

Maybe the First American Tourist in Albania

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1 Hospitality

One hundred years ago in Albania if a man gave you a drink, you were under his protection until someone else showed you a similar kindness. If you were injured, he had to avenge you. This view has not entirely disappeared.

The most notable instance of hospitality I encountered on my trip to Albania was when the parents of a friend of a friend of a driver found for me by a random person on the street offered to put me up for the night. Well, let me fill in. I was in Saranda, a dirty little beach town in the south of Albania. I had spent two hours at midday walking along the dirty little beach one way and then the other, and I was ready to move on, along the what turned out to be spectacular coast road from there to Vlorë. (The letter ë in Albanian is pronounced schwa, as in Vlorschwa.) I asked a taxi outside the center-of-town hotel and he said he'd take me for \$100, which I knew was outrageous, so I walked a few blocks away, and asked a random person on the street where a taxi stand was. He took me two more blocks to a large square with a lot of buses and a few cars. None of the cars were labeled as taxis; they were just sitting there with someone behind the steering wheel. The random person approached one driver and then called me over. The bargaining was brief. I was willing to pay \$50, but the driver said only \$40. I didn't want him to feel he had blown it by asking too little, so I said \$30, and he said yes. Even with that, one felt that this was like winning the lottery for him. That was okay with me. It was like winning the lottery for me, too. That's what economics is all about.

His name was Andrea. He was 21, tall, and extremely good looking. He had a friend with him, named Sokol, 20, smaller and even better looking. Before leaving they drove back to their apartments to change into their best clothes, and on the way there Andrea leaned out the window and shouted to everyone he knew, "I've got an American and I'm taking him to Vlorë for

\$30!!” I loved his exuberance. As I waited behind his apartment building, his mother came down and introduced herself, and asked me to take a picture of her with her son. At Sokol’s apartment building, while we waited for Sokol to change into his best clothes, five or six attractive girls leaned out a window or came outside to hang around Andrea.

The price went up along the way. We got to the key junction outside Saranda, and instead of turning left onto the coast road, they turned right. They intended to backtrack to the town of Gjirokastër on a road I had taken that morning, then north through the ugly oil fields of Ballsh and Fier that I had taken the day before, and finally back south on an uninteresting stretch of the coast road to Vlorë. They said the coast road was too bumpy. But for me the coast road was the whole point. This was the “Albanian Riviera”. (I hate it when countries don’t have enough pride to call things by their own names. Albania also calls its high mountains in the north the “Albanian Alps”.) I said \$40, and they took the coast road. In the end, I gave them \$50, grateful as I was that they had apparently decided not to rob and kill me.

These things are not without risk. I was looking for a mid-level way to travel in Albania. I could have gotten a car and driver, and guide if I was lucky, through Albtourist (about which more later) for \$180 with hotel and food, or I could have rented a taxi for \$100 a day on the steps of the Hotel Tirana, or I could have walked two blocks away to a taxi stand and gotten a taxi for \$75 or even \$60 a day. (It was on this reconnaissance mission my first afternoon in Tirana that I had my first picture-taking incident. I would clearly announce myself as a tourist by wearing my Minolta Maxxon camera (The one that betrayed me in Borneo; it was okay on this trip, except that sometimes it would go completely dead and I would have to give it a sharp blow to the battery pack.) around my neck. In general, Albanians were willing to have their pictures taken; sometimes they loved it; sometimes they were so insistent that I had trouble not taking their picture. A man on a two-hour ferry ride pestered me the whole time to take his picture, and was constantly telling me what else to take as well; in a way it was rather touching that he should be so anxious that I would find his country beautiful. The one exception to the willingness to pose was that sometimes girls between ten and twenty would be shy about it. As I was walking around Tirana that first afternoon, I spotted a man standing next to his taxi, talking with two women, one about thirty, one about twenty. I approached him to find out what he would charge to take me to Gjirokastër. They were quite amused by my morpheme-by-morpheme, inflectionless Albanian. After that

conversation was over, I figured enough rapport was established that I could take their picture, so I asked. Only the younger woman was reluctant. Her friend tried to convince her, then to pull her into the picture. At one point the older one had her arms around the younger pinning her in the frame, and the younger one momentarily dropped her hands from her face, and that's when I snapped the picture. I thought it was all in good fun. But the younger one burst into tears, shook loose, and ran away. The older one ran after her to calm her down, and I ran after them both to apologize as profusely as I knew how in Albanian. Immediately, we were surrounded by about half a dozen young Albanian toughs. I thought they were there to defend the honor of their Albanian women, but it turned out that the women were just as afraid of them as I was. They exchanged words I didn't understand, and the women hurried away. One of the young toughs looked at me and sniggered with a look of complicity and made a gesture that seemed to claim that the women were Lesbians. I smiled pleasantly, and hurried off in the other direction, wishing a return of the young woman's soul from my camera where it had been captured. Apparently it did return to her, for about fifteen minutes later I was walking past a bus and heard a knock on the window and it was her, smiling and waving at me. I debated whether to buy her some flowers at a kiosk that was conveniently there, but the bus pulled away before I could.)

Or I could have traveled from town to town by bus, as I did from Tirana to Berat, and then from Gjirokastër to Saranda, and then from Vlorë to Tirana, for a dollar a day. When they would let me pay. It was not always easy for me to pay in Albania. I was anxious to enter into the local economy, which I would count as successful when I got change for a crisp new 100-lek note (about a dollar) in grimy, shredded, greasy, old 10-lek notes. On my first afternoon excursion I entered a dark shop swarming with people and flies and bought an ice cream cone, but the man wouldn't take my money, until I stood there and stood there and stood there waving it. Finally he took it, seeing that I would not give in and that my ice cream was about to melt. I was less persistent on the bus I took from Tirana to Berat the next morning. I had asked a huge young Albanian man standing on a street corner where the bus to Berat was, and he put his arm around me and walked me to the first bus, about fifty meters away, learning that I was an American tourist, and that no, I wasn't an Albanian-American. Then he asked me something I didn't understand, and I said I didn't, and he prompted me, "Brooklyn? Tchicago?" so I said, "California." He walked me to the head of the line at the first bus, and the ticket taker ushered me

to his own reserved seat at the front of the bus, and then in Berat refused to take my money. Since I didn't know how much it was, there was no way I could just leave it for him, and it seemed like continuing to offer it was beginning to insult him.

