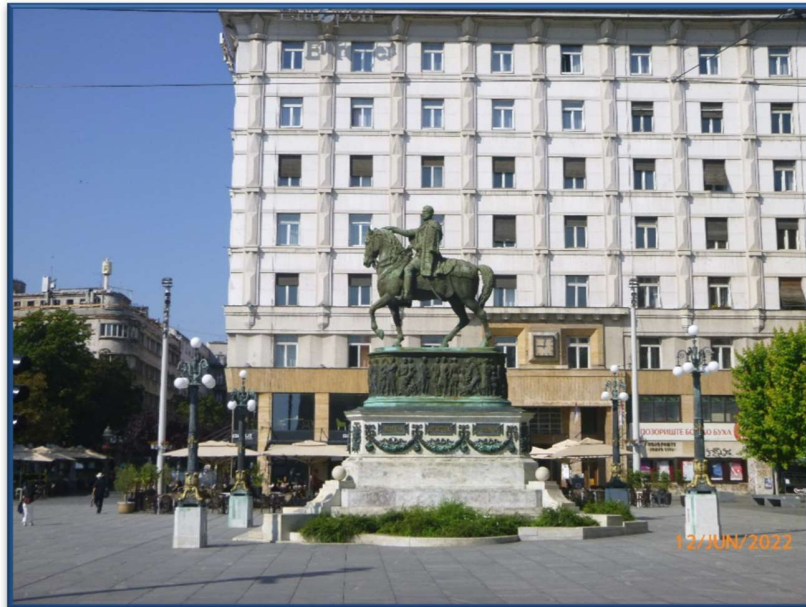


Intriguing Southeast Europe

Wearing a covid mask on 24 plus hours of international flights wasn't the most pleasant of tasks, but it was worth the inconvenience to resume international travel again. And it was a good reason to have a few extra reds in flight to justify the occasional mask removal.

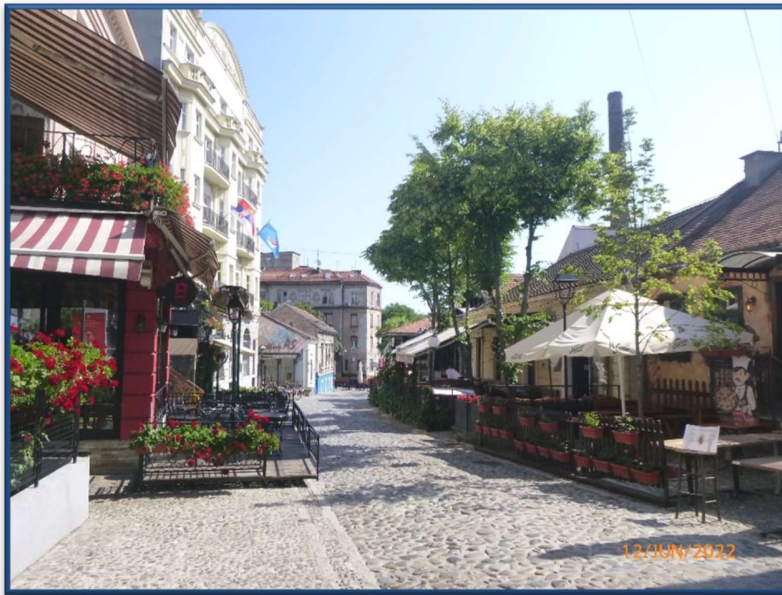
The queue lined up entering Belgrade's Nicola Tesla Airport passport control gradually started removing their masks when it became obvious none of the Serbian officials were wearing them, and I didn't wear a mask again until the return flights to Australia.



statue of Prince Mihailo in Republic Square, Belgrade

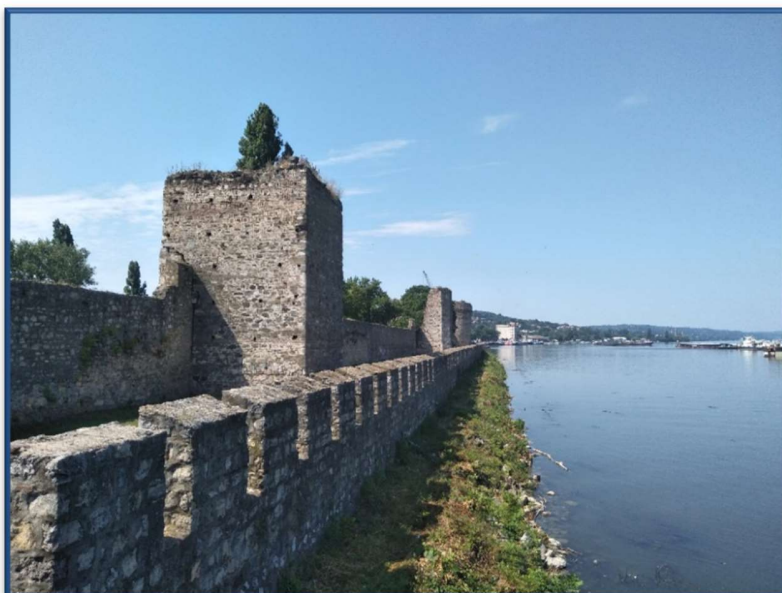
Belgrade was the starting point for this Adriatic Moto “*Intriguing Southeast Europe*” tour, and I arrived 2 days early to have time to settle in, explore the city, and catch up with my American mate Kurt. The city is a pleasant place to visit, with the older part on the east bank of the Sava River and the newer part on the west bank not far from its confluence with the Danube River. Belgrade Fortress, Kalemegdan Park and the Bohemian Quarter were well worth the walks in the summer heat.

