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The Mercedes-Adoring Gun-Toting Litter-Throwing Bush-Praising Greek-Hating Tourist-
Loving Ex-Dictatorship of Albania:
The Friendliest Nation on Earth

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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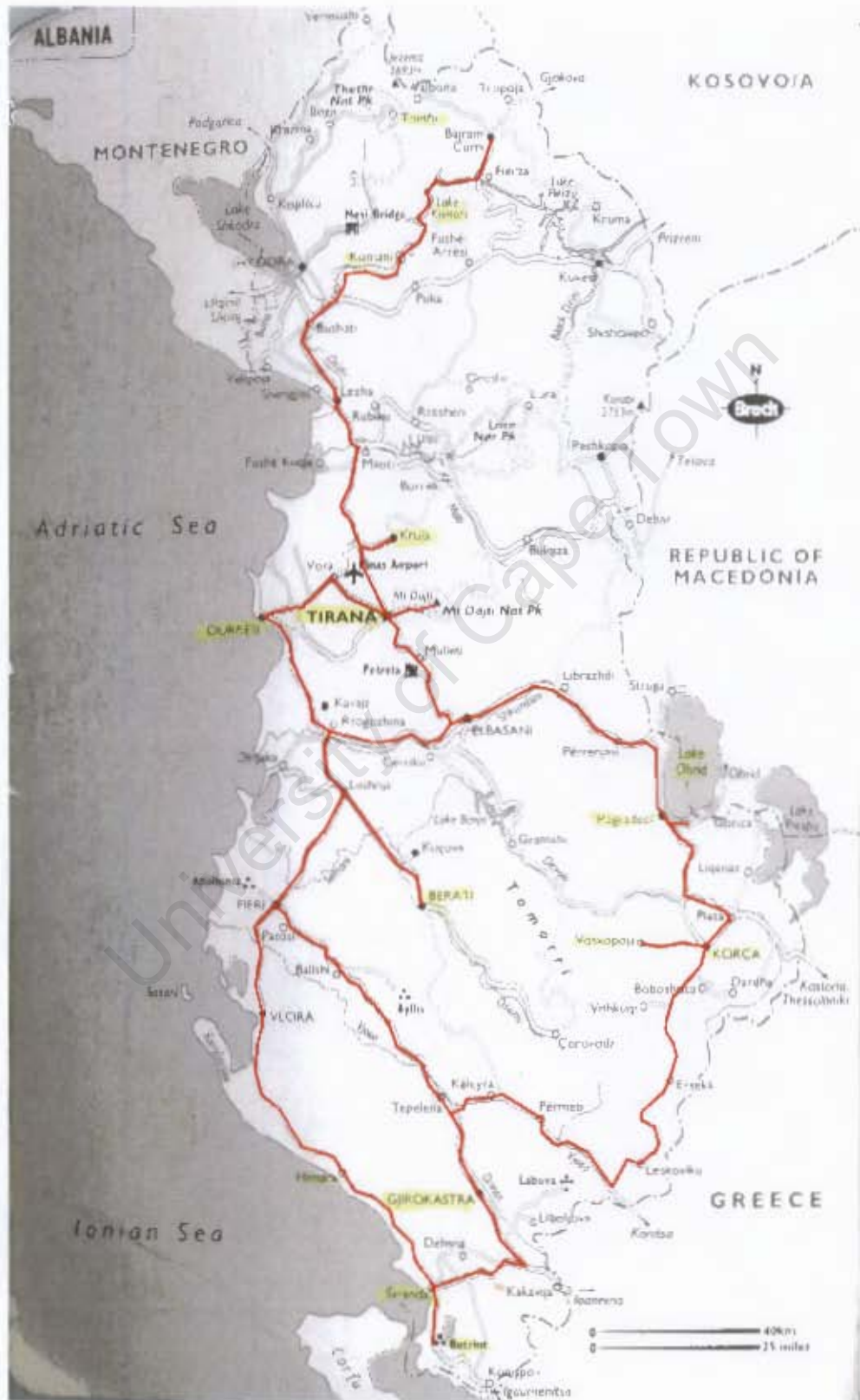
Abstract

Imagine a Muslim-majority country whose most famous national was a Catholic nun; a place where shaking your head means yes and nodding it means no; where taxi drivers can't read maps, and women can become men; where violent crime is almost non-existent, but insulting a man can give him the right to kill you.

In Albania the fields are still harvested with sickles and scythes, and George W Bush is admired as the honourable leader of the greatest nation on earth. It's a litter-strewn world of ragged mountains and turquoise seas, with hundreds of thousands of concrete bunkers above ground and uncounted secret passageways dug below, all of them reminders of an age of paranoia and Stalinism and tyranny. For decades it was illegal to own a car, to wear tight jeans, to listen to foreign radio broadcasts or to have a telephone, and Albania is now adjusting at its own pace. Their showers are the world's worst and their bathrooms the smallest, power and water are cut for hours every day, and their unsightly architecture is made worse by the teddy bears and scarecrows hung from roofs to ward off evil, but there is no shortage of things to explore.

I headed to Europe's least visited country for two weeks, to bolster their tourism count and find out if Albanians really were the depraved criminals that the rest of the continent took them to be. And was pleasantly surprised by what I found.

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Where Maps Mean Nothing

“Don’t do anything stupid. And remember – all Albanians are beastly, and they’ll do anything to rip you off,” said Will. “No, really. They’re ghastly. Be careful.”

It wasn’t something that was very comforting to hear when preparing to leave for a country I knew little about. I was going to Albania because I didn’t know anyone else that had. My grandparents had been turned away at the then-closed borders when driving a motor-home through Yugoslavia in the 1970s, so I thought it was time to go have a look on their behalf. Plus it’s one of the few countries that you can come back from and actually have people still interested to hear about your experiences. So when I told my sister, Sarah-Jane, that I’d bought tickets to the capital, Tirana, she decided to leave the banker’s life in London for a week and tick another obscure country off her own list; and so we doubled the average Albanian tourist arrivals for September.

The words of warning weren’t completely unfounded, coming from SJ’s Londoner boyfriend, who was somewhat thrown by our choice of destination. I later found out that the “Thieving Scoundrel” stereotype of Albanians is taken as fact in Europe, resulting from a decade of blaming them for stealing most of the continent’s Mercedes C-200s. And there were an awful lot of Mercedes’ on the road for the fourth poorest country in Europe, I noted while staring out the window of the airport *autobus*.

From the aeroplane Tirana had looked a lot bigger than I’d expected. It suddenly didn’t fit into the traversable little map of the city that the guidebooks had sold me on, and instead spread dauntingly across the valley, promising to get me lost. Still, I was glad to see the colour from far off. I’d held high hopes for Tirana after reading of reforms put in place since 2000 by its mayor, Edi Rama, previously an artist. The dreary apartment blocks of Stalinist Albania were painted with disco-bright colours and patterns, leaving the senses of even the most tolerant citizen affronted. I, of course, didn’t care about what they had to wake up to every day – I was just content with getting to wander around in an ex-communist capital city now painted like a Gay Pride rainbow.

Sadly I was to find out on landing that seven years of sunshine and a whole lot of dust can really knock the colour out of paint. In most places brights had faded to pastels, now fighting through the layers of filth upon them, and the effect was not quite what I’d hoped for. But I took my airport bus and dreaded the arrival of SJ’s plane from London, fearing being blamed for landing us in such a crap place. It was at least motivation to find out what was good about Tirana.