I'm actually not so sure now what I really could have paid for. My last three days in Albania, through irritating circumstances I'll describe later, I had my own driver, Agim Bano, and I gradually realized there was a ceremony attached to giving someone money. He would offer a tip to someone, the someone would hold up his hand in a gesture that fended off the gift, Agim would then with various thrusts and parries try to get past that hand and would eventually succeed in sticking the money into the man's pocket. At that point it was accepted. I mastered this technique well enough to give Agim a tip at the airport as we said goodbye.

But the trouble with the one-dollar buses was that I couldn't stop when I wanted to to take pictures. The mid-level of travel was to find a taxi, or at least a man with a car, in the provincial towns and negotiate a reasonable rate. I did this twice. The other time was in Berat my second day. It was midafternoon and I was sure the buses were through for the day. So I engaged a man for \$20. (He had asked \$25.) He took a friend along in the back seat.

Now there's the matter of the police in Albania. You run into them every ten kilometers or so along the road, and sometimes they wave you on through, and sometimes they just stop you and check papers, though never mine—I had a feeling they were a bit in awe of foreigners—but mostly if you're in a car, they stop you to hit you up for a ride. When it's a bus they stop, the people laugh and jeer at them, something that would have landed them in jail in the old days, and the police ignore that and go about their business in a quick and perfunctory manner. I asked a man in Shkodra about this. He said there were in fact more police stops today than during the Communist era. There needed to be, since there was more crime now. He said the policemen were all young men, something I had noticed, since it was now a more attractive career. All the police in the Communist era were old men, and they had mostly retired.

We were stopped by the police on our way to Gjirokastër, and a brash, young and very obnoxious soldier got in the back seat. He had not had much experience with foreigners, and his view of how you talked to them was if they didn't understand Albanian, try shouting Albanian louder. He shouted even louder than the tapes of Michael Jackson and Greek rock that the driver had blaring out of his car stereo. And to make sure I was listening,

he would grab me roughly by the shoulder. I could only keep from losing my temper with him by reminding myself of stories of Albanian vengeance.

With all my “Nuk kuptoj”s (“I don’t understand.”) and “Nuk di”s (“I don’t know.”) I finally got out of the conversation. But it was still apparently about me, for I heard a lot of “turisti” and “dollari”. Then it turned to politics, as I heard a lot of “George Bush.”

I tried a few times to stop and take pictures. The driver was quite willing to stop, but utterly baffled at what I wanted to take pictures of, e.g., completely ordinary villages on distant hilltops.

I think I’ve exhausted all my asides, as well as the 7 ± 2 registers in your short-term memory, and I’m ready to pop back to “These things are not without risk.” Remember that?

These things are not without risk. I didn’t know who Andrea and Sokol were, and why shouldn’t they rob me? I won’t say I was anxious. I get a constant rush of adrenalin when I travel, so I don’t get anxious. Rather I get wary. I keep track of escape routes, I note who else is around, whether friends or strangers, and I carry myself tough. Much the same attitude I adopt when I walk down the street in New York City. So I was wary when instead of driving out to the highway in Saranda, we went into the residential area and behind a block of apartment buildings, and I was glad to see other people around, and I was glad when I realized it was so Andrea could change his clothes, not so they could rob me. Whenever I asked him to stop along the way so I could take a picture, I would casually loop my daypack over my shoulder before getting out of the car; after all, why should they wait til the end of the ride to get \$40, when they could just drive off with my daypack and get (though they wouldn’t have known the exact amount) \$700 plus an American passport.

Along the way, we gave rides to other people. This seems to be expected in Albania. If you have an empty seat, you fill it. When several days later I was traveling around with Agim with a whole empty back seat, people on the road would wave us down, and when they realized we weren’t stopping, they’d step into the road shaking their fists at us furiously. Andrea and Sokol gave rides to people, first to a large, middle-aged farmer whom we took from a random curve in the road 10 km to the next village, and third, at the instigation of a policeman who stopped us and made us detour into the beautiful town of Himara, two attractive, blonde, middle-aged peasant women, whom we took 30 km, over the spectacular high pass of Llogarasë to the village of Dukati. But the second ride brought me to the height of wariness. In the town of Lukove, Sokol spotted two of his friends by the

road and we stopped and they got in, and we took them as far as Borsh, 20 km away. On the way I realized that we were on a very lonely stretch of the road in some very wild country, and here I was, with my \$700 and my American passport, alone in the car with four strong young men, complete strangers to me, who all knew each other, speaking in a language I didn't understand. Well, nothing happened, except that they gave me a peach, which I felt obliged to eat. (Civilized human that I am, I don't trust food that isn't bought in a supermarket.)

We got to Vlorë around 6:30, just when it was beginning to get dark. For me, when I'm traveling, this is the highest stress part of the day, and always has been, ever since I hitchhiked around the western U.S. in my college days. There is a rational explanation for this—it is the time of day that I seriously have to consider where I will spend the night. But in fact, the feeling is much more visceral. In the famous paper “What the Frog's Eye Tells the Frog's Brain” Lettvin, Maturana, et al. show that the frog can see two things—a small dark object about 12 inches from its nose, which makes its tongue flick out, and a dark shadow falling over its back, which makes it jump. This time of evening is for me what the dark shadow is for the frog. As my ancestors evolved from amphibians to people, the fear of the falling of a dark shadow evolved with them into the fear of the coming of evening.

The town of Vlorë was not calculated to ease my anxiety, er, wariness. It is one of those huge, desolate, anonymous, Eastern European cities with miles of identical apartment blocks, with broad empty avenues and not a shop or cafe or bar to provide a refuge. The beauty of the coastline gave way to industry as soon as we entered the town.

Sokol was driving by now, and I told him I wanted to go to a hotel near the bus station. In fact, there was such a place, as I discovered the next morning, not more than a kilometer from where I spent the night. But we didn't go there. Instead Sokol turned into an alleyway between two apartment blocks and bumped along it and behind a third and came to a stop between a wall and a trash bin. I sat calmly in the car, but I studied escape routes and noted with relief people watching us from various balconies. Sokol shouted up and a woman came out onto a second floor balcony. There was a brief conversation, and then Sokol said I was invited in for coffee. I declined, saying I wanted to get to the hotel before dark. But then a pleasant, intelligent, short, gray and balding man of, it turned out, 57, came down to the car and repeated the offer of coffee. I liked him immediately, so my resolve weakened, and I accepted. I won't say I let down

my guard, but at least the conspiracy to rob and kill me was getting larger and larger, perhaps even larger than the CIA conspiracy to kill Kennedy. (The analogy that occurred to me, in line with my celebrity status, was this: Imagine a taxi driver picking up a famous movie star, and deciding on the spur of the moment to rob and kill him. Implausible.)