Tour briefing was held in the starting hotel on Sun 12 June, the group consisting of Canadian couple Mike and Shari, another Canadian Phil, Kurt and myself plus guide Matej and van driver Sanjin, both from Adriatic's home country Slovenia. Bikes were all BMW, an R1250RT for Mike and Shari, an R1250GS for Kurt, an 850GS for Phil, a 750GS Sport for Matej and 750GS for myself.



Bohemian Quarter, Belgrade

On the road by 8:30am next morning, with lots of deviations through villages to avoid highway traffic. Coffee stop was Smederevo Fortress on the Danube River, an extensive 28 acre structure dating from the 13th century, and now rather delapidated due to a massive explosion while being used as a munitions store during WW2. Cause of the explosion was never determined, nor was the number of casualties, estimated to be in the thousands. Phil and I wandered in to explore and take some photos, while Matej sent up his drone to give a better overall view.



Danube River view of Smederevo Fortress



a drone's eye view of Smederevo Fortress

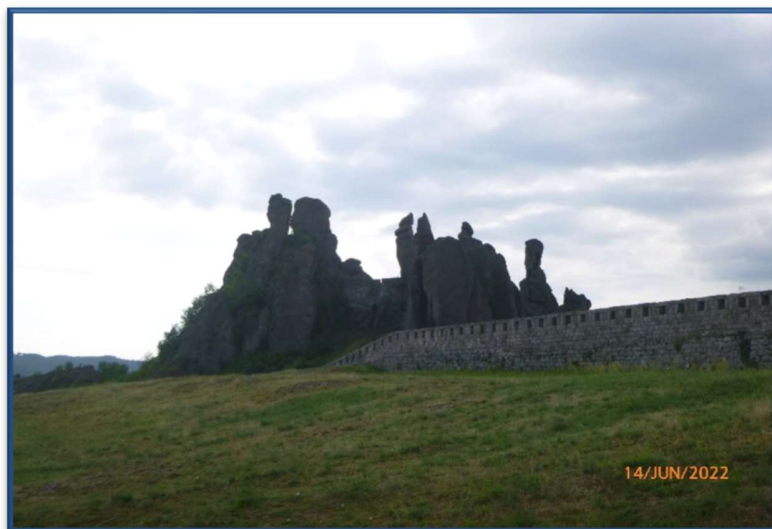
Far more majestic and in magnificent condition was the 14th century Golubac Fortress 80km down the road, also on the bank of the Danube and holding the distinction of repelling 120 attacks during its long history. The road then followed the Danube, passing through 12 short unlit tunnels to our lunch stop at Restaurant Lepadac, with a view of Romania on the opposite bank.



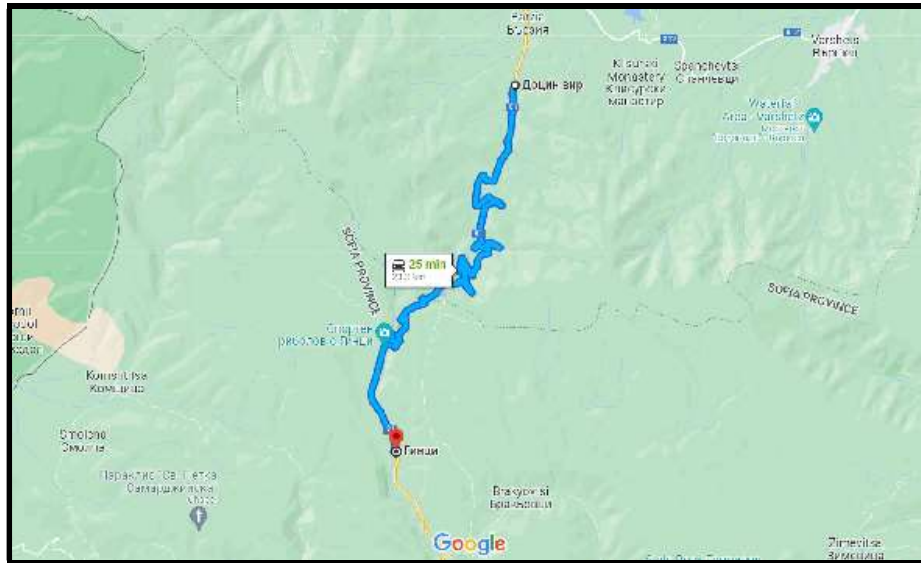
Golubac Fortress

Heavy rain started during the stop, extending lunch until the rain eased. Border entry from Serbia into Bulgaria presented little delay, arriving at our hotel in Vidin around 6:30pm allowing for a 1 hour time difference. Dinner was had on the floating Dunava Fish Grill restaurant moored on the Danube.

