AS IT HAPPENED!

The intention: to walk/trek as much as possible on foot from Peja, up the Rugova valley in Kosova, over to Montenegro and on to Albania.

The participants: 6 members of the Fell and Rock Climbing Club in the UK

Organizer: Richard Hargreaves B3P and FRCC

Why? Since his first trek in the Prokletije/Bjeshkët e Nemuna mountains of the Balkans Peace Park in 2003 Richard has believed that a complete trek through them, climbing peaks on the way, would make one of the very best mountain journeys in Europe. This trip would see if this was true!

Summary: Distance walked, about 130kms. Total ascent, 7250m (?). Peaks climbed, 5, including one in each country.

Day 1 June 16
Flew BA to Pristina, landed 2145. Met by private minibus to Peja, for 2 nights accommodation in Lendita Hyseni’s (Rugova Experience) family home in Peja.

Day 2 June 17
‘Orientation’ day in Peja. Met Fatos for coffee at 9.30 and visit to Environmentally Responsible Action (ERA) Group’s superb centre in the restored Haxhi Zeka’s Mill. Visit to the Peć Patriarchate (Serbian Orthodox Monastery). Lunch at Trofte (Trout Farm) in Istok, hosted by Fatos. Short guided tour of Peja with Lendita. Excellent supper with Lendita at the Art and Design Restaurant.

Day 3 June 18
With Agim Haqku (Jole) as guide, walked on road through Rugova Gorge, c. 17km, and up ERA’s Waterfall Trail. Then to Reka Allages village. 22kms, ascent 800m, 6½ hours but including 1½ hours’ enormous traditional lunch at Bjeshka restaurant arranged and paid for by Fatos.

It was interesting to walk through the Rugova Gorge for once, looking at the sport climbing routes and photographing madly from a nearly traffic free road on a Monday morning, but this is
not recommended for future treks. A good 3 or 4 day walking route from Peja to the Gur I Kuq café/chalets above Kuciste, via the high villages on the northern side of Rugova and possibly including Hajla Peak, is being worked out by Rugova Experience and friends in Peja. Stayed overnight in the home of Mustafa Nikci and his family in Reka Allages.

Day 4       June 19
Walk 1100m, 3½hrs, up through forest and alpine meadows to Hajla Peak 2403m, with its airy and flowery ridge, then 1300m down past Pepaj and Drelaj villages to the Rugova road. Fatos and Ellen there with Landrover to take us 10km to Gur-i-Kuq café/chalets for overnight stay. 7 hours walk. 21km.
Day 5     June 20
Walk from Gur I Kuq café, past Leqinatit lakes, up to Qafa Leqinatit 2000m, along broad Jelenak ridge and up to Qafa Zavoj 2200m on Montenegro border. Met there by Admir Lalić and Bimber from Karanfili Club. Guide Jole left for 6hr walk back home to Peja. Admir took us 1½hrs down to Babino Polje, beer, juice and water in a coolbox, and two cars to take us to the Karanfili Club hut in the Grbaje valley near Gusinje for supper and overnight stay.
This had been a truly magnificent day’s walk, with memorable flowers all the way. 14kms, 1100m ascent, 7 hours.
The original plan had been to stay overnight in Babino Polje but on Admir’s advice we had opted out of the next day’s 18km road walk to Plav past the town’s foul, life-threatening waste disposal site and accepted his offer of the overnight stay in Grbaje.
**Grbaje valley from Karanfili Hut. A must for any visitor to Prokletije in Montenegro**

**Day 6     June 21**
Walk with Admir, from Grbaje valley, up Volušnica 1879m and ridge walk to Talijanka 2015m. On the descent Admir rediscovered the prehistoric drawings on a stone slab which he had been shown as a boy. A relatively gentle day’s walk amidst wonderful flowers. 7hrs. Transport to Aqua Hotel, Plav for 2 nights stay, 24 euros full board at ‘pension’ rate.
Day 7     June 22
REST DAY. Visits to Plav town. Spectacular evening thunderstorm.

