

Bulgaria, Macedonia and Albania: “Old Europe” Gems of the Balkans

Over several years, I have had the privilege of exploring and even living in much of southeast Europe ... from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia to Montenegro, Hungary and the fascinating back-in-time Transylvania region of Romania. However, several seldom-visited countries in that region of Europe still remained on my travel bucket list when I noticed a new ElderTreks (eldertreks.com) exploratory trip of 22 days promising me a taste of “Old Europe” in Albania, Macedonia and Bulgaria. I signed up! A detour of a couple of itinerary days to the island of Corfu (in Greece) did make a strange but tempting bedfellow with the other three countries, but it is, after all, only a brief ferry ride from Albania’s extreme south coast.



While all of ElderTreks’ small-group tours for 50+ aged travelers are culturally, educationally and physically challenging to varying degrees, their first-time exploratory tours offer an extra element of breaking new ground. Even the most talented trip designer cannot anticipate the flow and content of a trip until clients are actually there in the bus, eating in the restaurants, tromping through the cities, towns and countryside, and sleeping in selected accommodations. On an exploratory trip, everyone needs to come with a sense of adventure and good humour, and the lead guide needs to have all the flexibility of a circus acrobat when it comes to making last minute itinerary changes!

The three key countries on our tour border one another while stretching from the Adriatic/Ionian seas to the Black Sea. I anticipated that they would be quite similar in terms of a richly-layered ancient to modern history, cultural outlook and ethnicity as well as religious persuasion and even geography. To some extent that perception is true ... after all, they have been occupied by many of

the same conquerors over a period of 2,500+ years, some of which brought now entrenched customs and state religions. And the final layering of post-WWII Communist rule until recent decades has also left its legacy - a form of anti-religion religion, one might say - still measurable in a way that many other former Communist European countries have largely left behind.

Indeed, we experienced the cobblestone streets of history, Greek, Roman and Byzantine ruins, cosmopolitan capital cities, quaint unspoiled towns, medieval monasteries and castles, UNESCO World Heritage Sites and pristine nature.



I would call the 20th century **Albania** story the most unusual in that “Communist” leader Hoxha effectively closed the borders to visitors and citizens alike, barring trade and ideologies during his paranoiac 44-year rule. He made the country the most isolated, poorest and educationally-backward country in Europe until his death in 1985. He played no favourites with regard to religion, not just in terms of banning Islam and the Albanian Orthodox faith, but destroying or vandalizing almost every religious building in the country, no matter how historical or culturally significant. On the other hand, he demonstrated a great fondness for dome-shaped cement bunkers which he ordered built by the thousands in towns, cities and the countryside, telling his citizens that Albania needed to protect itself from invasion from the rest of the world because other countries were jealous of Albania’s success.

During our time in Albania, we visited many new mosques and churches springing up throughout the country and talked with their religious leaders. Clearly, Mr. Hoxha failed to stamp out the people’s faith. Today, 70% of the population is Moslem and 30% Albanian Orthodox. He also failed to permanently dampen the spirit of Albania, thanks in large part to the vast numbers of countrymen who emigrated abroad and made successful lives in many countries. Between 1990 and today, they have poured money into building homes and businesses, arguably making Albania the most

economically vibrant and urbane of all three countries we visited.



Macedonia, a part of the Former Yugoslavia until that federation's dramatic implosion in the early 1990s, also has a deep cultural, historical and religious story that comes from being at the crossroads between Asia and Europe. The population is largely Macedonian, a Slavic-speaking Eastern Orthodox majority. However, there is also a 25% Albanian minority which is largely Muslim, again reflecting the 500-year regional rule of the Ottoman Empire.

For three days and nights, the picturesque lakeshore town of Ohrid served as headquarters for our daily forays out to historical sites such as the expertly-excavated city of Heraclea, nearby wilderness parks, and impressive Macedonian Orthodox monasteries, some even in caves. See an article in our collection about Macedonia's Lake Ohrid area with one of Europe's deepest and oldest lakes.

Despite joining the European Union in 2007, **Bulgaria** still seems the most frozen in Communist time of the three major countries visited. Nevertheless, it offered such highlights as the 10th century Rila Monastery, a magnet for visitors from Bulgaria and all of Southern Europe. We descended deep into the precarious, blackness of Devil's Throat Cave, and visited Plovdiv, one of Europe's oldest cities. Making news very recently, it is being hailed by Lonely Planet as "that rarest of beasts: a genuine hidden gem in Europe." LP has announced it as one of their top ten cities in the world to visit in 2015. The "hidden" part of the description may not stand for long.



With a stroke of boldness characteristic of ElderTreks, the refined, non-exploratory itinerary (eldertreks.com/tour/ETTD000488) for this tour has now added a two-day visit to **Kosovo**, Europe's youngest country. Just north of Macedonia and east of Albania, Kosovo is an exciting detour to a country whose tourism potential is barely on the radar. With a maximum of 14 people, this September tour of 22 land days departs from Sofia, Bulgaria and ends in Tirana, Albania. It will be offered once in 2015 and once in 2016 with guaranteed departures.

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