After a great ride from Vidin, Belgradcik Fortress was first stop next morning to explore this 2.5 acre site, dating from Roman times and set amid the spectacular “Red Rocks of Belgradcik”. After a long walk around, we had a coffee in town before setting off on some more great roads, despite a lot of the by now familiar pot-holes and loose gravel. I had a moment when I hit a patch of loose gravel and slid to the other side of the road but managed to stay on. Fortunately there was no oncoming traffic.

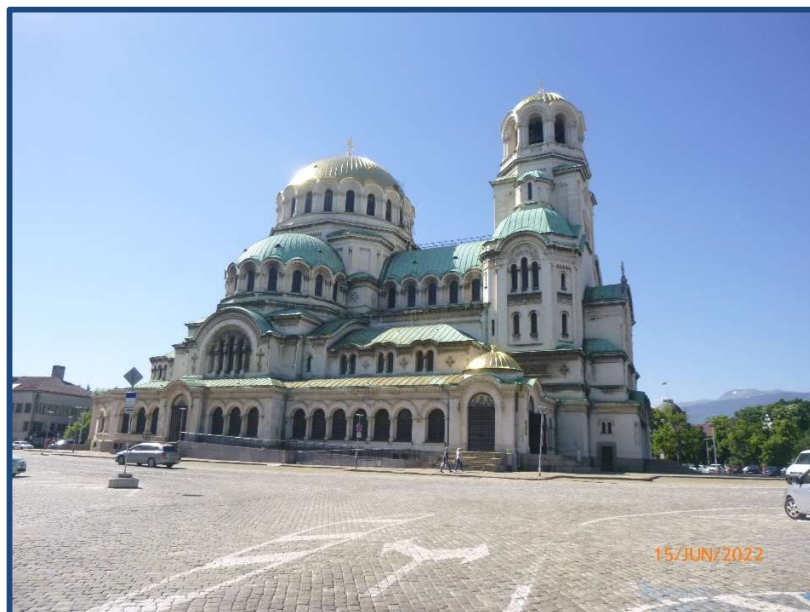


Belgradcik Fortress set around the Remarkable Red Rocks



driving the GPS crazy on the way to Sofia

While stopping for an afternoon break, Matej received advice from Sanjin that Bulgaria’s capital Sofia had experienced heavy rain and minor flooding, so we took several detours approaching the city including extended lane splitting to reach our hotel near the city centre. The heavy traffic was probably a blessing as it slowed approaching vehicles, who had no hesitation sending splashes our way. The hotel’s central location was very convenient for a guided walking tour next morning, followed by a free afternoon when I explored the city’s Roman ruins to complete our first rest day.



Aleksander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia

Traffic was slow out of town next morning before getting onto a main road, passing several old and abandoned factories most likely from the Soviet era. We also passed at least a dozen car sales yards just before Dupnica, with no other businesses in sight. Apparently it is common for yards to purchase second-hand cars in Germany and transport them in. Mercedes, BMW and Audi seemed very popular.

A great detour to Rila Monastery more than compensated for the mundane roads earlier, with a good road surface, sweeping bends, little traffic and predominately following the Rilska River. We spent more than 45 minutes exploring this historical monument, founded in the 10th century and dedicated to Bulgarian hermit and saint Ivan of Rila. The Monastery is depicted on the Bulgarian 1 Lev banknote.