It turned out that what’s good about Tirana is what’s good about Albania: it’s got the best people in the world. I’m pretty sure that it’s a claim that’s been made about other countries before, and it’s usually empty flattery given to places with no redeeming features by tourists who refuse to

admit they picked a lousy holiday destination. That does actually sound a bit like Albania, but its people are honestly in another league, which is particularly surprising considering the reputation they have outside their borders. Albanians are friendly, helpful, accommodating, and generally just make you realise what a distrusting person you are most of the time. You can't help wanting to be more like them. Not to share their horrible history or anything, but to have a slice of their wholly decent human nature.

And their history really is awful. The second half of the 20th century saw them being "gripped and stifled by the most repressive dictatorship in Europe", as the *Economist* described it. And while the 1990s brought on the eventual end to communism and tyranny, in their wake came anarchy, economic collapse, food shortages, unemployment and mass poverty. Mayor Edi Rama's vision of a rose-tinted Tirana is a flash of the optimism that the country has only been able to embrace in the past ten years.

There is little English spoken in Albania, and I managed to get onto the right *autobus* in the first place by pointing at vehicles, pointing at my watch, and scribbling departure times down on my hand for other people to point at (God bless the Arabs for giving us a universal set of numbers). Yet once we got to the Tirana bus stop, no matter which way I pointed at my map or how many varied mimes for "Which way to the hostel?" I performed, the driver was not getting me. At some point he had to leave, and after physically guiding me down the stairs he palmed me off on a young guy on the pavement, and pulled off in a hurry.

There was no question that my new host was a cash-sucking taxi driver, probably thrilled at the prospect of taking a westerner in circles all day to the tune of his ticking metre, but I was not about to be that westerner. My little maps had promised me that the hostel was only a kilometre from the city centre, which I surely had to be near, and I dug my heels in with "No taxi. No taxi." 20-kilogram backpack or not, I had too much pride and was definitely too much of a miser to catch a taxi for one piddling kilometre.

To my delight, the young man in question responded to my pidgin with, "Where do you need to go?" and I very nearly hugged him. He then continued to escort me the entire way to the hostel, afterwards just turning around and bidding me goodbye before making his way back to the airport bus stop, so that he could meet his father's flight on time.

I felt awful that I'd judged him so fast, but he was an example for me of what Albanians might be like. Just ten minutes later, the woman working at the hostel reception brought me additional change after realising that I'd miscalculated the exchange rate when paying her, and I wanted to hug her too. Maybe I was just emotional after 28 hours of travelling.

I didn't blame myself too much for being confused by the exchange rate – it was tricky. I did feel particularly stupid about an hour later when trying to buy an ice-cream with the crumpled mess of rands, euros, dollars and Albanian lek in my purse. The arithmetic was taxing enough,

but the added pressure of trying to translate ice-cream flavours and select them at the same time made the whole exercise impossible. I eventually just shoved a ten-dollar note at the guy behind the counter and accepted the wad of lek change he gave me without counting it, as it would have been fruitless. He took the ten dollars and grinned at me as if I'd just promised to feed and clothe his family for a week, which I possibly had. In his cheeriness he taught me the pronunciation of my first Albanian word: *faleminderit* – “thank you”.

I'd actually been hunting for souvenirs while on my tour of the capital, but found the ice-cream man after mistakenly veering north instead of east, because the hasty Lonely Planet cartographers had placed the opera house on the wrong side of Skanderbeg Square. Albania is at the best of times a challenge to navigate. It is literally Where the Streets Have No Name. There are some boulevards that have been christened in honour of a martyr or two, but those names are only put on maps to provide token comfort to foreigners. Locals don't use maps. Never have. Taxi drivers can't even read them. Part of the great Stalinist scheme of keeping everyone ignorant of everything, involved never issuing any road maps or town plans, which in effect turned my guidebook maps into not much more than pretty pictures, as you'd be hard-pressed to find a single street sign in Tirana. The one relief is that the city has some decent landmarks, of which Skanderbeg Square is the most obvious, overlooked from the east by an opera house, a mosque and a clock tower that never tells the right time. The square is a whirling oval of traffic right in the centre, like the Arc de Triomphe but with three Mercedes' for every Citroën. The lane markings faded away a long time ago, so now cars just drive as many abreast as they can fit. I counted six, but that was when buses were parked on the sides. I'm sure they could get it up to eight without much difficulty.

Crossing roads in Albania is terrifying. Even when there are lane markings, they have no bearing on what direction you should be going in; they just mean “drive car here”. Hence you find yourself floundering in the middle of a road, whipping your head from side to side with no idea from which direction you're about to be obliterated. I decided on that first afternoon that I would not be using the international driver's licence I'd organised for the trip – I clearly wasn't even qualified to be a pedestrian in Albania.

The Star-Spangled Balkans

I had to double-check Albania's position in Europe when first deciding to go there. I'm lying. I had to check that it was actually in Europe. I felt less guilty later when I realised that "Albania, Just North of Greece" was its full name if I had to tell anyone else where I was going. It does also have the title of "Least Visited European Country", but they don't tell you that in the brochures, mostly because there aren't really any. It's a vicious circle, a lack of tourism. The closed borders during communism made it pretty difficult to get in, and for a long time it didn't make for a very appealing destination for your summer break.

Albania's problems started long ago, but the past century in particular has been an eventful one. In 1912 it was one of the last Balkan nations to gain independence from the omnipotent Ottoman Empire that had lorded over it for 500 years. It was then gradually prostituted off to Mussolini by its own ruler, the unique King Zog (more on him later), until World War II, when it was juggled between the Italians, Germans and Greeks before being won back by its own communist partisans. Which was probably the worst thing that could have happened.

Nearly five decades of communism followed – hard communism under a ruthless autocracy, along with all the secret police and rations and political prisoners and unjustified chrome mine sentences that tyranny promotes. Things like telephones, make-up, listening to foreign radio broadcasts and male facial hair were all banned. It was a regime under which a political prisoner sent to jail for life would frequently have his whole family sent with him, and a 12-year-old could be sentenced to death for damaging government property. Enver Hoxha, the murderous dictator-for-life who inspired the horrors endured by his people, finally died in 1985, and in 1990 opposition parties were eventually permitted, with elections planned for a few months later. All the country's pent-up aggression against being repressed for so long was suddenly loosed and expressed through mindless destruction. Public transport vehicles and government buildings across the country were burnt, co-operative farms went up in flames, and over the following year a third of Albania's schools were looted. About 5 000 citizens tried to leave the country by cramming into the grounds of foreign embassies, and hundreds of those were later allegedly killed by security forces. So in March 1991 the world's press crammed into Tirana and sat, fingers poised at keyboards, waiting confidently for the "last bastion of Stalinism" to fall in the elections.

Except it didn't – after crowds had pulled down Hoxha statues and held bonfires of Marxist-Leninist literature, the communists still won. There wasn't even a material amount of foul play suspected – there just wasn't enough infrastructure for the Democratic Party to get their message out, and Albanians lacked the political savvy to move away from their leaders of so long. Reforms came into play, but a year of crippling strikes, food and fuel shortages, and violent

crime followed. Tens of thousands of men commandeered ships across the Adriatic Sea to Italy, whose population was shocked by the TV coverage of half-starved illegal immigrants roaming their streets in 1970s clothing. About 2 000 teachers left the country, the standard of living for town dwellers with regular salaries halved, robbery rates tripled and homicide rates doubled – all in a year. So in 1992 elections were held again, and this time the Democratic Party managed to clinch it, making Albania the last European country to abandon communism.

Unfortunately the Democratic Party also couldn't deliver on its promises for a better life after taking over a country that had lost 50% of its GDP in three years, so instead they tried to dupe a nation exhausted by rife unemployment and near-anarchy into yet another one-party state. The country didn't react well to their intentions: nationalised factories and the remaining co-operative farms were ransacked, and port towns were lost to gangsters, who controlled the flow of illegal trade through them. Yet the real uprising only came five years later, when the country well and truly fell apart.