So that's how I got to Mustafa Kaçi's apartment. That's how it came about that he was the one who taught me about Albanian hospitality.

Because I really was a celebrity. The first American tourist. They had seen plenty of American missionaries. That was one of the biggest surprises, although I guess it shouldn't have been—that hordes of American, born-again Christian missionaries would swoop in like vultures to feed on the carcass of Balkan Communism. Albania should prove fertile ground. Of course they already have their own traditional religions, thank you—70% Muslim, 20% Greek Orthodox, and 10% Roman Catholic. No Southern Baptist tradition. But religion has been discouraged since 1944 and stringently suppressed since 1967. (You could see it in the mosques, which are either in ruins or only beginning to be repaired. And maybe I imagined it, but the worshipers I saw in the Tirana mosque seemed tentative and unsure of exactly what to do.) That's enough for a generation to grow up free from the traditional religions, leaving the missionaries with virgin territory to plow. I talked to a number of the missionaries, and they were all nice people—after all, that's their business. But it all struck me as a grand deception. These people are coming in as the first representatives of modern Western culture, and their appeal is primarily as representatives of modern Western culture, yet in modern Western culture they constitute a backwater.

They had seen a few Albanian-American businessmen, coming there to look for business opportunities, like the Albanian-American I met in Tirana who owned a restaurant in New Jersey and was looking to open one on the “Albanian Riviera”. But a British diplomat I talked to in the Tirana Airport waiting for the plane to Rome said that the “investment climate” was not favorable enough yet. For example, foreigners cannot yet own land in Albania.

They had apparently seen some German tourists in Saranda, perhaps over for the day from Corfu, although I didn't see any, because someone greeted me with “Grüss Gott”.

I saw a busload of Greek tourists in Tepelenë, just north of Gjirokastër. Greece, like Yugoslavia, has never reconciled itself to Albania's existence, and this was no doubt the advance army of invasion.

But I was the first American tourist. Certainly the first one traveling the way I was traveling. I did meet an American geography teacher from Massachusetts later in Shkodra, traveling in a study group with half a dozen Brits.

So I was a celebrity, and while Mustafa's wife served me coffee, relatives and neighbors trooped in and out of the apartment, almost in shifts, to meet me. Mustafa was a retired electrical engineer. He had studied in Leningrad in the late 1950s, but had been sent home in 1961 when Soviet-Albanian relations soured over Khrushchev's overtures to Yugoslavia. His wife showed me their photo album with pictures of him in Leningrad, and then their wedding pictures. They had three sons, a 27-year-old who was working in Rome, a 26-year-old, Sokol's friend, who had worked in Greece for a while last year but was now living at home, and a 19-year-old who had once won honorable mention in an international children's art contest, and was now an artist in Saranda.

They insisted I stay for dinner, and they insisted I stay the night. I could have the son's room while he slept on the couch in the living room. I yielded to dinner, but resisted on staying the night, saying I had to leave by bus to Tirana very early. Mustafa went to telephone the hotel and returned with a pallid expression. He said I couldn't possibly stay in the hotel; it was so expensive—\$25 a night. I couldn't exactly tell him that that was in the noise for me.

When the conversation had exhausted my sparse knowledge of Albanian, I got out my notes on Albanian, which had considerably more words than I had memorized, and Mustafa browsed through them, looking for words that he could use. When he hit the word for "guest", he pointed to it and he pointed to me, and then I could not refuse.

Accepting hospitality has its drawbacks. I had wondered about the availability of food in Albania before going there, and in fact had packed a dozen granola bars just in case. But food turned out not to be a problem. There was never much choice, but there was always something. Albania is not a starving country. There is poverty, but it is not Africa-style poverty, or even Asia-style poverty. It is the kind of poverty that means there are horses and wagons on the highways. It is the kind of poverty that means two men can walk down the middle of the main street in Tirana, carrying a sheep between them, and that a woman can sit casually smoking a cigarette waiting at a bus stop while her goat nibbles the hedge behind her. There is food enough for everyone. I soon learned why. It is not the Albanians. When the Communists were in power, the people worked because they had to. When

the Communists fell, they didn't have to work anymore, so they didn't. So they didn't produce any food. The European Community stepped in with Operation Pelican, supplying food until the harvest came in in October, and as I rode along the highways I would encounter long convoys of Italian army trucks distributing the food aid. Even the bread comes from food aid. I don't know what happens after October, whether there will be a harvest. Albania has, for the most part, decollectivized agriculture. They divided the collective farms up into individual plots and distributed them. But the people have no equipment to work them with. I saw people bending over in wheat fields with sickles. I saw a man pushing a hand plow pulled by one cow. But the landscape is covered with beautiful green and yellow corn fields, many of them harvested with cows and sheep grazing in the stubble. So maybe there will be a harvest.

Anyway, when you are a guest, you don't have any choice about what you eat, and my worst fears were realized. I was served liver. I hate liver. I gag on liver. I can't keep it down. As I stared at the plate waiting for the others to be served, I plotted out my strategy carefully. There were wonderfully pungent olives on the plate, and hot red peppers, and feta cheese and tomato slices, and I had just been served a glass of that strong Balkan liquor called raki that explodes in your mouth and burns your esophagus. I would cut off a small piece of liver, combine it on the fork with an olive or pepper, chew it with my molars, and swallow it without ever letting the liver touch my tongue. If some did, I would kill the sensation with a sip of the raki. I couldn't finish all the liver, but if I left a little bit of everything, they might not suspect. I was well into execution of this plan when Mustafa's wife brought out a second plate, heaped with very tough chicken and lots of French fries. On this I couldn't even begin.

And then— Well, whatever the state of Albanian agriculture, they certainly have plenty of watermelons. Early in the year the government had everyone plant watermelons, with the idea of exporting them to the rest of Europe. But when the harvest came in, the government stupidly decided that it would be unseemly to export watermelons while receiving food aid. So now Albania has a glut of watermelons. I passed truckloads of watermelons on the roads, wagonloads of watermelons, cartloads of watermelons. Broken watermelons littered the highways. And now Mustafa's son cut up a watermelon and placed most of it in front of me.