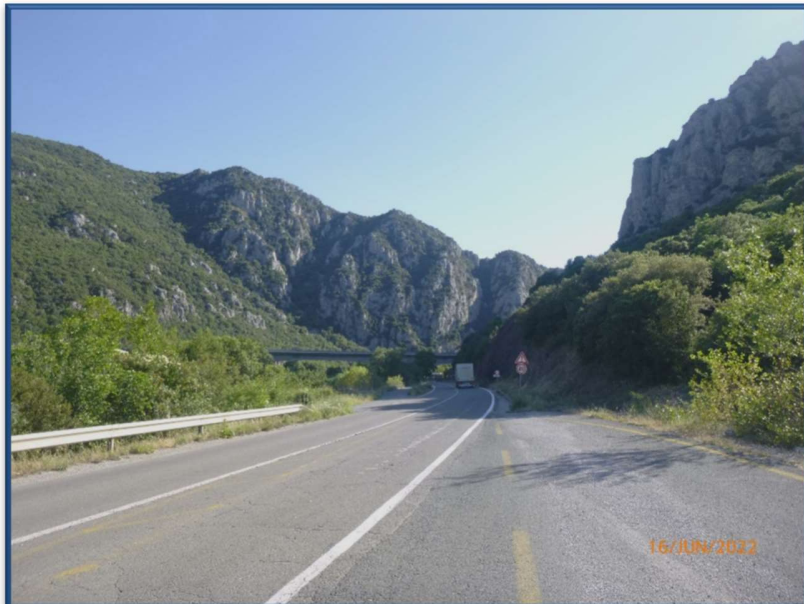
Rila Monastery

Not much time was lost at the Bulgaria - North Macedonia border, nor was much time lost while Matej repaired a puncture I'd picked up in the rear tyre. Someone somewhere is missing an 8mm x 75mm socket head cap screw, now a unique souvenir of the tour. Accommodation that night was the Pupova Kula winery, with dinner a mix of courses with wines to match.

Many more vineyards were sighted next morning while travelling less than average roads, before a great ride over a mountain in Mavrovo National Park. This was a busy road, with an overtaking lane going up, and a black Mercedes imagining another overtaking lane going down to overtake a truck. This wasn't uncommon. Unfortunately I was going up the mountain in the real overtaking lane and also overtaking a truck. All parties casually took evasive action and no harm was done.



my unique souvenir



hoping there's either more bends or a tunnel ahead

The roads became ordinary again, but there is massive construction work going on building motorways in the challenging landscape. We arrived at our hotel overlooking the lake outside Ohrid around 4:30pm, had a couple of beers, and taxied into town for dinner.

Ohrid was the second rest day of the tour, taking a small boat cruise of approx. 1 hour along Lake Ohrid to the Monastery of Sveti Naum and lunch in an adjacent restaurant. The boat dropped us off in town on return, with plenty of time to explore the Old Town, have dinner and taxi back to the hotel.



Monastery of Sveti Naum on Lake Ohrid

Matej and Sanjin washed the bikes while we were in town, and somehow the headlight cowling on my bike came free and refused to lock in. The puncture repair had been slowly losing pressure, so the bike was consigned to the van and I adopted the spare bike, also a BMW 750GS.

The route out was along a mountain road paralleling the lake before crossing into Albania, again with no drama at the border. Albania presented better than I expected, with tidy houses, lots of Mercedes, BMW and Audi, and quite a few fancy motorbikes including H-D out and about on this pleasant Sunday.

One unusual feature to date was the number of unfinished houses, hotels and petrol stations in many areas we passed through. Construction was mainly multi-storey, with concrete for slabs, columns and floors and rendered bricks or blocks forming the walls. Most unfinished buildings had slabs and upper floors complete but the walls were generally half complete or open spaces. The only explanation was “they just ran out of money”.

Some of the roads also appeared unfinished in the mountainous terrain, with more pot-holes and more loose gravel. The 13km from Erseka to Barmashi Pass in the Gramoz Mountains was particularly challenging, as if every pot-hole in Wingecarribee Shire had been gathered up, fed steroids, cloned, then randomly placed in each km of road. An interesting ride, but not one I'd care to do again. Matej had warned us that 3 bikes suffered damaged rims on this section last tour.

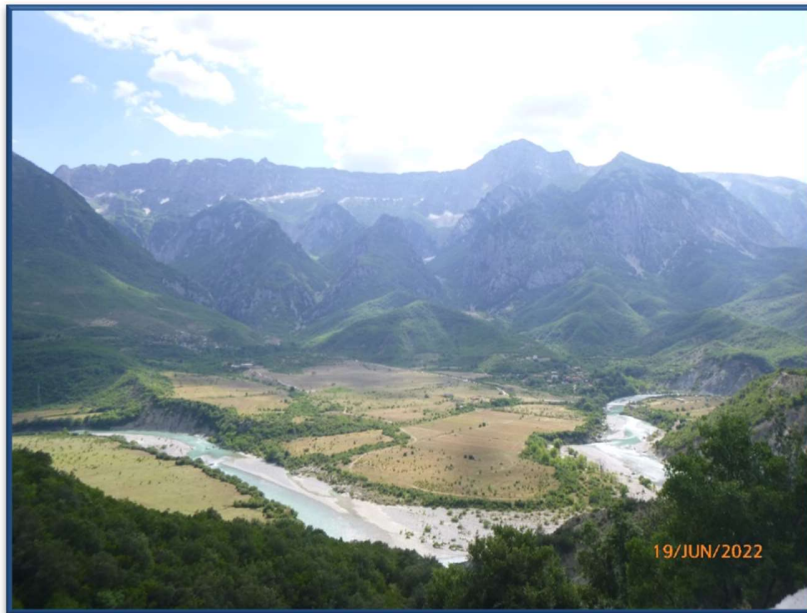


having survived Barmashi Pass



fields, forests and mountains – lots of mountains

The ride after lunch was less demanding, up, down and around mountain ranges before reaching Gjirokaster around 5:30pm. This interesting city warranted an exploration next morning, taking the hotel courtesy bus up to the imposing fortress then walking down into the old part of town before being picked up and brought back to the hotel around 11:00am. All very civilized. On the bikes again, with more good roads and lunch at the popular “Blue Eye” deep water spring near Kronje.



rivers, isolated villages and more mountains – lots more mountains



a welcome road surface after all the pot-holes



did I mention cattle dung as a road hazard?