For a year or two Albania showed its first signs of real economic progress; growths so high in fact that the World Bank and IMF sounded warnings in 1996. Things were going too well too fast, and the culprit was an enemy that the population was too naïve to see coming, and that the government was either too naïve or too greedy to even illegalise. In hindsight, it was probably the latter. Albania fell victim to pyramid schemes, "the most despicable form of capitalism" according to Will, ranter against all things Albanian, and the country regrettably shoved all the money they could find at them, in desperation for the unmatched returns. They sold their houses, deposited everything they had, and then fought and protested and went crazy when everything collapsed in the inevitable withdrawal panic.

An estimated 70% of the population lost their life savings. That's a whole lot of poverty to unleash almost overnight, and makes for millions of angry people. Police stations were attacked, military barracks were looted, and a population freshly armed with a million illegal weapons rapidly drove government authorities out of the anti-Democratic south. Soon all southern towns and cities were under the control of militia groups. A state of emergency was declared, with curfews and press censorship in tow, and as the gangs advanced north to Tirana's outskirts they came head-to-head with staunch defenders of the Democratic Party. The city's residents lived for a few months with tanks in their streets, and learnt to fall asleep to the tattoo of machine guns, but what was set to be a full blown civil war was thankfully stopped by the arrival of international peacekeeping forces, the promise of new elections and the formation of a temporary multi-party government.

It later transpired that the Democratic Party had not only been involved in the smuggling of petrol, drugs and weapons during their rule, but had also been behind the private company running the largest of the pyramid schemes. They unsurprisingly lost the 1997 elections, returning power to the Socialist Party (the renamed and reformed communists), only to win it back from

them again in 2005. Albanians looked back in shock at what they had been through, and in the post-pyramid scheme years the country became tired of falling apart, and began to rebuild itself.

Life is certainly more stable now, and the GDP has been increasing at 5% per year since 1998, but people are still poor and opportunity is still scarce. On my way back to the hostel I found my way to a monument called the Bell of Peace – it's made from melted down spent bullets collected in the streets by Tirana's school children, after the fighting. The city wants to remember what it knows shouldn't be forgotten. What's ironic is that the Bell of Peace stands right outside a conference centre named the Pyramid. Entirely unconnected to the schemes that caused the struggle that inspired the bell, but still amusing. The building takes its name from its bizarre design: a huge white tiled pyramid in the centre of a city of pastel striped dilapidated apartment blocks. It was designed by Enver Hoxha's deluded daughter, whose fantastic misreading of public sentiment led her to believe that in 1988 what Tirana really needed was a museum dedicated to the life of her supposedly venerated old father. Unluckily for Albania she's also a qualified architect, making it easier for her to act on such impulses, and it took five years for it to be proved that the museum was not going to be a money-spinner, and that Hoxha was, in fact, now detested, in spite of the propaganda-fuelled cult that was made of his persona when he was alive.

I walked into the grounds surrounding the Pyramid to have a closer look, and then stopped to watch a wedding procession of Mercedes C-200s go by – a common sight on weekends. On the roof above the entrance was a huge banner saying "WELCOME PRESIDENT BUSH". George W had kindly stopped in Tirana for all of seven hours nearly three months earlier – the first American president to actually visit while in office – and the Albanians were still savouring the honour.

There's an old local saying that goes, "You should love your country as the eagle loves and guards her nest," but the modern version is apparently, "You should love your country as Albanians love America." And they really really do. The official explanation dates back to Woodrow Wilson's support of the little nation in the aftermath of World War I, but it's more to do with the people's desperate desire for the US brand of wealth and success, after being lectured for so many years on how iniquitous Yankee capitalism was. Part of the Albanian prime minister's kowtowing welcome for "the greatest and most distinguished guest we have ever had in all times" involved naming a boulevard after Bush. And I certainly hope he had enough time in his seven hours to make sure they put up a sign to prove it.

I wandered up the road from the Pyramid to Skanderbeg Square, past the now closed Hotel Dajti. Its doors were chained, its windows dusty and its parking lot empty, showing no sign of its history as the city's hub for foreign businessmen and the site of many of Hoxha's secret meetings. There are apparently narrow levels between the storeys in which spies could crawl to keep an eye on

guests. Tirana is filled with hidey-holes and secret passageways – rumours abound about underground armaments factories and nuclear bunkers below every old apartment block. There are supposedly huge bunkers under the central suburb of Blloku, which was home to senior party officials' families during communism, and was completely out of bounds to civilians. It was where the more-equal elite benefited from perks like free food and alcohol, special medical attention and allowances for travel and entertainment. On top of that they made purchases of holiday houses, European designer clothing, cosmetics and appliances, all on government accounts. In fact in the 1960s the country's sole TV transmitter broadcast to only 200 sets – all of them owned by party officials. And this while the masses toiled on co-operative farms and in public industries in what was called "the national struggle against privileges, luxury, and inequality".

Also beneath Blloku is a maze of tunnels, supposedly linking Hoxha's home to various government buildings. One person I met told me that there's a tunnel that stretches all the way to the weapons stores built within the nearby Mount Dajti, but it's all so clandestine that no-one really knows what's below the city. I walked on hoping that there was something particularly juicy beneath me right then; something like the 16 tonnes of chemical weapons that were chanced upon in 2005 at a military base, supposedly forgotten about until then.

In the late afternoon the streets were lined with corn vendors – huddled-over women fanning tiny coal beds on which mielies braaied and blistered. Others pushed popcorn carts surrounded by balloon animals that they sold to children in the dusty parks. I turned at the square after crossing by the grace of a lollipop lady (Tirana has lollipop ladies! I haven't seen one of them since primary school) and made my way back to the hostel to meet SJ, breathing in the fumes of the city as I went, and wearing its dirt on my skin.

She arrived at 9pm looking like she was going for a picnic in Clapham, in jeans, an embroidered top and some bright blue beads, peeving me immensely. As always, I'd readjusted my wardrobe for this trip, in the name of Practicality, and had invested in things like zip-off pants (saving the space of a pair of shorts!), mosquito-defying long-sleeved shirts, and an array of other things designed to make me feel as unattractive as possible, and to discourage advances from any Albanian men looking to emigrate on a foreign woman's arm. I was at least successful with the latter, but SJ also managed to return home alone, and she did it looking infinitely better, *and* while laughing at my Scary Traveller uniform and berating me for still being a crap packer.

"Have I taught you nothing?" she asked when seeing that I hadn't decanted my shampoo into a travel-size bottle. She's always been the bossy one, but she's generally been the one with that much more common sense too, which makes her a very useful travelling partner, and grants her certain bossiness rights. We wandered up past the lollipop lady to have a beer and plan the best way for two twenty-something South African women to tackle the white Third World, which in the end was by taking a long-distance bus every day, and sleeping in a new town every night.

For the next two weeks my alarm would set the pace of my trip, through four southern beach towns and one mountainous citadel with Sarah-Jane, and then to the lakes and mountains of the northern and south-eastern borders in the week after she left.

The only firm decision taken that night, though, was that we would catch a bus to the far south the next morning – the rest we would take as it came.

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Bunkerspotting

Albanians get fairly indignant if you suggest that their Mercedes' were stolen. While it seems quite accepted by the rest of the world that the country's harbours were dealing wholesale in stolen goods during the chaos of the 1990s, Albanians ridicule the idea that fleets of stolen vehicles managed to get through their borders unnoticed.