I don't think my strategy worked very well. Everyone else cleaned their plate, while I had scraps of liver and heaps of chicken and most of a watermelon remaining. Mustafa's wife brightened when I complimented her on

the dinner, but I don't think she believed me.

The second drawback of accepting hospitality was the plumbing. Well, for all I know the plumbing at the hotel was worse. Plumbing was always an adventure in Albania. The first thing I'd do when I got to a hotel room was fix the plumbing if I could. In the room in Shkodra to get the water in the toilet to stop running, I propped up the float with a hanger, and then to flush the toilet I first had to fill the tank with the shower head, which was at the end of a hose. The shower head itself dripped so to stop the noise I had to lay it on the floor by the drain. In the middle of my first night in Tirana, the faucet in the bathroom spontaneously turned on, and I woke up in the middle of a dream about my room being flooded. In the bathroom of my room in Gjirokastër, the light didn't work, so I couldn't really tell what else didn't work. I kept the toilet lid closed just in case.

The biggest adventure in plumbing, however, came in the Hotel Tirana, Albania's biggest and second most "luxurious" hotel. It was midday. I had just returned from Vlorë by bus and was waiting for the man at Albtourist to find me a driver, and I wanted to go to the toilet—excuse me for going into detail, but #2. I tried the men's room on the ground floor, but the door was locked. I looked for the concierge and spotted her going down some stairs into the basement and I called down to her. She ignored me and I kept calling and she kept ignoring me, and finally the concierge for the first floor showed up and told me to follow her up there. Once in the stall, I wiped some drops of water off the seat with some toilet paper, figuring they were left over from when the stall was cleaned, and some of the water soaked through to my fingers. When I was through, I tested a suspicion I had begun to have, discovered that the toilet seat did not stay up, and realized that those drops of water may not have been so innocent. So I was quite desperate to wash my hands. But when I tried the sink, there was no water. I boldly strode into the women's room to use the sink there, but no water. There was no running water in the entire hotel. The first-floor concierge had no real interest in helping me find water, and probably didn't understand the problem. I had traveled light around southern Albania, with only a day pack with a change of clothes in it, leaving my suitcase at the Hotel Tirana. Since my first night in Albania I had stayed on the ninth floor, I had left the suitcase with the ninth-floor concierge and had given her a pack of Marlboros to think kindly of me while my suitcase was in her care. So now to wash my hands I went up to the ninth floor, found the concierge, retrieved my suitcase, gave her a tip, and then pleaded for water to wash my hands. She let me into someone's room, and when I turned on

the faucet, there was just enough water for the job left in the pipes.

The plumbing in Mustafa's apartment was a complex arrangement of tanks and hoses and faucets, but it all came down to one tiny faucet that had a thick rubber band looped over the spigot. When you unloosed the rubber band, a trickle of cold water would dribble out of the faucet. I was able to shave with that, looking at my shadow in lieu of a mirror—my hand knew where to shave, but my eyes had to look at something. A shower was out of the question, as was flushing the toilet, a fact that led to my adventure in the Hotel Tirana later that morning.

Modernization comes to a country unevenly. In contrast with the plumbing, Mustafa had had the television on during the entire dinner, and he constantly switched channels with his remote control, from an Italian soap opera on the station from Rome to an American soap opera on the station from Tirana.

My night at Mustafa's was the biggest example of hospitality, but certainly not the only one. When I checked into the hotel in Shkodra, the clerk behind the desk, whose name was "Irir", invited me over to his apartment after dinner for coffee. Like Mustafa's apartment and like other apartments I have seen in eastern Europe, it was on an unlit street in a run-down building, the steps to the second-floor entrance were crumbling, you could see through the floorboards in the kitchen, but the living room was a place of warmth and beauty. This is the part of their home that they can do something with, that is really their own, and this is where they invest their money and energy. There was a large cabinet on one side of the room with their china and various objects of display, and on the other side of the room a black, family heirloom chest of drawers from 1875. His two cute teenage daughters were sitting on a couch watching "Karate Kid" on television, and his wife's mother, dressed in black, was sitting in another corner. They took me into the bedroom and showed me their son, a 12-day-old baby. I took photographs of the family, including the first photograph ever of their son. I'll send them the family portraits when I get them developed.

The next night in Shkodra, I walked around the neighborhood of the hotel after dinner and stopped in at a small, warm-looking cafe with a number of people in it. I ordered a raki and took a chair. Within five minutes I had been invited to join a table with three teachers in their 50s and a driver of 40. As our conversation went through the usual course—where am I from, describe my family, where have I been in Albania—the rest of the people in the cafe gathered around me. The conversation then turned to politics. The statements were pretty basic: "Enver Hoxha bad."

“George Bush good.” They liked George Bush, but didn’t seem distressed when I said I was for Clinton. They didn’t know anything about Clinton. (Do any of us?) Then the cook came out with ice cream for me, and then for everyone else. They kept my glass of raki filled, and I had to start pretending to drink or I wouldn’t have made it back to the hotel. The brother of the driver of 40 showed up; he was a doctor, and wanted to know how much a doctor made in America. I tried to temper the information by quoting the price of a house in California. Just before closing time, the driver of 40, a family man, insisted I spend the night in his apartment instead of the hotel. I declined. Then a rather strange-looking, hatchet-faced man who had entered the cafe rather late and had moved his chair right next to mine, also insisted I stay in his apartment. This I declined too. I wondered if he was gay; I didn’t know the signals in Albania, or the attitudes. When the cafe closed, he accompanied me back to the hotel. He took my arm, but I shook his hand loose. As we approached the door of the hotel, he said, “Ten dollars.” I didn’t reply. He said, “Ten dollars. You understand?” I said, “I understand ‘ten dollars’, but I don’t understand who’s giving it to whom and for what.” I don’t think he understood. At the door he kissed me on both cheeks, the Albanian-style farewell.