Gjirokastra Fortress viewed from the Old Town



and the Old Town

Sarande was our stop for the night. Situated on a horse-shoe shaped bay with the Greek island of Corfu clearly visible across the water, this area is the Albanian equivalent of Australia's Gold Coast, with our hotel having a private beach and the bar extending to the water's edge. Even more civilized. We walked along the beach-front to dinner at one of the many restaurants, and watched an endless parade of people strutting up and down the promenade.

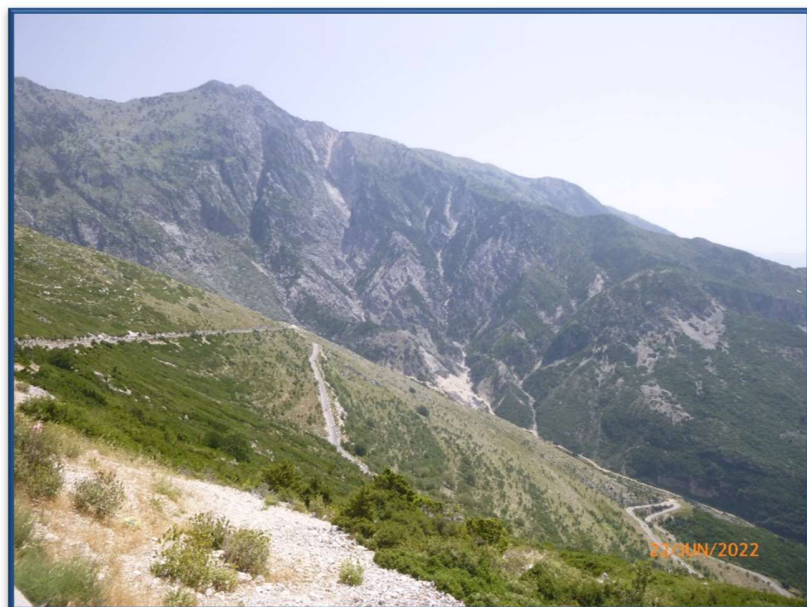


the tourists



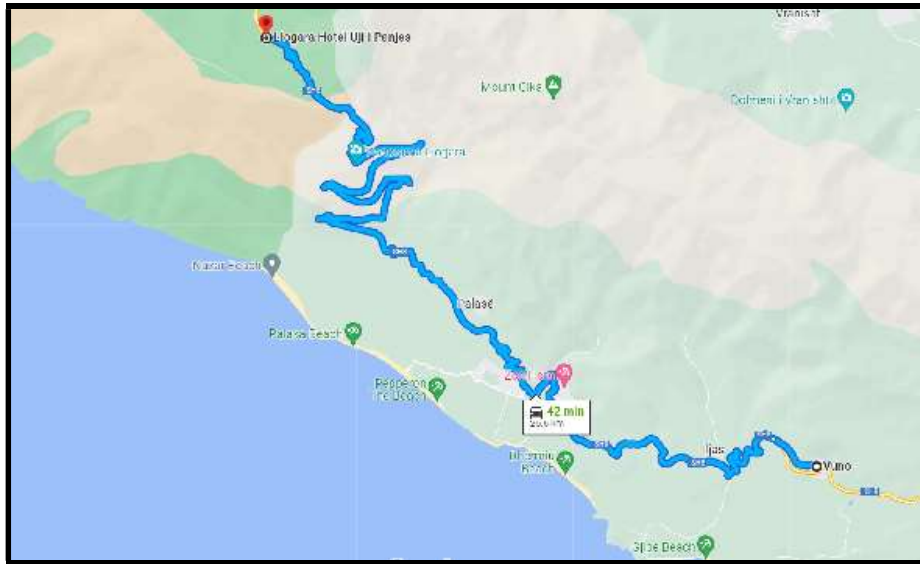
Sarande

This was to be our third and final rest day, but the temptation to ride into Greece for lunch was too overwhelming for some of us including Matej and Sanjin. Some good roads, some not so good, with a different return route to experience a short and very basic ferry crossing, arriving back at the hotel with enough time to have a swim in the Ionian Sea.



Llogara Pass

The ride out of Sarande was great, a long sweeping road along the opposite side of the mountain above the city, then onto the “Albanian Riviera” road, winding up, down and around the coastal mountains including the impressive Llogara Pass, stopping at a lookout near the highest point to take in the view, catch our breath, and naturally take some photos.