They're quite happy to discuss their expensive taste in cars if you just leave the thievery bit out of it. SJ met one man who spoke no English, but when she asked one of his friends why Albanians loved Mercedes' so much, he managed to interrupt with "resilient". And resilience is a valuable characteristic for a car in a country where three quarters of the land is blanketed by mountains; which is a terrifying geographic fact in a country of such bad drivers. Not that the Albanians can really be held responsible for their lack of driving skills. The party outlawed the private ownership of cars for the last 25 years of their rule to make sure that everyone stayed as isolated as possible, lest freedom of movement allowed them to get wind of any revisionist ideas. The party elite, of course, had the right to draw from the government's pool of 500 cars whenever they wished (their ideologies obviously safe from western influence, no matter how far they roamed), but literally only two civilians were granted the privilege of car ownership during that period. Road maintenance was therefore not of any great priority, and when communism ended the number of cars on the roads rose from 500 to 500 000 in fifteen years, which is not a great deal more than the number of Western Europeans who woke up one morning in the 1990s to find their C-200s missing.

Public transport is worth anticipating in a country where no-one has more than 15 years' driving experience and the roads are poorly maintained mountain passes. So on the morning after our arrival Sarah-Jane and I set off ambitiously on our first long-distance Albanian bus trip – from Tirana down to Saranda: 284 kilometres in eight hours.

At least no fear of speeding buses then.

We crossed Tirana's shit-smelling Lana River on our way out, winding along the city's dusty streets onto the surrounding dusty plains, where the edge-dwellers kept flocks of turkeys and dusty plots of vines and maize. I wasn't surprised to find the area rimmed with mountains – they were going to have to start appearing somewhere if they had 75% of the country covered. I was surprised though by the presence of the word *lavazh*, which was inescapable, and painted on walls everywhere along the way. SJ was the one who eventually figured it out, after we'd seen it in Tirana, on its outskirts, and now out in the sticks – it meant carwash. Keeping all the Mercs clean has become a high priority with so much dust around, and a lot of people are using a hosepipe and a bucket as a major source of income. Out on the national road it seemed even

more popular to combine the *lavazh* with a few outdoor tables, usually in the shade of some beer-sponsored umbrellas and a vine-wrapped trellis, and the combo bar-carwashes really made quite a tempting offer. However running such an establishment is not so easy when electricity and water are cut off for hours every day, across the country. Which doesn't stop you from serving warm drinks, but does affect how clean you can get your customer's C-200. Unreliable water and power supplies are the biggest hurdle blocking Albania's progress. It's just not possible for a previously communist country with a devastated economy to try setting things on the right track when its factories have to be shut down every morning and afternoon. The more organised bars and restaurants have built routines around firing up their pavement generators twice a day, but keeping mines and industrial plants running is a lot more difficult. And none of this does much to encourage foreign investment. In 2006 the Ministry of Finance estimated that the power problem had cost the country nearly 20% of its potential GDP growth.

The problem is in part explained by the current drought, which in a country run by hydroelectric stations would understandably affect both power and water supply. What isn't explained is why it's taking so long to find other solutions, when this has been a problem for years now. Reports in January 2008 of the government having approved plans for Europe's biggest wind farm, to be built on a southern Albanian peninsula, are the first steps in the right direction. Another wind farm, a bio-fuel power plant and a coal-fired plant may follow, but for now the power cuts are still daily, and the situation is still dire. What is to be done about the water shortages is anyone's guess. For five years the World Bank has been boasting of addressing the problem with water management projects that are run in co-operation with the Albanian government, and even now there are towns that are supplied with water for only a few hours each day.

As we moved through more rural areas the bus started to fill with old women in black peasant clothing. We had the misfortune of having a young man next to us who pretended to sleep while actually staring creepily at the novelty of two young foreign women, but we really were novelties. Not just as blatant outsiders, or as women travelling alone, but as white people from *Afrika Jugut*. Try telling a nation of 3,6 million white Europeans who've never seen a black person in the flesh before that there are countries in Africa with more white people than they have. It's fiction to them. They stroke their cheek, repeating, "*Afrika?*" and then laugh you off.

There's a certain comfortable schedule to an Albanian bus trip that you grow to enjoy, or I did, mostly because it revolved around food. Breaks for mid-morning snacks, lunch, and mid-afternoon snacks are a way of life for long-distance bus drivers, and our breakfast stop came as we neared the coast. The passengers disembarked at a *byrektore* – a small private shop serving *byrek*, triangular pies of crisp buttered phyllo, filled with salty feta-like cheese, shredded veal, spinach, squash or other such delights. They're one of the best reasons to visit the country, which doesn't mean that there aren't great reasons to see Albania, just that *byrek* are seriously good.

Eating them is also something of an adventure, as the filling is almost always a surprise when you don't speak Albanian. It's one of those peculiar-looking assortments of letters which is the lone survivor of its linguistic branch, and is actually annoying in how much it enjoys being different – frequently for no reason at all. Take its alphabet of 36 characters, being the standard 26 that English makes do with, plus ten completely unnecessary additions like *dh*, *sh* and *th*. In English we don't count “sh” and “th” as additional letters – who on earth had the bright idea of Albanian needing two-letter letters? *Ë* isn't a new *letter* just because you slapped two dots on top of it. Try spending five minutes looking for *gjizë* in a translation dictionary, only to realise that you've been hunting under G instead of in the *Gj* section. That's when you stop caring about what might be inside your *byrek* and just point at whichever one is closest to you.

There was no *byrek* potluck for us on this journey – we'd already had our fill before leaving Tirana, and the pastry-induced guilt of having two for breakfast had then led us to a fruit vendor, where prunes and sweet little thick-skinned white grapes were the seasonal offer. This being our first bus trip, we had no inkling of the strict meal-scheduling ahead of us, and felt the need to gather supplies for the journey: durable and authentic-feeling things like sunflower seeds, twin peanuts in their shells, and the inescapable Bake Rolls – addictive bags of toasted butter-smearred bagel slices.

Green-hearted guidebook authors enthuse over the guaranteed organic produce in Albania “because farmers are so poor that they cannot afford chemical fertilisers or pesticides,” but I grew sceptical of their claims after seeing the Albanian attitude to littering, which is nonchalant at best. When the fruit comes from land irrigated by rivers so polluted that the discarded plastic bottles and Bake Rolls bags actually form islands rather than bothering to float along, I struggle to believe that the produce is pure and goodly. And it's not that I even really care about the origins of the things I eat – I'm just irritated by unnecessary yodelling about organic food.

Littering is something the Albanians have really taken to. Under communism, smug Kosovan neighbours who visited the country used to say, “The streets of Tirana are so clean because the Albanians have nothing to throw away.” Sadly someone seemed to take it as a challenge, and the country now shows no sign of having spent decades of the last century free of litter.

The best way to occupy yourself on cross-country bus trips in Albania is to play “Spot the Bunker”. It's kind of like lion-spotting in Kruger Park, but a bit easier, and with a dash of communist nostalgia thrown in. 700 000 concrete bunkers cover the country – a product of the extreme paranoia in which Hoxha enveloped Albania after swearing off Yugoslavia, the USSR and China in turn for going soft on Stalinism. By 1975, with all borders closed and no more powerful allies left, he feared the same spy invasions that the UK and US had attempted after

World War II, in their bid to rid the world of evil Reds. Those missions had been thwarted and more than 400 men were executed for their involvement ("Dissenters must be exterminated like a weasel in a chicken coop," said Hoxha at the time), but perhaps while the Cold War was going on, things would end differently. So he built bunkers – an average of 24 of them to every square kilometre. You'll find less than 24 *people* in every square kilometre of a great many of the world's countries.