There were small acts of hospitality. On the crowded bus from Gjirokastrë to Saranda an old man insisted I take his seat, while he sat on a bundle in the aisle. There was no way I could refuse without insulting him. Anyway, it paid off for him, because I gave him a pack of Marlboros when we arrived in Saranda—I really did appreciate that seat. On the bus from Vlorë to Tirana we stopped at a cafe briefly, and the man who was sitting next to me on the bus insisted on paying for my coffee. Again, to refuse would have been to insult. He won too. All the men at the front of the bus took their smoking seriously and were constantly passing cigarettes back and forth. I took out a pack of Marlboros, gave them to the man, and indicated that he should pass them around to the others. He opened the pack, though slowly, and passed a few cigarettes around to some of the men, and they lit up. But I had the feeling that it was with some reluctance, as if they were being forced to smoke money.

There is a moral issue here—I’m quite aware of it. Should I be encouraging them in something as unhealthy as smoking cigarettes? But remember, I was a tourist, not a missionary.

My final example of hospitality, rather dubious hospitality in this case, is from my second day in Albania, while I was walking around the inner city of Berat, on top of a mountain, inside the walls of a fortress. The

brief summary of Albanian history is this: In 3000 years they have never had a beneficial relationship with another country. Their few periods of independence have been spent fighting off their eventual conquerors. You can see this in their architecture. All their monuments are fortresses, and every city of suitable antiquity has its fortress on top of the nearest hill. What is distinctive about their traditional houses is that they are built like fortresses, with stone walls and small windows on the first two floors. Even in this century, the fortress mentality has persisted. Enver Hoxha was convinced his enemies would invade so he had bunkers placed everywhere. You ride past ordinary corn fields, and there in the middle or at the edge are three or four of these things, hemispheres of concrete sticking above the ground like giant soldiers' helmets. (There is a housing shortage in Albania, and I saw one of the bunkers that had been converted into a home, with a stick fence around it and chickens in the yard.)

So I was walking around the town inside the fortress on top of the hill in Berat—a wonderful town, with the maze-like character of villages on Greek islands, except the houses and streets were all made out of shiny white rocks—when a very cute girl about (exactly, as it turned out) ten years old suddenly appeared in the street before me, well aware of her photogenicity, and posing. I took her picture. She spoke a little English and a little more Italian, and was very bright. (Calculating, as it turned out.) I told her I was an American, and she took me by the hand and led me through streets to a gate, and through the gate into a courtyard and up the steps into her house. No explanation.

I was praying that her mother or father would be home, but they weren't. Only her 15-year-old sister. They had me sit down and served me ice water and preserves. Now I was rather nervous at this moment. Imagine the same situation in America. The father comes home and sees a strange, middle-aged man sitting in his house with his two young daughters. I'd risk being shot. I didn't know Albanian attitudes on this question, but there again were those stories of Albanian vengeance.

Anyway, I was safe. Neither parent came home while I was there.

The girl—her name was Brunilola Paga, Bruna for short—pointed to my camera and asked if she could take a picture of me. I thought her hospitality was worth at least one wasted picture, so I gave her the camera, without the flash, and showed her where to push. She took my picture, all dark I'm sure, and then before I could leap across the room to stop her, she whirled the camera around the room going snap, snap, snap, snap. If I hadn't caught her when I did, she would have taken the whole roll.

Then she came over and sat down beside me, and hooked her finger under my watchband and said, “I like your watch.” I took this to mean she not only liked it, she wanted it. When I made it clear I wasn’t going to give it to her, she asked for my ball-point pen. I told her I needed it, so she asked me for the notebook she had spotted in my daypack, the one I kept my journal in. I took pictures of her and her sister, with as much of the living room as I could, including the washing machine and refrigerator (but unfortunately not the dead chicken that was the only item in the refrigerator). Then I took down their address, and Bruna placed a whole order—the photographs, a watch, a pen, a notebook, a dollar, and a Michael Jackson tape.

I said I wanted to walk around the village some more, so she led me out, and up to the top of the village where on the battlements of the fortress, in an old lookout tower, there was a coffee house. This is exactly what I had hoped to find. In my travels I race from sight to site, but the moments I remember with greatest fondness have me sitting at an outdoor table at a cafe with a beautiful view. I ordered a coffee for me and lemonades for Bruna and her little brother, who had tagged along, and went to sit at a table by the parapet with a beautiful view of the modern town below and the length of the Osum River valley, closely hemmed in by mountains. Bruna finished her lemonade and asked if I would buy her and her brother some chocolate, so I did. When I went to pay the bill, I learned that the coffee was 3 leks (about 3 cents), the lemonades were 10 leks each, and the chocolate bars were 120 leks each. She knew what to ask for.

I needed to move on, she walked me to the arched gate of the old town, and we shook hands goodbye. I had successfully held onto my camera, my watch, my pen, and my notebook. But I still have her address and that Christmas list, and I wonder if I should send her a Michael Jackson tape.

2 Frustration

I had hoped to see lots of beautiful places in Albania. I did see some. I’ve described Berat. The town of Gjirokastër was even better. It is spread across the ridges and gullies of a large hill, with the obligatory fort on top. Nothing in the fort, except some pits in the cement that the short, stocky custodian with an animated face giving me a guided tour in a little Albanian plus a lot of Albanian gestures, which I found even more incomprehensible than the Albanian language, said were the result of “Bomb! Bomb! Bomb!”, unless “bam” means something very different in Albanian, and some walls

here and there where people were either shot, garrotted, hung, or had their throats slit—again the incomprehensibility of the Albanian gestures. All this happened in World War II, or maybe World War I, or maybe even in Ottoman times. There were also some high vaulted chambers where apparently the Turkish soldiers slept and—the gesture here is the index finger of the right hand pointing into the palm of the left hand—either slept under umbrellas or sat on one-legged stools or engaged in some unspeakably perverted sexual practice in the privacy of their own barracks.

But the rest of Gjirokastër was wonderful. The maze-like streets were of red, black, and white brick-shaped cobblestones. The houses were one-story and of stucco on their uphill side, but on their downhill side had two stories of stone below, looking like small fortresses, with windows not much larger than a rifle could fit through. The roofs were mostly of slate. You would wander down a narrow lane closely hemmed in by shops all built of the same stone, and reach the end for a magnificent view of the length of the Drino River valley.

But the high point of the trip was to be the village of Thethi, in the far north. I had read about it in Edith Durham's *High Albania*, the story of a lone Englishwoman's trek in 1908 through the mountain villages of the "Albanian Alps". For Durham it was a visit to a previous era, and perhaps for me it would be too.

