a treasure! It was fully intact and preserved, but even better, each little room (about 60 in all) was filled with archaeological finds, exclusively stone and tile. There were Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman architectural fragments, gravestones, statues, and who knows what else. It was free and I was the only person there for the whole time I spent poking around and sketching. But don't imagine this was some kind of modern museum. Most of the rooms were unlighted, and nothing was labelled. It was really something between a museum and a warehouse, and I liked it like that.

Then I found the art gallery, not 15 minutes walk away. It was an extremely beautiful and well preserved Ottoman bath with 4 main rooms, discreetly plastered inside so that interesting structural and decorative brickwork remained exposed. It was a wonderful environment displaying a small assortment of modern Yugoslavian paintings.



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After the art gallery I wandered around the rest of Skopje's historic district, its architecture and its mood extending back to the seventeenth century. Still, there was no doubt that I was in the twentieth century, so I was not unhappy when 2:45 rolled around. I could feel a rumbling and a tingling as I entered the train station.

By 7:00 PM I was in Gevgelije (gev-GEL-lee-ya), the border town. Unfortunately, I wasn't prepared for the next step.

I had enough dinars to get me to Saloniki, but it was too late to change money, so I wouldn't be able to pay for a hotel there. I had forgotten to get drachmae earlier. In any case it was questionable that the trainman would accept dinars, because the train was technically Greek from Gevgelije on. Gevgelije, itself, had no obvious hotels, and if there was one, I didn't intend to stay in it. My standards are low, but not that low. Furthermore, no one at the station spoke German, English, or Turkish, which are the only languages I can make myself understood in.

Then I heard strange noises. It was someone speaking English! I turned to see a rather unkempt, bearded fellow. (He may have had the exact same impressions, looking at me.) He was talking to me, actually, asking a bit hopelessly, "Does anyone speak English or German here?" I gave him the grim news, best as I knew it: I was the only one. It turned out that he was Dutch, a migrant worker living in southern Greece (Peloponnesos), working the various harvests of oranges, tomatoes, and other fruit and vegetables as they came due. He had been kicked out of Greece because his visa had expired; but more importantly, he was working illegally. The police knew all the foreign workers, and periodically harassed them. That was part of the game. In general the police were forced (or paid) to look the other way. The Greek landowners wanted and needed these migrant workers. They even preferred them over fellow Greeks because they worked harder and demanded less money. Of course, they tended to be much less experienced, but the important issue seemed to be money. The pay was \$2.00 to \$3.00 an hour, in special situations a bit more, plus food and a place to sleep in a barn, a spare room, or some rough workers' quarters. From a distance it sounded romantic.

250

So, my new-found friend had now crossed the border into Yugoslavia by train, had been here a few hours, and was going back into Greece by a different route. "I have a small fine to pay, 50 drachs (about 62 cents), but I hear there is no trouble crossing back into Greece if you pay. At the Turkish border they are only out of the country a half hour."

"Why did you leave Holland?" I asked. What I really wanted to know was why he had left one of Europe's most prosperous economies to work in relatively impoverished Greece. He understood my question. "Now there is 10% unemployment in Holland. It will go to 12%. 50,000 students graduate a year, and they know there will be no jobs for them. It makes you question what you're doing." He spoke English very well, with a characteristic Dutch lisp. "Holland is not the prospering country it was 15 years ago. There is much work now in Greece, but none in my country." I was surprised, even



skeptical. The Wall Street Journal certainly didn't paint the picture that way.

"When do you plan to go back?" I pried. "The early harvests will be done by mid June. Then I will have some money and will travel the islands. Then I will go to a kibbutz in Israel, one I have been to before. I'll stay there a year or so. I really like it there. You work only 6 hours a day, 6 days a week, and you have no worries. Everything is taken care of -- food, a place to sleep, cheap stores for cigarettes, even free cigarettes, lots of fun." He told stories of water fights, work, flirtations, leisure. He had no plans to return home.

"I am walking to the border by the road. They won't know me there. You want to come along? It's only 5 kilometers." He seemed at ease, but I could tell he wanted company; or else he wanted an easy mark on the empty road to the border. I thought about it over hot peppers and kebab. He asked if I'd buy him coffee. I was glad to. He had only drachmae; I had only dinars. I smoked his cigarettes. We were partners. "Ready to go?" he asked. "Sure," I said.

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V. A TYPICAL BORDER IN A TYPICAL DAYDREAM

Train to Orestias.

It is impossible to recapture the atmosphere of real adventure. The events themselves are simple, but the emotional excitement, the exhilaration, the sense of utter freedom amplifies every word, every gesture, into worlds of meaning and pleasure. Every observation becomes a profound philosophical postulate; every tale of previous adventure a Homeric epic. If, from your comfortable armchair, I seem a little over-enthusiastic, I apologize. All I know is: the demons were at least a thousand miles away!