The bunkers are grey little concrete-and-iron domes that guard beaches, hills, mountains, roadsides and almost any other position from which you could shoot a capitalist spy. Upon being invaded, the idea was for all able-bodied comrades to race for their nearest bunker, where ample Kalashnikovs would be distributed to them. Although the invasion never came, and they were never put to their intended use, they have proved themselves to be suitably sturdy. Before their construction was approved and rolled out, the lucky engineer who designed them had to sit inside one while Hoxha, ever the benevolent leader, watched it being pummelled by a tank. While undoubtedly traumatised, the engineer could hopefully take some comfort now from his design having been immortalised as Albania's most popular souvenir: the bunker-shaped marble ashtray. It would probably be Europe's most popular souvenir if more tourists got to see it. Beats the hell out of an Eiffel Tower snow globe.

When in Albania, Do as the Romans Do

The first time I saw a man walking down the Saranda promenade with his shirt tied in a little knot above his exposed belly, I thought he was gay.

Turned out it wasn't a gay thing. It wasn't even a Saranda thing, Albanian men just seem to enjoy displaying their abs, or more often their lack thereof. They'll roll up their t-shirts in the middle of a bus trip – it's bizarre. Perhaps it was some sort of mating ritual that went over my head. The promenade strolling in general was definitely a ritual, but it was a great one. At dusk every day all residents leave what they're doing to take a stroll for an hour or more. The custom is unoriginally called *xhiro* (jee-ro), meaning "walk", and in each town it follows a set route, lined with popcorn and ice-cream stalls that hurriedly set up just before the crowds start building. Every second stall keeps a scale – the human-weighing kind, which they presumably charge you to use. The novelty of public weigh-ins usually amuses me, specifically when paying for the pleasure, but to weigh yourself while buying your popcorn and ice-cream seems particularly fatalistic.

Also along Saranda's promenade were carousels of jeeps and jets and ponies, and rows of bars and coffee shops, filled entirely with men. In fact they're mostly just coffee shops. And they are exclusively packed with men. The Albanian male's penchant for sipping on half-full tumblers of *raki* over breakfast is surprising, but it's their propensity for coffee-drinking that's to be admired. God knows which of them are the 30% of the workforce that's estimated to be unemployed, and having to borrow their coffee money, but with that much time on their hands it has to be a fair proportion. It's only during *xhiro* that you get proof that the towns actually have women in them – the rest of the day they're tucked neatly away, presumably occupied with child-minding, cleaning and meal preparation while their husbands work up a caffeine buzz for hours on end.

We'd arrived on Saranda's palm-lined slopes in the late afternoon, and quickly found a hotel by the grace of a man whose entire knowledge of English was "Two persona, twenty Euro, one room," which won us a front-row view of the bay from a balcony the size of a tennis court, in an otherwise abandoned hotel. The downside being the four flights of polished marble stairs, with a conspicuously absent banister, that had to be scaled to reach the very cheap and spotless room. And yet for €20, smashing our shins open seemed worth risking. After having our first compulsory Mediterranean swim (or Ionian, to be exact) in a disappointingly opaque sea, and dabbling in beer-drinking after a spot of *xhiro*, we needed to find food, but locating restaurants amongst all the coffee shops ended up being quite a task.

SJ and I both consider eating to be a central part of travelling, and since in Saranda, we wanted to sample traditionally cooked local seafood. Unfortunately that's about the furthest from "When in Rome" that we could have got. When in Saranda, apparently, or anywhere else in

Albania, one eats as if one is in Rome. Pizza and pasta were pretty much the only things available. Albanians took a ream or two of leafs from the cookbooks of their neighbours across the Adriatic when shaping their modern cuisine, and have largely abandoned what Albanian cooking must once have been. At some point you just need to accept that when eating out, Italian food *is* Albanian food, and it's generally not bad either. When eventually leaving my purism behind me I managed to enjoy some very good Albanian pasta.

The Bradt guide had got me excited though with its exotic promises of local meals. On top of the expected dishes of lamb and aubergine and feta came delicacies like eel, frogs' legs, sheep's head soup and chopped liver in gut casing, making me simultaneously anticipative and *grillerig*. My rule is that if other people choose to eat it regularly, and it makes you recoil, it's got to at least be worth contemplating.

But that night we were out of luck, and backtracked up and down the promenade until the grumpiness bit. I only wanted to eat seafood, and SJ eventually didn't mind what we ate, but insisted on eating somewhere others were eating if it was going to be seafood. Except that the coffee shops were the only places that had customers. Those and one *sufflaqi* takeaway spot, which I'd like to say is traditional Albanian food, except that they serve it with a couple of chips jammed in the top and a squeeze of mustard and tomato sauce.

We grew unreasonably excited when finally spotting a tiny seafood place with two families seated outside, and pulled our chairs a little closer to the table than usual, while trying to summon the waitress with our eager blinking. But we turned the menu's pages gingerly – we had been handed the great indicator of Where Not to Eat When in Foreign Lands: the English menu – only one step up from the menu with pictures. Fortunately Albania still doesn't have enough tourists for the translated menu to be a symbol of all the other compromises made on behalf of foreign customers, like serving cheeseburgers and a 24-hour full English breakfast. And anyway, there was seafood available, there were other people eating there, and our only other option involved chips with cheap mustard on them rolled in a pita.

I was ready to start compensating for being notably boring during our bus trip, having passed up the opportunity to try the intriguing padkos: bags of weird peanut-almond half-breeds, little newspaper cones filled with oblong red berries (I feared they make have been narcotic) and Meat Lump in Soup, as I christened the inescapable meal served at all roadside cafés. It was pathetic that I'd tried none of them, and I now wanted to indulge in some reckless ordering, with scant consideration of edibility and side effects. So I started by requesting the cuttlefish (because who eats cuttlefish?), but there was no stock, and then tried for the mussels (because they're a local speciality farmed in the nearby Butrint Lagoon), but there were none of those either, so we shared a whole grilled fish, calamari rings, fried aubergine, a Greek salad and a portion of chips. But when ordering boring things, it's at least a great comfort if they taste very good, and for the most part they did. The fish, a local catch called *koce* (koh-tsa), was crisp and blistered on the

outside with sweet, flaking flesh, and the aubergine was lightly battered and more-ish. The calamari had been caught some time during Hoxha's rule and frozen, but the novelty value of having the chips served sprinkled with origanum was more than enough to make up for it and excite me all over again. I can be easily pleased.

After pushing our chairs back with mumbles of sated joy we were served a complimentary plate of sweet slices of pear and peach, conveniently pierced with toothpicks to avoid the inconvenience of sticky fingers. So I shoved those down too.

We followed our rounded tummies back to the hotel, past a parade of traditionally dressed dancers performing beneath a fireworks display, and marvelled that such efforts were being made to welcome us. Some Italian *pomp, skiet en donder* was being screened at an outdoor cinema at the edge of a quay, and it seemed to be popular. Italian is the most common second language in the country, and hasn't been taught in schools since World War II – everyone's just learnt it from years of rewiring their TVs to pick up the Italian broadcasts that were forbidden under communism. While English is not widely spoken, there is now the option to learn it at school, so many more young people know it than do older ones. Because we were English we attracted those Albanians that spoke some of the language, and they were always keen for the opportunity to practise it. A knowledge of English is apparently becoming essential for getting a "good" job, even if its use is not required in the position. For the most part, though, we found catching buses, booking rooms and ordering meals to be a daily exercise in pointing, signing, and hurriedly flipping through phrasebooks.

We considered going for a closer look at the movie, but we would have understood nothing, and I was craving a shower. I had been around for the backpackers' claps and cheers when the power came back on at 7pm the previous evening, but the water didn't make an appearance, so I was now separated from my last shower by 72 hours, and was very keen to close the gap.