In Tirana I had walked through the National Museum, a very nice, well-laid-out, modern museum, highly informative even though all the descriptions were only in Albanian. In one room I saw a picture of a hauntingly beautiful village in a deep mountain valley, whose houses were all three-story stone towers. I asked the woman who was following me around turning lights on for me—I was the only visitor at the museum at the time—where it was, and she didn't know, but I imagined it must be Thethi.

When I first arranged this trip, I worked through the Kutrubes Travel Agency in Boston, specialists in Albanian travel from back in the days when it was difficult, and, it turned out, not entirely up to date on the realities of Albanian travel. I tried to do things on my own at first and called information in Washington to ask for the Albanian Embassy and was told there was none. So I called the United Nations mission in New York, and was given the ambassador's home phone in Silver Springs, Maryland, and I called him to ask about visas. He said they weren't set up yet to give visas, but if I sent him the basic information, he would make sure a visa was waiting for me at the Tirana Airport. This seemed rather chancy to me, so I decided to work through Kutrubes.

I paid them \$50 for a visa, plus a \$30 handling charge. The cost for the required jeep, a driver, guide, hotel, and meals was \$180 a day, pretty steep, but I decide if I could use that for one day to go to Thethi and back, it would certainly be worth it. My plane was to arrive in the early afternoon, and I would go directly from the airport to Shkodra, two hours to the north, spend the night there, go to and from Thethi the next day, and then return to Tirana the third day, and begin my tour of the south on my own. Well, you guessed it—that two hours to Shkodra the first afternoon would count as a complete day, for \$180, and so would the two-hour return to Tirana on the third day, even if I wasn't going to use the hotel. So now the price was \$540, plus the visa and handling charge, for a total of \$620. Very steep. But this was Albania, the land forbidden to Americans for fifty years, and I wanted to see the best of it. I swallowed hard, and sent my money in.

The week before I left, I called Kathy Kutrubes and asked her to send me a copy of the fax she had originally sent to Albtourist, so I would have a piece of paper to wave if there was trouble at the airport about my visa. She did, and when I read it I was shocked to see that she had neglected to say anything about Thethi. It only mentioned two nights in the unremarkable city of Shkodra and a car and driver for three days. I called her back and insisted she fax them immediately specifying that the car and driver were for a trip to Thethi, and send me a copy of the fax as well. I got that fax two days before I left, and was a bit dismayed that she listed a town called "Bajram Curri" as a possible alternative to Thethi, but I didn't know anything about that town, and for all I knew, it was as nice.

When I arrived at the airport, the first surprise was that visas were no longer required of American citizens. A quick stamp, and I was through Passport Control. But what about my \$50?

There were no driver and English-speaking guide waiting to whisk me off to Shkodra in a jeep. There was only an Albanian-speaking cab driver with my name on a piece of paper and instructions to take me into Tirana.

At the Hotel Tirana I spoke with the Albtourist agent, Agron Agolli. He spoke perfect English and was a very friendly, helpful man. He said he had never heard of my plans to go to Thethi. He had never received the second fax—the fax machine had been down the last ten days. This could well have been true. There was no way, he said, that he could get a jeep on this short a notice.

I knew I had to be flexible to travel in Albania, so we sat down and I quickly rearranged my entire plans. I would travel around the south for the first three days and then return to Tirana to get the jeep and driver that he

would have arranged in the meantime. He agreed to that.

I explored Tirana the rest of the afternoon, a pleasant town with overly broad avenues and monumental architecture rising out of fine evergreen parks. The statue of Enver Hoxha had been torn down, and the pedestal was painted with the name of “George Bush”. The next morning I went to Berat, and then to Gjirokastër, and the day after to Saranda, the “Albanian Riviera”, and Vlorë. The morning of the fourth day I took the bus back to Tirana.

Mr. Agolli had not yet found the jeep for Thethi—had he tried?—but if I gave him two more hours, he would. I returned two hours later, and he announced that Thethi was impossible; no driver would agree to drive that road. He had noticed on the fax that Kathy Kutrubes had listed Bajram Curri as an alternative, so he had arranged a driver with an ordinary car to take me there instead. Oh, and by the way, the English-speaking guide that I had paid for was not available.

Now I could have refused all this outright, and returned to America to demand my money back from Kutrubes. Law suits, and all that. But these were my last three days in Albania, and I wouldn’t be back, and maybe Bajram Curri was just as nice as Thethi. I decided to make the best of a bad situation. The driver, Agim Bano, and I got in the car and drove off for Shkodra, stopping at the fortress of Kruje on the way, where the one Albanian hero, Skanderbeg, had held off the Turks for twenty-five years in the 1400s.

The next day, on the way to Bajram Curri, there was one thing that was exceptionally beautiful. During the Communist era, Albania had built three large dams on the Drin River, and above the second the road discontinued and we had to take a ferry for two hours, a ferry loaded with oil, timber, grain, and watermelon trucks, a few private cars, and several donkeys. It followed the course of Lake Komani, between narrow spectacular cliffs, almost like a Yosemite valley that had been flooded, past slopes that had isolated corn fields balanced on them, with no visible means of access, the occasional peasant family working the fields. The most remarkable incident was when the ferry suddenly veered toward shore and docked at a rock at the base of a steep slope covered with nothing but scrub. About half a dozen men got off, the last of them what looked like a frail old man in traditional dress and a red cap, who had to be helped gently off the ramp. Before the ramp was raised again, the men were on their way up the hill on an invisible path, the old man out in front, and by the time we started to back away from the shore, they were well up the slope, the old man far above the others, not

seeming to hurry, but stretching his lead with every easy step. The tough old Albanian mountain peasants, I thought.

We disembarked at Fierza, at the far end of the lake, and a short drive took us to Bajram Curri. I couldn't believe my eyes. This was no mountain village. It was a modern and very ugly city. You could see the mountains in the distance, but it was not in the mountains itself. Agim looked at me with a kind of "What now?" expression; he didn't know what I had wanted to come here for.

When I was first introduced to Agim the day before, he had seemed rather cold (Later I would think of him as quiet and dignified.), and I was dreading spending three days with him. I gave him a pack of Marlboros right away to sweeten his disposition, but that didn't seem to work, and in fact I never saw him smoke. But as we went along, he seemed to warm up a bit. He had bought me a coffee while we were waiting for the ferry. I hardly knew enough Albanian to crack jokes, but I had learned that the word for "ferry" was "traghetto", so when I saw two boys paddle up in a rowboat made out of scrap metal, I pointed and asked him, "Traghetto?" He laughed for the first time. On the ferry he seemed genuinely anxious that I should find the canyon beautiful. (He needn't have worried.)

