

REPORT OF TRAVELLERS' CLUB MEETING
8th MARCH 2009

THE BEST OF THE BALKANS - FROM BULGARIA TO SLOVENIA

Our first meeting for 2009 had a bumper attendance – 60. The speaker was Colin Sale, and the audience included some of the participants of his recent two Study Tours of the Balkans who no doubt relished the nostalgia hit triggered by his superb photos. I felt some nostalgia for the trusty old slide projector which Colin has now abandoned in favour of digital Power Point presentations.

There were two parts to this new style classy slide show:

1. An overview of the natural and human geography of this region, using lots of photos, diagrams and explanations.
2. A chronological tour along the route of the 4,600 km coach travel from Istanbul to Munich via the Balkan Nations, plus Venice, the Italian Dolomites and Salzburg, but the feast of photos covered just the Balkan countries of Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Slovenia.

The Overview

The Balkans, named after the mountains which they all share, were the original Provinces of Dalmatia on the eastern shore of the Adriatic Sea, and Thrace, the adjacent area in the south east (now Bulgaria and Macedonia). We learned of the predominantly limestone geology and the shaping of spectacular landscapes by earth movements, erosion by rivers and glaciers, and the effects of rising sea levels. The results of these processes are high mountains rising steeply from the sea, numerous islands (1,100 just in Croatia), great harbours, underground rivers, enormous limestone caves, travertine terraces with waterfalls and beautiful lakes.

The Romans conquered the Illyrians who were the earlier inhabitants - a few of their settlements have been unearthed – but in almost all places throughout the region, there are Roman remains to be seen – in roads, arenas, triumphal arches, and mosaics. Also are the remnants of the early Christian era from the 4th to 15th centuries which became Eastern Orthodox in the south and east, and Roman Catholic along the Adriatic coast and in the north. Some of the early churches were recycled into mosques, some were fortunately preserved, and others that were destroyed are recently being excavated.

Since the 15th century, further invasions, infiltrations and political changes have led to religious and cultural conflicts and further alteration to the cultural landscapes. The invasion and settlement by the Ottoman Turks saw the appearance of numerous mosques in the south and east, and Communist eras in what became Yugoslavia and Albania, saw the introduction of block after block of drab apartment buildings. And, out of all this, the modern 21st century Balkan countries have emerged! As we know only too well, the cultural conflicts continue, but Colin's photos showed a wealth of diversity and many contrasts, e.g. Christians living on one side of a river and Muslims on the other, with an enclave of Romany Gypsies on the outskirts of the same city. Along the coast and around the islands there are now huge marinas of expensive pleasure boats and large

holiday resorts being developed around some of the best beaches of Europe – with these and the spectacular natural landscapes continuing to draw ever larger numbers of tourists to the Balkans.

The Tour

Because the Society has asked that these reports be shorter, I shall mention a few highlights only. Ironically Colin's feast was just a selection from his very large collection of photos taken on several tours to the region.

- Bulgaria – Ancient ruins in Plovdiv and Sofia's yellow brick roads.
- Macedonia – gorgeous Lake Ohrid and heritage Orthodox monastery St Naum that nurtured the written language.
- Albania – mushroom shaped bunkers in the countryside; Soviet-style apartment blocks now painted in rainbow hues; and Durres – port of departure for refugees escaping to Italy over the centuries.
- Montenegro – magnificent coastal vistas, e.g. Kotor.
- Croatia – Dubrovnik walking on the walls and taking ferry rides; Split with Diocletian's Palace mausoleum (now a Christian Cathedral) and so much more; the Istrian Peninsula – another Riviera; and Plitvice Lakes National Park- stunning waterfalls.
- Bosnia-Hercegovina – fascinating Mostar with that famous bridge.
- Slovenia – Postojna's enormous limestone caves complex; Ljubljana, a sophisticated small city; beautiful Lake Bled – Tito's choice for his holidays – such good taste.

Thanks

Thank you dear members for your patience re our shortage of chairs and refreshments at this meeting – you are most welcome at any meeting; however, if you know for sure that you are coming we would appreciate a phone call the week before so that we have some idea of the expected numbers.

Sincere thanks to Colin, and best wishes for his travels and photography in the future.

- Ela Taranto