

## Welcome

Sitting at an ex-pat bar in Prishtina, Kosovo, I felt welcome. I heard a lot of people speaking English and talked to some Americans who were working with American aid companies. Looking across the street, there were several spray-painted signs on concrete slabs stating, “I Love the US” and “Kosovo is the Best”, next to an advertisement for JFK cigarettes. The main north-south street in the city is named after Bill Clinton, although it is spelled Klinton. Staying in Kosovo on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, I watched a television show that had several young female



singers singing happy birthday to America.

Kosovars appreciation for America is partly due to US bombing of the Serbs in 1999, which many Albanians also approved of as many ethnic Albanians live in Kosovo. The Albanian capital Tirana had numerous greetings for US President Bush left up from his summer of 2007 visit. A small, temporary exhibit was dedicated to President Bush, his family life and his visit to Albania.

Life in Tirana, Albania has some color mixed with a lot of drab. The city has numerous orange, yellow and red houses that help contrast the drab concrete of most buildings. Blloku is the area were the Communists used to live when they were in power and thus is the most developed area and the best place to eat and drink, although there seems to be only imported beer. A university is located near this area which helps generate a good nightlife with a lot of live bands, many who specialize in '80's rock. I saw the “Best Live Band in Kosovo” in Blloku, which doesn't say much for the Kosovo rock scene.

The drab can be seen in the museums of Tirana. The front of the National Museum of History contains a communist style mural of Albanians throughout history. The museum does a nice job of illustrating ancient and medieval history, but the communist era is a bit skimpy. The statue of Skanderbeg, a national hero who fought against the Ottomans in the



Middle Ages, is near the National Museum. Several mosques, churches and small museums are located on either side of the dirty and weak stream of the Lana River.

An hour west from the confusing and dusty Tirana bus station is the city of Durres located on the Adriatic Sea. Despite this prime location, the beaches and the city as a whole are average but there are still a lot of visitors who escape to the beach. There are some Roman ruins which include an attractive amphitheater along with a deteriorating bath and basilica. Above the Byzantine city walls is the Citadel which overlooks the city. The most prominent building in the city is the Great Mosque.

The numerous bunkers located in Durres and Albania are a testament to the independent spirit of Albanians.



They were not built in World War II; rather they were built after 1950 when Albania broke from the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. First Secretary Hoxha had 700,000 of these bunkers built to protect against Soviet attack. The engineer had to sit inside the bunker while tanks bombarded them to prove they would not crumble. Although the Soviet Union has fallen, the bunkers are nearly impossible to move and have

stayed. Many have been decorated, again as a way to add color to the drab. If I was a child in Albania, I'd love to play war with all the bunkers in the country. Others have another idea for the bunkers. They are notorious for young people have sex inside, their version of "safe sex". If an arial raid came, they would be safe.

The independent Albanian streak can be seen in other ways. The numerous stolen Land Rovers, BMWs and Mercedes Benzes illustrate the independent streak. Some still have EU license plates, so it's fairly obvious they're stolen. Albanians doesn't seem too concerned about joining the European Union so the countries of the EU can't lean on them too much. In the countryside, modernization and the "European" way of life doesn't seem like a priority. Cows and horses move freely among the fields and roads, hay gets stacked by forks and the using fire for heat is common. I saw a farmer usher his herd up a set of steps and onto a highway overpass.

In contrast, Kosovo had a "European" feel largely due to the numerous European visitors. In 2007, The United Nations Interim Administration Mission (UNMIK) was largely the administrative body, Kosovo Force (KFOR) the military body and there were numerous other aid agencies like USAID and still other agencies tied to the UN. It was easy to travel in Kosovo as there were many English speakers, cheap phone calls home and some good ex-pat bars and restaurants. The numerous agencies brought security, but made for a tedious bureaucracy which seemed to limit progress.

Prishtina is the capital of Kosovo. Near my hotel was the burial sight of one of the revolutionary leaders, Ibrahim Rugova, with the black and red flag of Kosovo flying over his grave. Prishtina is fairly compact with its 165,000 residents seemingly all near the

main boulevards of Bill Clinton and Mother Theresa, who was Albanian. There are several nice mosques to see, as well as the Kosovo Museum when open and the Sports Complex Shopping Mall for sports, shopping, drink and food.

The trip west of the capital to the city of Prizren includes beautiful views of the woody and hilly countryside. The city has a small river, a good pedestrian mall and numerous attractive mosques. More of the destruction of the 1999 bombings can be seen in Prizren, especially on the outskirts of the city. There are attempts to rebuild some of the more historical buildings but regular houses haven't been completed yet. Also, as of July 2007, there were numerous spray painted signs on walls that indicated "12:44 Times Up UNMIK Go Home", an indication that some Kosovars want to rule themselves, and not be ruled by the UN. In February 2008, Kosovars did declare independence from Serbia.

Albania and Kosovo share a border with Macedonia. Technically the country is called the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), as Greece objected to the use of Macedonia. They saw the name as historically Greek and required a name change or else they would end relations. Skopje is the capital of the FYROM and is similar to many of the Balkan capitals. It has a charming old bridge over a raging river (the Vardar River) with an adjacent square where young, hip people eat, drink and mostly smoke. There are a few nice museums, with the history museum, Museum of Macedonia, being the most extensive. There are some remnants from an old castle, Kale, as well as many Eastern Orthodox churches and mosques. Mount Vondo lies to the south of the city and is topped by the Millennium Cross which requires a three hour hike to reach.



A more attractive Macedonian city is Ohrid, which lies on a lake that shares its name. The lake, which also borders Albania, lies to the south of the old town and is a place where people stroll along its promenade that eventually turns into a bike path. There are several attractive churches with the most picturesque being Jovan at Kaneo, which is located on the lake. To the north is Samoil's Fortress which has well-preserved walls that afford great views of both the old and new cities. Near the fortress is an old Roman amphitheater that dates to the time of Christ. A strange attraction is a 900 year old gnarled tree which in the past housed a barber shop.

An appealing side trip from Ohrid is to the city of Bitola. The city has a long promenade, Tito Street, which has statues of the old Yugoslav dictator as well as several nice cafes. At the end of the street is an old bazaar, several mosques and

churches and an old clock tower. Heading south there is a park which contains several statues dedicated to World War II veterans and some welcome shade. Within walking distance, albeit a long walk through the outskirts of town and past a huge junkyard, are the Roman ruins, Heraclea Lyncestis. The ruins have an intact amphitheater as well as several frescos. The excavation process is continuing.

The excavation process of this whole area is continuing. After the bombings, Kosovo is physically rebuilding and is coming to terms with their independence. Albania is rebuilding after their own version of communism which was as destructive as the Soviet style. Finally, Macedonia is constructing its own history separate from Greece's.