Llogara Pass

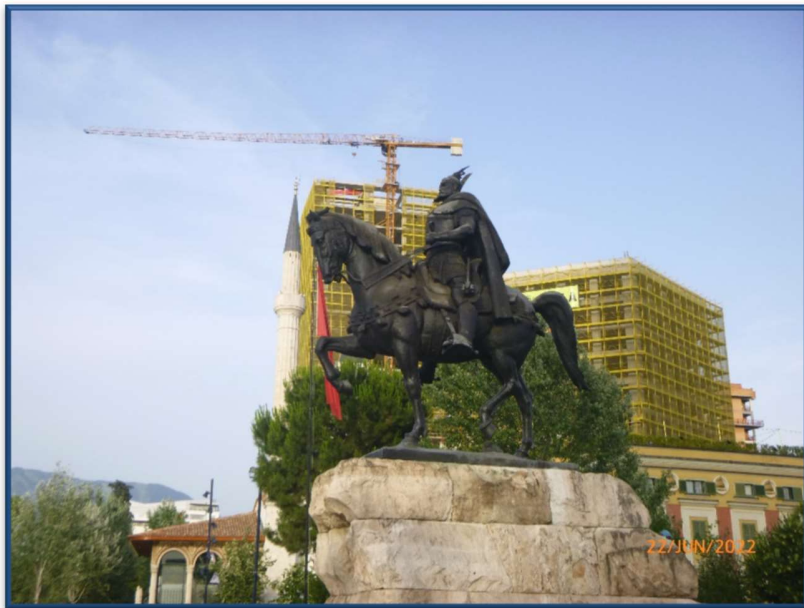
Lunch stop was just before Vlore, another Gold Coast style resort city, before taking a motorway towards Fier. Temperatures were hot again, reaching 38°C before taking on the longer mountain pass route towards Elbasan, where it cooled to 30°C at the peak, a glorious road with virtually no traffic except a group of Tour d’Albania aspirants. The ride down the pass was just as good before encountering heavy traffic on the way in to Albania’s capital Tirana. Adriatic’s tour booklet warned us that Tirana drivers have a reputation for being aggressive.

Albania had been somewhat isolated from the world by its erratic communist leader Enver Hoxha, who had deposed King Zog during WW2 and ruled the country from 1944 until his death in 1985. Hoxha ordered construction of over 170,000 concrete bunkers throughout Albania as protection against imagined enemies, diverting money from more essential needs. Most are now abandoned, although some of the bigger ones have been converted to cafes, restaurants and hotels.

Tirana has many new buildings under construction, and the people seem energetic and getting on with life. One controversial building is the Enver Hoxha Museum, a pyramid shaped structure designed by Hoxha’s architect daughter and completed in 1988 as a monument to the deceased leader. It is sarcastically referred to as the Enver Hoxha Mausoleum, although officially this was never its intended purpose. After several years of disrepair, it is now being converted to an IT centre for youth.



must be a significant pot-hole to warrant this attention



National Hero Skanderbeg in Skanderbeg Square, Tirana

More traffic hassles getting out of Tirana next morning, then suburban roads before turning off towards Kruja, another mountain town with an imposing fortress perched on the peak, famous in Albanian history for holding off several attacks by the invading Ottomans. There is an Ottoman styled bazaar in the town centre, so the Ottomans must have had some success during their five centuries of rule.

Not unexpectedly, the road up to Kruja consisted of multiple hair-pin bends, and a sand and gravel operation half way up ensured it didn't miss out on the regulation gravel traps. Back down the mountain and onto the main road, where I was disappointed we didn't see any cubes as we passed through Rubik.



Kruja Fortress

Unexpectedly the road became a 4 lane motorway, with a stop for lunch at a restaurant overlooking a lake, then continuing to the Albania - Kosovo border, with no hassles passing through. Even more unexpected, the motorway continued to Prizren, a delightful city with (surprise, surprise) a fortress perched high on a hill overlooking the town, and the Prizren River flowing through the centre of the Old Town. Phil had taken a longer route along the old road, but the motorway had the rest of us at our hotel with time to stroll around the Old Town, take a few photos and buy a souvenir or two. Kurt and I were relaxing outside the hotel having a beer when Phil finally arrived. We all had smiles on our faces.

As with all countries in this part of Europe, Kosovo has a long and varied history. Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman Empires have ruled the region over the centuries, as well as many other more local entities. Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008 and is now recognized by approx. half the member states of the United Nations. A large majority of its residents are of Albanian heritage, and the children speak excellent English. One told me this is largely due to the high proportion of English language cartoons on TV. I'm embarrassed I didn't study any Kosovo cartoons before I left home.



Prizren River with Prizren Fortress in the background

During this tour, I was bemused to see references to fortresses and citadels rather than castles. The fortresses we visited did lack the opulence of Western Europe castles (although past invaders may have had something to do with this), but their size and imposing presence conveyed the impression of many mighty struggles, a legacy that has persisted into recent times.