An Albanian shower is more eventful than it sounds, mostly due to it taking place in an Albanian bathroom, which is by definition small enough to make sure that your elbows hit the walls on both sides when drying yourself. Generally the toilet is also positioned to either ensure that the door cannot be opened to more than an acute angle, or to only allow you to sit on it sideways. And at a mere 1,5 metres tall, if I have to position myself sideways, the vertically unchallenged would probably need to wrap their legs around the cistern to have a seat. Having a shower means squeezing into the standing space between the toilet and basin and holding the shower head extension above you, or grasping it between your chin and shoulder, while it pisses water all over everything. And then you stomp to bed grumpily leaving dirty puddles through the bedroom. And it's only after your fifth hotel that you realise that maybe the ugly plastic house slippers at the bathroom door are perhaps there for that purpose, and it's not just that the maids are all forgetful and keep leaving their unsightly shoes in your room.

"Ka puk puk puk puk!" exclaimed the taxi driver. Or something like that. He was trying to convince us (without the benefit of a shared language) that all the buses were broken, and we were going to have to travel by taxi to Ksamili, 17 kilometres further south. He smiled during his dead engine performance to let us know that he was kidding with us, but the smile also pleaded: for such an act, wouldn't we prefer to drive with a charming taxi driver anyway?

For a while we regretted turning him down, as the Ksamili bus stop was a nightmare to locate, and my spirit for challenge doesn't stand up to much when I'm walking in circles around a town on a slope, under a beating sun, with a sweaty nylon backpack threatening to topple me. We trudged a widening gyre round Saranda's centre for half an hour, eventually finding the station about 250 metres from our hotel. This could have been enough to merit some irritability, except that we discovered a local food market along the way, making for some very excited exploring.

The great thing about being snap-happy with your camera in Albania is that everyone's thrilled to be in your photos and see themselves on a digital screen, but the postal service is too primitive for anyone to ask you to send them copies, and your average veggie stall owner probably isn't on gmail. I had two middle-aged women sneaking up and shoving each other into the frame, and then giggling victoriously when they got to see the result. Their stalls were a delight – buckets of glossy olives, crates of piled grapes and shiny aubergines, sacks of pulses, tables full of bananas, and tall mineral water bottles filled with fragrant pickles of bright peppers, garlic, lemon, onions and origanum. Their scales balanced with collections of brass weights that were probably older than their owners, and their chamomile tea was sold as bunches of flowers. Across the road was the fish man, with four polystyrene trays, each filled with a different catch. Some of them still gasped while staring up at him, and occasionally shifted position. He spoke some English, and was eager to chat to SJ, who told him about the *koce* we'd eaten the night before. He pointed it out to us, agreeing that it was delicious, but too expensive for him to eat himself. And he honestly couldn't tell us what any of the other three types tasted like, as he'd never tried them. The Fish Man. Really. I lost some respect for him right there.

We managed to confirm with a pedestrian that we were finally in the right spot to catch the Ksamili bus, which was arriving at 10am (this required all ten fingers), and got to clamber on board literally a minute later, and with backpacks, clambering is what you do. There's actually a fair amount of skill that goes into travelling with the weight of a half-formed Siamese twin on your back, and picking a bus seat requires a certain amount of strategy. My clever sister grabbed us two single window seats, behind each other, where we could keep our bags next to us, and an eye on them, regardless of how busy the bus got. This was before we had disproved the Thieving Scoundrel stereotype, and still watched our packs as if they were wily toddlers off their leashes.

The road to Ksamili was a narrow cliff pass to which the bus clung, allowing nervous drivers to edge their cars by with two tyres half-over the side. It was a huge excitement-builder for the trip back, when our bus would be on the thin-air side of the road. Were we to fall, we would bounce awkwardly down the slope and land with a plop in the silver Butrint Lagoon, possibly in the middle of one of the lattices on which the mussels are farmed.

In *My Family and Other Animals*, Gerald Durrell's memoir of his childhood on Corfu, the Butrint Lagoon was the setting of his gun-toting brother Leslie's boar-hunting excursions. Albania provided the mountains to which the Durrells gazed from their villas across the sea, with Butrint less than three kilometres away from Corfu and Ksamili only five – close enough for desperate young men to have risked their lives for the swim in their bids to escape communist Albania. Swimming in the middle of the night heightened the chance of catching hypothermia, but the real danger came in being caught, which at the time meant a 25-year prison sentence.

SJ and my ambitions were not that lofty – we had chosen to stay in Ksamili because of the four little rocky islands just off its shore, simply because there's something to be said for swimming through turquoise waters towards uninhabited islands. Our plans were scaled down when we climbed off the bus and into a wind turbine, which snatched our enthusiasm away with it. We settled instead on a walk down to the sea after finding the only hotel still open post-August, and, as we went, chewed on sand and our own hair as they were blown into our mouths. The paths were strewn with the obligatory plastic bags and water bottles, as well as a few soiled nappies, but the beach itself was charming. A chain of rickety outdoor bars stretched over the water on wooden quays, lined with bright loungers and bikini-clad middle-aged women tanning their rolls. Rowboats ferried people across to one of the islands, where the smallest of the bars was perched on a jetty next to a tiny stretch of sand patterned with umbrellas, and it all would have made for a really wonderful day if it hadn't been so unbearably windy. So we opted for a history lesson instead.

The ancient settlement of Butrint, a few kilometres down the road, is one of only two World Heritage Sites in Albania, which is two more than I initially expected to tick off my list during this trip. Butrint is a showcase of ruins from a period of about 2 500 years, during which it was home in turn to Illyrians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines and Venetians. A tiny national park now protects the original settlement on its small hill, where it gradually disappeared beneath the earth until being rediscovered and excavated in the 1920s. Paths through the ruins led under stone archways and down staircases, past marble wells and 1 500-year-old mosaic floors now concealed by sandpits. Shady avenues wrapped around the lagoon's edge, and were lined with mossy brickwork and trees that grew from the centres of ancient walls. It was all very calming standing there surrounded by the remains of buildings in which people had lived and worked thousands of years previously. I like to play a game with myself in such places, imagining if it'd be more fun to see how they lived, or watch their reaction in seeing how we live. I usually end up

going for the second one – there's such a kick to be got out of watching people get freaked out by cars and TVs in old time-travelling movies.

Somewhere like Butrint is of course the one place in Albania (besides the country's only hostel, in Tirana) where you're bound to find tourists. Butrint is the sole driver of the majority of Albania's international tourism, and its visitors are mostly day-trippers from Corfu, who ferry in and out of the country in a matter of hours. The rest pass through the borders while doing longer trips around the Balkans or Eastern Europe, making SJ and I unusual specimens to have left home with the intention of seeing only Albania.

Back in Ksamili we decided on a blustery walk along the coast. Beach bar after beach bar was closed in the late summer, and the last few desperate proprietors eyed us with anticipation and then disappointment as we passed. We walked under pines along stretches of beach dotted with empty café tables and beached pedal-boats. At the end of the string of deserted bars we sauntered up to an interesting looking building site, and then swiftly changed our minds when a rabid dog lurched out of the bushes, snarling and frothing.

Albanians dogs are best avoided. Up to a century ago dogs were sometimes crossbred with wolves in the mountainous north of the country, and they're now used as nocturnal guards, trained to rip the organs out of any intruders. Because of them, nobody dares go outside in the dead of night, but it's hard to imagine that there's a foe out there more vicious than the beast that's supposedly protecting you.

We carried on past more (dog-less) building sites, until doing a double-take at the sight of a woman dangling limply from one of the unfinished balconies. Except that it wasn't a woman; it was a scarecrow, and we shouldn't have been surprised to see it there. Our bus trips so far had been lined with incomplete buildings displaying scarecrows, goats' horns or teddy bears, all there to apparently ward off evil spirits. They're usually attached to the iron rods that stretch optimistically to the sky, waiting until the next storey can be afforded. The construction always looks cheaply done and ugly; endless levels of concrete pillars with glass frontings are the country's biggest eyesore, after the litter. The buildings are also frequently illegal, although everyone told me that what is allowed is approved through bribery, so there really is no right way about it.