Day 8     June 23
Walk up Visitor peak 2210m, straight up from Aqua hotel, 4hrs, with guide Ravko chosen by Admir for his local knowledge. Didn't include main peak at 2211m; Ravko was concerned about threatening thunderstorm. Long descent to Gusinje past very high 'katun' (shepherds' summer settlement) 3½hrs. Rosi Hotel, Gusinje, not available after all so Admir had booked us into Krojet Restaurant and family house, beside Ali Pasha's Spring, outside Gusinje. Very pleasant situation, home and good food, run by German speaking woman. 21km, 1300m ascent, 8hrs.

Day 9     June 24
A day of changed plans. Zastan Kaliba ex-police hut said to be still not fit for use, so Admir had arranged to bring one large tent as far up the Ropojana Valley jeep track as possible, while we would walk up the valley past Vuthaj. The weather forecast was for heavy rain from midday and storms later. Admir persuaded us to return to Grbaje for the night, after a morning walk to
Vuthaj, the Gerla waterfall and the Oko Skakovića blue pool, then back to Gusinje. 13km. Collected from a coffee stop and taken to Grbaje. It didn't rain at all!

On foot up Ropojana

'Oko Skakavica', the blue pool.
The only spring for the river

Day 10  June 25

From Grbaje drove up Ropojana until road became impassable, impressively destroyed by winter floods. Carrying full packs, we walked up the destroyed jeep track and on to the waymarked route to the Jezerc Lakes (Liqeni Gjeshtarjes) and the Albanian border half way along the dry bed of the lake. Surprised to find water in the usually dry lower lake. Met Pavlin Polia and a horse with horseman just beyond the border as arranged. Loaded the 6 sacks onto the horse, keeping daysacks ourselves, then followed the waymarks up to Runicës meadows on route to Qafa e Pejës. Decided that Maja Arapit 2217m was on. The horse and sacks continued to Qafa e Pejës while Pavlin took us on a more mountaineering route to Arapit by the marked path towards Nikc. A slower, longer, interesting route. Top of Arapit at 4pm then straight down to Qafa e Pejës and the zig-zags to Pavlin's car parked near the water point. Drove down the valley to Pavlin's house in Thethi. An 11hr day, 15km, 1000m ascent.

On the Albanian border, our horse loaded and ready

On Runicës meadows, just inside Albania.
Maja Arapit just visible, the far left peak

Towards Maja Arapit 2217m

Summit party on Arapit. Our guide Pavlin on left.

Day 11 June 26
REST DAY in Thethi. Visited the Kulla, the Museum, opened for us by enthusiastic Jessica! Then the waterfall, the canyon and a vehicle ride to Nderlysaj. Great stay at Pavlin’s!

Haymaking in Thethi seen through a Kulla window

Jessica and her grandmother, our museum guides

Day 12 June 27
With Pavlin’s cousin Peter as guide, while Pavlin drove round to Valbona with the sacks, walked up to Qafa Valbona, 3½hrs, and down to Rrogam to Kol Gjoni guesthouse. 15km, 1050m ascent.
Day 13    June 28
Into the unknown! New to Pavlin as well who drove us from Rrogam to Cerem 1100m, a high 'summer' village, and house of Kujtim Çela Goçaj who is offering accommodation for the first time. We were the family's first visitors. Great welcome! Decided to accept their offer of supper that evening but not overnight because very early start needed next morning for the Fierze ferry. Pavlin drove another hour up to the Montenegro border where we walked leisurely over little flowery and shrubby alps at 2050m. Great views all round. Back down to Kujtim's for traditional supper on the floor, then to his flat in Bajram Curri for short sleep after watching Italy 2, Germany 1 football.

Day 14    June 29
5am drive to Lake Koman passenger ferry 'traget'. Car ferry no longer operating. Pavlin drove round to Shkodër with our sacks. 2 hours on ferry to Koman, then minibus to Shkodër and Tradita Hotel. Afternoon and evening in Shkodër.
Day 15   June 30
Minibus to Tirana airport. BA2649 flight at 1455 to Gatwick 1700.

BACKPACKING? Apart from an hour at the beginning of Day 10 our sacks were carried for us the whole way, by vehicle, bus or horse. So we just had day sacks for each day's walk. At our ages, backs and hips said no to carrying full rucksacks.

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We are extremely grateful to these three kind people. They were all so welcoming, helpful and efficient. They were also very good company, giving us lots of insight into life in Kosova, Montenegro and Albania.

Richard    July 5th 2012

Postscript:

It is unlikely that we would, but let us not forget. . .

the butterflies and flowers . . . the whole way