Riding out of Prizren was mainly suburban style roads, with restaurants, car wrecking yards, furniture shops, beauty parlours and sand & gravel operations all happily intermingled. Cars in the wrecking yards included the plentiful Mercedes, BMW and Audi, and as with other wrecking yards visible on this tour, most seemed to have wheels and suspensions removed rather than body damage. Probably something to do with the pot-holed roads and the multiple speed humps.

I'm not sure if it was the strained relationship between Kosovo and Serbia, the opportunity to again have lunch in a different country, or the fantastic mountain road, but Matej led us on a great 100km detour through Montenegro and lunch before our final border crossing on Kulina Pass. Matej certainly lived up to Adriatic's motto "ride roads less travelled".

Back into Serbia, we enjoyed another great ride beside the Lim River, although there was a notable increase in traffic density and driver intensity. There were several sections of roadworks with automatic stop/go lights, and not all drivers seemed to accept having bikes move to the front of the queue.



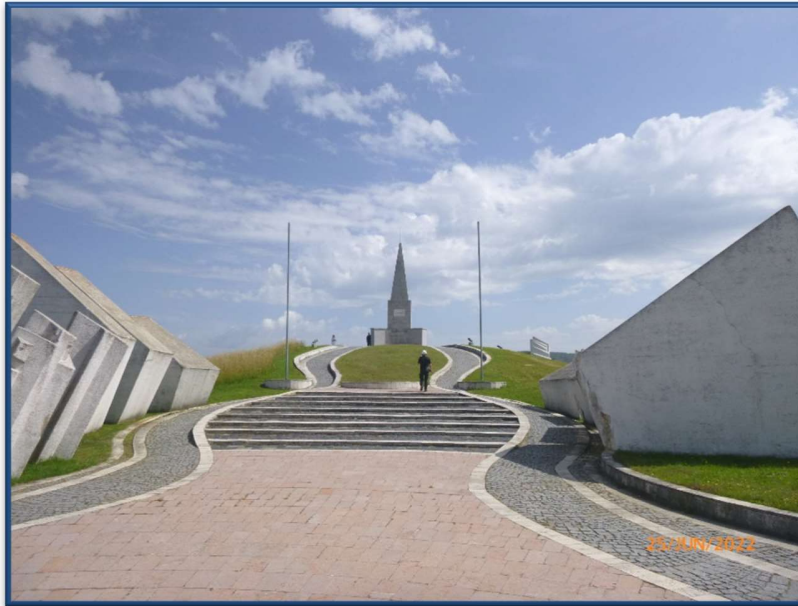
planning the route ahead

Mokra Gora means Wet Mountain in Serbian, but fortunately it did not live up to its name and we had a pleasant ride up to the tourist retreat of Mecavnik, an initiative of Serbian film director Emir Kusturica and home to an annual film festival. This was our penultimate stop on the tour with accommodation in the new but traditional style timber cabins.



my own log cabin in the backwoods of Serbia

The final day's ride was another pleasant route through the mountains, stopping at Kadinjaca Memorial dedicated to partisan fighters who put up fierce resistance to the Nazis in WW2. By this stage I'd almost adjusted to pot-holes, uneven bitumen patches, gravel deposits, faded centre lines, bumpy surfaces, cobblestones, inconsistent bend radii, stray dogs, goats, sheep and cattle, and crazy drivers of scooters, cars, trucks, tractors and donkey carts, and enjoyed more good riding to Valjevo for lunch, then the unavoidable and mediocre suburban roads and a motorway into Belgrade.



Kadinjaca Memorial

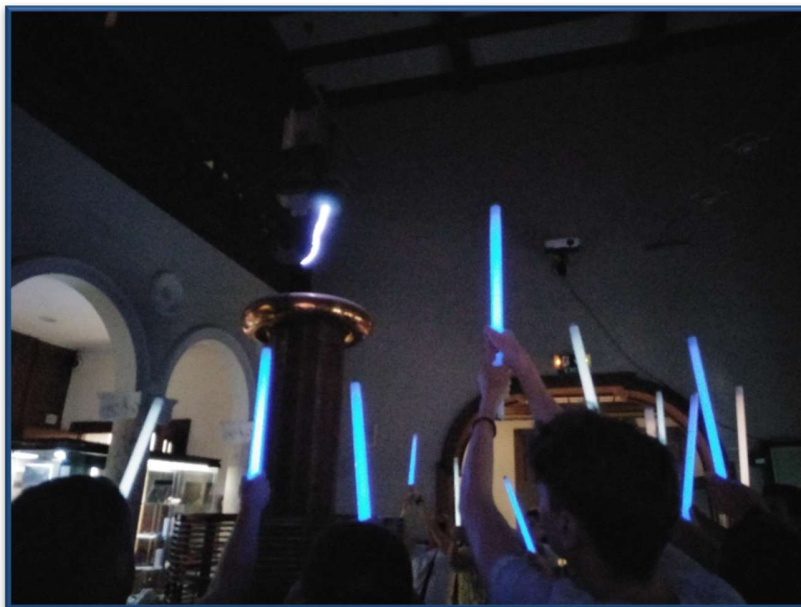
Total distance travelled was 2,659km including the detours for lunch in Greece and Montenegro, no bikes were dropped, and no arguments eventuated. Farewell dinner was held in Novak Djokovic's restaurant near our hotel, an ironic touch seeing I almost wasn't allowed into Serbia due to a certain Serbia - Australia diplomatic stoush before the Australian Open tennis tournament in January. Perhaps Novak has since had his covid jab, because he was looking a bit stone faced on the night of the dinner.