Later that night the hotel manageress warned us not to go outside between 11pm and 7am, or the dog would rip us apart and eat each of the eight limbs we shared while watching us bleed to death. It sounded like fun, but I was planning on sleeping during those hours anyway.

The Big Fat Greek Problem

Overtaking around a blind corner up a blind rise on a mountain pass in a Mercedes is a very authentic Albanian experience, and I think our taxi driver felt obliged to share it with us. So he overtook with no great haste, allowing us to savour the terror.

We had hired him upon returning to Saranda, to take us to see *Syri i Kaltër*, or the Blue Eye Spring, which lies just inland. The name comes from the view from above of the spring's dark pupil and bright turquoise iris. Its full depth has never been explored, so no-one knows how much further below 50 metres it goes, but it's a beautiful place, so it doesn't really matter. It's so lovely, in fact, that it was banned to citizens during communism and was part of a hunting and fishing getaway for the party elite. But now the masses are allowed in, and they've started a rubbish dump on the shore, so no matter how beautiful the river looks in the forest's dappled light, you know it's been fouled. More so because on the morning we were there the pile of cans and bags was complimented by a human stool sample, buzzing with flies.

The water is supposedly a stable 10°C, which despite the sunny weather meant I would not be swimming, until SJ started telling me how pathetic I was; and the experience did make for a far better story (and therefore a better justified taxi fare) if I had a minor dip. So I decided to brave the water, and I went to get changed behind the toilet tree, very slowly and carefully, to make sure that nothing touched the ground.

My swim was a 10-metre race to the centre of the spring's surge, after which I catapulted out the water feeling like I'd been slathered with tiger balm. My body's thermometer had been thrown so far off balance that it didn't even know if the mercury had been shoved up or down, leaving me washed over with hot and icy prickling, and every goose bump standing to attention. And half my bikini top off. In front of the dozen domestic tourists that had arrived with us. I readjusted speedily and wrapped myself tightly in a towel, trying to erase the previous 20 seconds.

We wandered back through the strip of forest and over a swing bridge to find our taxi driver on the other side, where he had been fastidiously washing and polishing his Mercedes, and had then neatly hung his cloths on the stretch of washing line he had set up in his boot. This despite him having to drive five unavoidable kilometres down a dirt road in order to get us back from the spring. Such is the mentality that justifies half the nation making their living from running carwashes.

Three hours north of Saranda, in Himara, the people speak Greek. They go to Greek Orthodox churches, consider themselves ethnically Greek, and many of them even hold Greek citizenship. Much sensitivity surrounds the issue – a hundred years ago when the world's great nations were

carving Balkan borders to suit their own plans, the region of southern Albania was repeatedly passed back and forth between Albania and Greece. It started as Albania's and is currently considered theirs too, but the Greeks were slow to give up on the area, and only in 1987 ended the official state of war between the two countries, that had been in place since 1940, when Albania was under Italian occupation.

The Greek government's now considerably reduced claim is over just Himara and Dhërmiu, further north, where Greek-speaking Christians are in the majority. Albania, however, attributes the language and religion in the towns to them having remained enclaves of Christianity under Ottoman rule, which saw most of the country become Muslim. The government also reiterates the fact that Himara and Dhërmi don't border on Greece, and are separated from it by two further regions.

After the Albanian borders opened in 1990, some of the southern towns lost up to 70% of their residents to Greece. They were initially granted permanent residence there, but in recent years those with Christian names who could prove that they came from Himara or Dhërmiu were also eligible for citizenship, and many of them scrambled for the chance to get EU passports. Therefore the people who remain either really want to be there, or are really depressed that they couldn't get out.

That evening, we met one of the latter. He introduced himself as Apostolis – there were two Apostolis' in Himara, and the other one was sitting behind us at the small Greek café where we ate, peeling and crunching on raw garlic cloves as he chatted. The first Apostolis was close to 50, had taught himself to speak English, and was now trying to teach his two young sons too, as he thought their teacher was too useless to try. He was interested to find out that we came from South Africa, as he'd tried to immigrate there too, in 1991, and was again rejected. Just discussing the situation made him frustrated: in Hoxha's regime he wasn't allowed to go to university because he was considered Greek, and now, in a free country, he couldn't emigrate because everyone considered him Albanian. Many of the frustrations between the two countries stem from the treatment of their respective minorities within each others' borders. Albania protests that its citizens living in Greece are being denied human rights, and Greece protests that the same is happening to the people in Albania who it claims as Greek.

So we tried changing the subject to more positive things and said how much we had enjoyed the trip to Himara. The bus had driven around transparent blue bays edged with groves of orange, lemon and olive trees, and Apostolis agreed that the stretch of coast was Albania's most beautiful, but as far as he was concerned, he was not Albanian. Albanians to him were Muslims, and Muslims wreck countries.

He told us he was a beekeeper, but that got him onto the drought, and how bad it was for the flowers, which in turn led to us discussing the power problem, and what a stuff-up it all was. There was no shortage of electricity under communism, he said, but then each house only had

one light bulb, and there was no access to modern appliances. In the 1980s you actually required a permit to own a TV or fridge. Now of course he had those things and others, but most of the time couldn't use them.

He put us in a slightly awkward position after that by asking where we were staying and how much it was costing us, and when we named our beachfront hotel and our rate of 1 000 lek (R80) each for the night, he was briefly embittered. "These are the best places in Albania, and *you* can stay there," he complained. Such accommodation was obviously far from his reach.

We left soon after that, and SJ kicked me as I wished him a hearty "*Mirupafshim*" (goodbye). I'd become so used to everyone being thrilled to hear us say the most cursory of Albanian greetings, and completely forgot that this time I was saying it to someone who chose to speak Greek, and had just spent an hour telling me how much he hated Albania.

We waited outside the next morning for the early bus, long before most of Himara had awoken. The population had somehow been trained into pre-dawn commutes, and travelling after 7am meant taking twice the time to cover the necessary ground as the driver picked up all the passengers taking shorter routes. Catching a bus in Albania therefore always required an early start.

We were heading for Dhërmiu, a community split in two. Up on the mountain was a steep hamlet of crumbling stone walls, tree-shaded alleys and shutters that flaked pastel layers of paint. White steeples of Greek Orthodox churches poked out here and there, looking for the congregations that had abandoned them. Much of Dhërmiu's population had chosen to be Greek, and now mostly elderly people remained, some of whose children returned to visit in the summer.

Two kilometres straight down the mountain lay Dhërmiu's beaches – some of Albania's most celebrated – and a handful of hotels and ugly houses. SJ and I had argued about whether the bus would take us directly to the beach or drop us off in the mountains, and I was quite convinced that the public transport system couldn't be so user-unfriendly as to make us hike down the very steep mountainside to find accommodation. I was wrong though, and regretted not having put better shoes on when slap-slapping down the wet tarmac in slippery, muddy slops while trying not to let the weight of my pack tip me forward down the 45° slope.

"Would you like to walk with us on the beach?" The invitation came from three girls at the neighbouring table, whom we had assumed spoke no English. We agreed happily to go with them, but it was one of those moments where you have to rethink your conversation of the last few minutes and hope that you haven't inadvertently said anything rude about the people next to you.