So now in Bajram Curri, he was quite distressed when he saw my disappointment. He drove to the "tourist" hotel—no tourist was staying there—to see if they knew of any options. There we were told that 27 kilometers away on a "good road"—"rrugë e mirë", I had learned enough Albanian to pick out the phrase, a beautiful phrase beginning with a heavily trilled "r"—there was the picturesque village of Valbonë. I consulted my map. It was definitely in the heart of the high "Albanian Alps", one valley over from Thethi, although over a hundred miles from Thethi by road. For all I knew, it could have been Valbonë that I had seen a picture of in the National Museum. My spirits lifted, and we set off.

The road through town was not good. It was rutted, potholed, scored by gutters, and it was hard for Agim to go more than 10 miles an hour. It often happens that roads like this are worst in the towns, where they are most heavily used. I tried to say this to Agim in Albanian, and I prayed it would get better as soon as we reached the countryside.

Instead, what pavement there was ended abruptly in a mass of ruts. It was obvious Agim didn't have the clearance in his car to go the next hundred meters, let alone 27 kilometers. Agim asked a passerby and learned the road got no better.

I took a few pictures, since this was the far point I would reach, of the

nearby corn fields and the steep blue mountains in the distance, and got back in the car to turn back, resigned.

We returned to the hotel, and the men who had said it was a good road stood at the entrance laughing at the joke they had had. Agim walked through them, silently fuming.

Agim tried as best he could to salvage my trip for the next day and a half. At the hotel he got them to open their special banquet room and give us a lunch of beefsteak and French fries. He drove the long way back, on a moderately scenic road. The next morning he took me to Shkodra's historic but abandoned Lead Mosque and to the purported grave of Skanderbeg in Lezhë (In fact, Skanderbeg's body has long since been parceled out into relics), and he humored me when I wanted to stop in the village of Bushat and take pictures of peasant houses. He helped me get a picture of a woman in traditional dress, which I had seen a lot of in the north, in and among all the blue jeans and Batman T-shirts.

But I hadn't seen Thethi and I hadn't seen Valbonë. I had spent \$620 to see something I could have seen by bus for \$4.

3 Albania as a Place to Visit

Okay. The people are nice. The country is (purportedly) beautiful. But is it possible to travel in Albania?

People's two biggest fears, if they read newspapers, are poverty and war, and these are unfounded.

Poverty I've already spoken about. The insensitive tourist could miss it entirely, and the rationalizing tourist could convince himself or herself that he or she was doing the best thing he or she could do for their economy—being a tourist. The Albanian economy is in fact not in good shape. Their agriculture is on the edge, not thriving, but not broken down completely. They do have watermelons. But their industry is in utter ruin. Factory managers discovered they could do better selling on the black market any raw materials they received, rather than using them to keep the factories running, so those factories stopped producing the raw material needed by other factories, and soon the shortages spread through the entire economy. Today the average factory is not only shut down, it is gutted. Even the window frames have been stolen.

There were very few beggars outside the two major hotels in Tirana, certainly nothing in comparison with the homeless in the average American

city, and outside Tirana there were no beggars at all.

Well, not quite. At the Tirana airport, small packs of boys followed me, shouting, “Hey Italiano! Mille lire!” At the fortress of Kruje, where again I was the only tourist, two boys spotted me, and then two more, and then two more, and soon I was leading a flock of them around the ruins. Their conversation was somewhat boring, basically, “Give me a dollar! Give me a dollar!” As I would balance my way along broken walls next to steep drops, they would leap in front of me and break my stride. The one time a boy made me fall, it was fortunately not far. But this is not really begging. A friend of mine, now a philosophy professor at the University of South Carolina, was a refugee from Lithuania as a boy, in Germany, and he remembers with fondness chasing after American soldiers and pleading for chewing gum. I myself. I had a railroad track behind my house, growing up in South Bend, Indiana, that was unused except when passenger trains brought in fans for Notre Dame football games on autumn Saturday afternoons, and we ran along beside the trains begging for nickels and dimes. I still remember the triumph of getting a half dollar.

The situation of a man I met outside the Hotel Tirana told me a lot about the state of the Albanian economy. He was a mechanical engineer, but now he no longer worked as one. It was much more profitable to hang around the steps of the hotel, selling lapel pins to foreigners and offering to change money. I talked to him for quite a while, while a friend of his, a nice-looking, earnest, intelligent young man stood quietly by, listening intently.

I think they have a future in tourism (especially after I sell my story to newspapers all across the country.) In fact I devised a three-point plan to develop the tourist industry, which unsolicited I imparted to Agron Agolli of Albtourist, even though he told me he had just escorted an international delegation of tourist industry experts around Albania. My plan is this:

1. Get a few rental car companies. It is possible to travel in the \$100 range through Albtourist, and it is possible to travel in the \$1 a day range by bus, but unless you are aggressive and not very risk-averse about finding private drivers, it is impossible to travel in a \$30 or \$40 range. A mid-range needs to be possible.
2. Improve and widen the road between Saranda and Vlorë, without destroying its beauty. That will open up the “Albanian Riviera” to tourism. (Germans will lead the way.) Borsh and Himara especially have great possibilities. (He asked about Saranda, and I called it a

dirty little town, and he asked if I had seen a cove just south of there, and I admitted I hadn't.)

3. Don't build any new tourist facilities. The ones already there are nowhere near capacity. Just maintain the ones you have already. That's a lot cheaper.

After I gave him my plan, he asked me my profession, and I decided to take this as a compliment, rather than as a challenge.

So much for Albania's economy. What about war? Will you get shot if you go there? Well, not right now. The biggest risk for Albania lies next door in the Kosovo province of Yugoslavia. It is 90% Albanian, but the Serbs view it as their ancestral homeland. It belongs to Yugoslavia because of accidents of alliance in World War I. Austria-Hungary was on one side, so Serbia was on the other, so Turkey was on the first, so Greece was on the second, so Albania was on the first, and they lost.