I had an extra day in Belgrade, visiting the Nikola Tesla Museum and exploring more of this interesting city, before finding my covid masks for the flights home. Another very enjoyable trip.

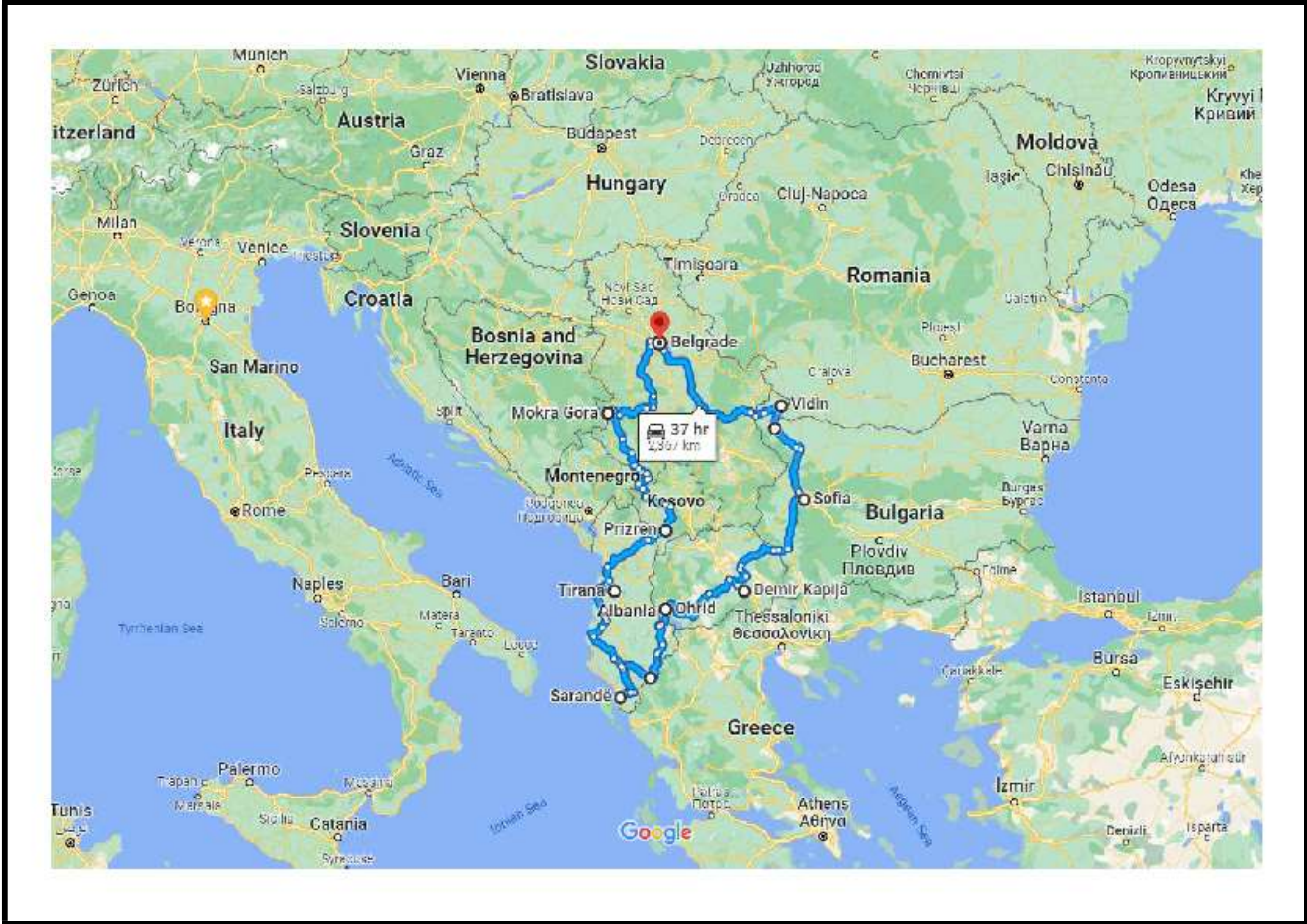
Geoff Roberts



my mate Novak at his restaurant in Belgrade



Luke Skywalker wanna-bees at Nikola Tesla Museum



Route Map