We left the dim lights of Gevgelija behind. With each step, my Dutch compatriot approached his hour of judgement. He feared the Greeks would not let him return. Then he would be lost, and he was frightened when he thought of it. With each step of my own, my former life fled further, as if I were stepping from mountain to mountain, continent to continent, across time with giant steps. We were all alone, beneath a sky so clear it was not black but ultra-violet. Indeed, that opaque sky-dome seemed to reveal, in jagged, pinpoint holes, the radiance of an enormous sun behind. I was seeing stars!

We could see the orange glow of extravagant kilowattage around the border station. It appeared and disappeared in the cleavage of crisscrossing hills. Although not appearing far, it took about an hour and a half to reach the Yugoslav side. One or two cars and a few trucks passed us in that time. A sign, with arrows pointing to the three left lanes, said "cars" in four languages. Another sign with arrows to the four right lanes said "buses and trucks."



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Being uncertain how to classify ourselves, given the choices, we wandered to the far left, where a guard was smoking in boredom. He tilted his head towards the building behind him, directing us. Inside, they peered disdainfully, and a bit curiously. At this time of year and at this time of night hikers were especially rare, but they quickly shuffled us through.

It was a good quarter of a mile to the Greek side. As we walked, my partner practiced his lines: "Why do you want to return to Greece?" "Because I like your country so much and I want to see more." "Why did you overstay your visa?" "I was enjoying myself so much I forgot to notice." The more serious questions and more serious lies he practiced under his breath. At the Greek side we again had to decide if we were cars or trucks. I chose "cars" again and the Dutchman followed, emerging from his practices not far from the customs house. To be brief, we both strolled through with hardly a word spoken.

Connected to the customs house was a bank and an all-purpose store and restaurant. Now the party began! Inside the restaurant a strange assortment of people was gathered, with no apparent intention of leaving. There were some unshaven Greek truck drivers and a fat, loud driver from England; 3 or 4 restaurant employees; the 2 of us; some transient customers from who-knows-where; a tall loner; and an ever increasing group of German hitch-hikers, all of whom were young, blond, long-haired, and ragged. The Germans at first appeared to be part of a single group. It turned out that they were travelling alone or in pairs, had been straggling in for the last three days, and were having no success getting rides out.

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My partner gleefully bought me a beer to celebrate his return to paradise. Soon the limey was in on it, buying beers and arguing about the necessity of nuclear weapons and the evils of welfare. Others joined in. A pile of beer bottles and cigarette butts began to stack up on our table, and I headed out for some air. I began talking to the loner, a 6'4" German, about 23, who was hitching down to the Peloponnese to pick fruit. It turned out he worked on the farm neighboring my Dutch partner's. They were soon toasting each other, Greek tomatoes, and the life of freedom. A tape recorder was playing American music, and one whole tape must have been recorded at Piggies (now Cap'n John's, in Provincetown). I had spent the last four months living at Piggies and I could hardly refrain from dancing. The restaurant workers were setting off fireworks, and the Germans were lounging, wrapped in scarfs and blankets, or trying to cop free beers. I kept making eye contact with one German woman. She looked like my wife when she was still a hippy. It was deja vu over and over again.

About 2:00 AM the German loner, my partner, and myself wandered out to find a safe, illegal place to camp for the night. Big signs said "No camping in the open." It was frosty. It couldn't have been clearer or more beautiful.





VI. THE TIBETAN GODDESS TARA MAKES AN APPEARANCE

Train to Orestias.

I woke at 5:41 to catch a bus at 7:00 AM to Saloniki, strange repetition of the day before. In the east the sky was turning from royal lapis speckled with gold flecks, to pure turquoise, Persian turquoise. I left the German and Dutchman and wandered back to the customs office, laughing as I walked, feeling absolutely free. Everything was as it should be. It was then -- these things are so unexpected -- I woke up one rung higher!

The German girl I had seen the night before was outside and began to dance for me. She had long dirty hair and ragged clothes: a grey skirt and green knit sweater filled with holes, turquoise pants extending beneath her skirt, soiled golden slippers. She was, perhaps, one of the last hippies. She was also, perhaps, more beautiful than anything I could remember, but, then, I couldn't remember much. She emptied my mind. In the very bottom of the voidness of her eyes I saw my wife. She was my wife! She knew it too, and danced for me, tossing a blanket over her shoulders as she glided. I walked away -- it was part of the dance -- and 50 yards apart, I turned to the west. I could see dim and towering snow peaked mountains, and before them, fog streaming down ravines into the valley, so that only the tips of the poplars were visible. Layer by layer, and from near to far, the fog dispersed, revealing the fertile land. It was more beautiful than any painting, more real than experience. I turned to Her and motioned. We both stared, seeing through the fog to Tibet and the moon at once, to previous lives, to everything. I walked back to her and we spoke some words, sounds, a code for the perfect Love we felt, Love that only travellers can know; unrestrained Love that can only be felt by those who must feel it all in a moment, before they part forever.

My bus came. By 8:30 I was in Saloniki. By 9:30 I was on a train to Orestias. All twelve hours on that train I thought about that Night and that Moment. It took all twelve hours for me to remember it was over. But it wasn't really over. It was there, a parallel universe on the other side of a membrane of thought.



END OF PART 1