Now the Albanians there want to be part of Albania, or at least have their own republic, and they expressed this wish in 1981 in the form of riots. Since then the Serbs have systematically excluded them from any position whose job description includes the carrying of weapons. But as two Albanian engineers, in Italy for a two-week training program, told me in the Rome airport after they spotted me studying my *Instant Albanian for Smart People* notes, "These are not people who talk out their problems." If war, or rather, when war begins, Albania could well be dragged into it. The pressure to provide more than refugee camps will be great, and Yugoslavia, which has always coveted Albania, is not likely to exercise restraint.

In Albania itself, there is less likelihood of ethnic or religious conflict, or so the people say. Albanian is the only ethnicity. The people I asked denied any possibility of religious conflict, despite the 70% Muslim, 20% Greek Orthodox (mostly in the south), 10% Roman Catholic (mostly in the north) split. They said it is an old saying in Albania that the first religion of Albanians is Albania. In any case, one would think that the Christians are too outnumbered to complain much. And there is no sign of Islamic fundamentalist fanaticism. The Muslims I talked to quite readily admitted that Islam was a relatively recent (1600-1800) Turkish imposition, fostered primarily by tax breaks, and the only reason they were still Muslim was that it was a more reasonable religion than Christianity (as it no doubt is—having fewer religious principles they have fewer absurdities).

Nevertheless, one should never underestimate the power of religion to provide an excuse to kill one's neighbor. And in Albania everybody knows

who is what. (I have no idea what the religion is of most of my friends, or whether they have a religion.) Of the three teachers and the driver in the cafe in Shkodra, one of the teachers was a Muslim, and they used their friendship as an example of religious harmony. But everyone knew he was Muslim, and he seemed a bit uncomfortable when he was identified as such. And as the girl in Berat led me through the streets an old woman scolded her, I don't know for what, and after we were past, she told me dismissively, "Musselman."

4 No Jail

I wasn't thrown in jail in Albania. My last adventure there may have carried some genuine risk of that. I was at the airport waiting for my flight to Rome. Of the \$100 I had changed into leks, I had only been able to spend \$70 in six days. So I was wondering what to do with my remaining 3000 leks. When there outside the entrance to the waiting room, next to a policeman, was the mechanical engineer's nice-looking, earnest friend, selling lapel pins. I greeted him as an old friend, and then asked him if he would change my remaining Albanian money back into dollars. He agreed, only as a friend, to do so, and we went, not so much around a corner from the policeman, as around a symbolic corner from the policeman, stepping far enough away that he could ignore us if he wanted to. But the man told me he only had a \$100 bill, so I would have to give him \$70 American in addition to the 3000 leks. We made the exchange, and I went into the waiting room.

Now my only worry was whether the bill was counterfeit. I took another \$100 bill out of my pocket and examined the two closely, side by side. I couldn't see any differences, but I still wouldn't be comfortable until I had exchanged it for something else.

When I stepped up to the desk for passport control, the police officer said there was a \$10 airport tax. "Boing!!" went an idea in my head. I gave him the \$100 bill.

"Don't you have anything smaller?" he asked.

"No," I lied.

He rubbed it hard to see if the ink would smear, as I watched nervously. Then he handed it to the cashier, who also rubbed hard to see if the ink would smear. I wasn't arrested. I was given \$90 in change, my passport was stamped, and I passed into the international waiting room, where I had time for a cup of espresso before we were led out onto the runway to board

the flight for Rome.

5 Post Script

When I got home and developed my pictures, I sent Ilir, the hotel clerk in Shkodra, the pictures I had taken of him and his family, including the first pictures of their newborn son.

When I had checked into the hotel in Shkodra, Ilir was the clerk behind the desk. Albania was a pretty unusual place to be visiting, so I wanted to send post cards to all my friends. After checking in, I asked if he had post cards, and he pulled out a six-inch stack of them, all different. We both laughed at this, and he made whimsical remarks as I went through and chose fifteen or twenty of them. I liked him. I bought and affixed the stamps.

I wrote and addressed them the next day while I was sitting with Agim Bono, drinking a cup of coffee, waiting for the ferry across Lake Komani. The next morning when I checked out, there was a different clerk at the hotel desk. I asked her if I could just give the post cards to her to mail, and she said yes.

The post cards never arrived.

What happened instead was that all of the women—none of the men—only and all the women whom I had written post cards to—began to get letters from Ilir. No explanation in his letters of where he got their names and addresses. Just out of the blue. He asked them in very flowery terms if he could be their friend.

I first heard of this from my secretary and another woman, and I asked around, and it turned out that all of them had gotten these letters. No one responded.

Several months later I got a letter myself from Ilir. No mention of what he had done to my post cards or of the letters he sent to my friends. Let me quote this letter in full:

“My dear honourable friend MR. HOBBS,

“I am very pleased to hear from you. I was besides myself with joy, for that very day I received the letter from You it was the 30th anniversary of my wife Elisabeth and my family thank you from the bottom of our hearts for Your respect and kindness. Once again thank You for the photos You send they have come out so well.

“My dear honourable friend, I wish from the bottom of my heart, may

this letter finds you and Your honourable family in good health and may successes attend You with Your work.

“Special thanks are addressed from my wife and my old mother.

“My dear friend it will be a great honour and respect for me and my family if You become Godfather of my new born little daughter Antonella if you want to. [I was sure he had said the newborn baby was a boy.] This is the desire of my family and particularly my wife.

“My dear friend almost a month has lapsed since I lost my job or kind of ‘social assistance’. The excuse was poor and ridiculous I have been working at the hotel during the times of ex-regime so me and 5 reception colleges lost our jobs. You see DEMOCRASY is working full steam. So I am turning to you as if my brother. So my friend ‘necessity has no law’. Winter is knocking at our doors. No wood (our heating sistem is a modern medieval one) No electricity, no water. My little children are scared of the darkness they start crying as soon as the darkness sets in. So if possible send me a solar lamp, a rechargable latern battery lamp. I and my family should be very much obliged and undyingly thankful for your kindness. Now I am bringing this letter to a close wishing You all the best of the world. May God bless You! and a very happy Christmas!

“Sincerely Yours

“Ilir & family.”

I would not want to belittle his suffering, which I am quite sure was genuine. Before the episode of the post cards, I certainly would have responded in any way I could. If I had gotten such a letter from the other people I met there—Mustafa Kaçi, for example—I would have gladly responded. But I did not respond. Ilir had already lost my sympathy.