They were in Dhërmiu for a three-week holiday, and had been sipping on *raki* next to us while we ate our hotel breakfast. All three came from Tirana, and two of them were sisters; and

while they all seemed to be financially comfortable, when the latter two mentioned that their grandfather had been the vice-prime minister during communism, we realised how comparatively privileged they must have been. In a country of hardships and deprivation, their childhoods must have been filled with the perquisites of power and hypocrisy, plus the obligatory nationalism. I still had Apostolis' conversation on my mind from the previous night, and was trying to understand more about the hostility between the Albanians and the Greeks.

"Are there many Greek people that live around Dhërmiu?" I asked the younger sister, trying to feel my way around the subject.

"No. They're Albanian people who speak Greek. It's strange. I don't like it. Why must you speak another language if you're Albanian?" I thought that South Africa's 11 official languages might be an interesting comparison for her, but stopped when I realised that we had adopted none of them from a neighbour who considered itself at war with us. English and Afrikaans came from our colonisers, but Greece had never made a colony of Albania. The politics surrounding the issue of minority groups meant that neither Greece nor Albania queried ethnicity in their last censuses. The size of Albania's "Greek" population hadn't been counted since 1989, and even then the estimates ranged between 1% and 12% of the population, which at 3.6 million is potentially a lot of people to actively dislike. Half an hour later we passed a man sweeping outside his house, who greeted the five of us with "Yassas," ("hello" in Greek), and the older sister snubbed him, muttering to us, "I hate Albanians who speak Greek."

Our walk was cut short, as the girls had insisted that we turn around after they spotted a lone, possibly drunk male walking towards us on the beach. SJ and I weren't sure if he represented a real threat to a group of five women, or if they were overreacting, but guessed at the latter after seeing their responses. They were aged between 23 and 27, and had to giggle their way back to the hotel, glancing back furtively to track his progress behind us. The whole situation was strange – they were independent, opinionated, well-off young women with careers of their own, and yet helpless enough that they couldn't confidently walk on the beach, despite them telling us they were certain the man would not have been violent.

In the three years that they'd spent their annual holiday at Dhërmiu, they'd never ventured into the town, just two kilometres away. I was surprised when they agreed to walk there with us, but it didn't last long. SJ and I fell in love with the whitewashed alleys we explored, shaded by trees bearing figs, pomegranates, walnuts and quinces, yet as soon as the main road was out of sight the Tirana girls got nervous. "I think we are going to be lost," said the older sister. "I think we must go back now. Do you agree?"

SJ and I made a very reluctant about turn, only out of politeness, and spent no more time with them that day, finding ourselves a bar on a bunker-strewn beach instead, where we befriended a door-fitter who had left Dhërmiu for Athens 17 years earlier, and allowed him to buy us beers.

Of the Previously Atheist *Raki*-Drinking Muslims, and their Catholic Saint

Vlora looked like a mess of pastel apartment blocks from a distance, and it was. After hiking halfway back up the hill with our packs on in the early morning, we'd been offered a fortuitous lift with one of the managers from our hotel in Dhërmiu, and leapt into his Mercedes with a chorus of "*Faleminderit!*" We only wanted to pass through Vlora on our way to Berati, and happily left our bags in the care of the conductor of the Berati bus for the hour before we were due to depart.

Travelling as a paranoid South African takes a mind shift in a country so full of trustworthy people. Four days earlier I had refused to leave my pack in the bus when heading for Saranda. I saw that the conductor was offended when I chose to lug my belongings around with me until we left, rather than trust him with them, but I had to ignore his reaction. I couldn't switch off my vigilance that easily. I had read before leaving South Africa how unlikely it was for tourists to come into contact with violent crime in Albania, and how in fact the tradition of hospitality was likely to make sure that we would be particularly well looked after rather than taken advantage of, but it had taken five days for me to believe it. So it was a huge sign of faith in Albanian people that in Vlora we were comfortable to walk away and know that the bus, the conductor and our luggage would still be there when we got back.

There is a compromise to long distance bus trips in the developing world: you want to get on early enough to get a good seat (or a seat at all), and late enough to not be the one having to wait for the whole bus to fill before it can leave. Everybody plays that game, so reserving seats is a tweaking of rules. And when we returned from our walk around Vlora to find that the conductor had saved us the two best seats on board – up front, right behind the driver – I felt like a horrible cynic knowing that I'd started off not trusting people like him enough to leave a bag in a bus' luggage hold.

In 1967, inspired by the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Enver Hoxha promptly made religion illegal and declared his country the world's first and only atheist state. From 1977 the "storage of religious literature" merited a prison sentence of three to ten years. More than 200 religious leaders were imprisoned, while many others were tried, tortured and executed along with their followers. The slogan of the period revived the words of Pashko Vasa, a 19th-century poet: "The religion of Albania is Albanianism." The government took ownership of all religious buildings, either converting them for their own use, or destroying all but those deemed special enough to be spared. By the time religion was legalised again in 1990, only 5% of the country's houses of worship remained.

Albania's religious history was a bit screwed up before then too. During the Ottomans' 500-year rule they gave tax breaks to Muslims, incentivising most of the population to convert to

Islam over time, if not in their hearts then at least in name. The result is that the country today considers itself 70% Muslim, 20% Orthodox and 10% Catholic, and prides itself on the enviable peace that has long existed between these groups (during his visit George Bush even highlighted it as an example of religious tolerance for the rest of the world). Except that it's not so much tolerance as indifference; 23 years of atheism set Albania up for a whole lot of apathy, and most people don't seem to have rushed back to mosque with much enthusiasm. In most Muslim-majority countries the month of Ramadan sees normal daily life come to a standstill; in Albania I passed a boy banging a drum in the street to mark its start, and that was literally the last I saw of it. I certainly never heard any mention of fasting. Something else I struggled to relate to with my knowledge of Islam, and specifically Islam in Cape Town, was that Albania's Bektashi Muslims are allowed to drink alcohol. They grow grapevines and harvest them to make wine and *raki*, just as the Orthodox and Catholics and atheists do.

Berati was lucky enough to have been spared the brunt of Albania's atheism campaign, and was one of the few places awarded "Museum-City" status – a high compliment from the party and a great relief for the town. Its old centre was therefore thankfully protected from reconstruction under communism, as the view of its Ottoman-era houses wrapped around Berati's citadel is one of the most recognised in Albania, and has merited the name "the Town of a Thousand Windows" for the rows of wooden window frames on the face of each home. The citadel's wall still includes some of the stones from the original Illyrian fortification from the 4th century BC, and many of the older houses therein are still inhabited. The site of the Berati itself has been settled since the Bronze Age, around 4 000 years ago.

We explored the churches of the citadel for a while after completing the exhausting haul up the hill to reach it, and then promised ourselves a mid-afternoon snack in the Christian quarter, Gorica, a suburb so unfortunately positioned within the mountain's folds that it never sees the sun in winter. To reach it we crossed a footbridge over the grey river, above which swallows endlessly swarmed, and then found ourselves an empty restaurant where we made the horrible error of mistaking mezze for antipasti. Our visions were of a few small lamb *qofta*, some olives, a bit of goats' cheese and maybe some roasted peppers or aubergines. What we were served (and what we nearly finished) was five skewered *qofta*, each one big enough to fill a boerewors roll; along with a lamb chop, lamb liver, lamb kidney, a battered and deep-fried minced beef patty, and two portions of chips.

On an American menu, this was the meal that would have been called "The Triple Bypass". After five hours of trying to escape our own garlicky burps, we could manage only chamomile tea for supper.

Sarah-Jane had to return to London that weekend, leaving me alone to continue my bus-riding. On Friday morning we therefore found ourselves back at Skanderbeg Square, this time to check if we could get any opera tickets for that evening. Watching an opera in Tirana seemed like it would have supplied us with some good stories, but the posters outside the opera house were for performances that finished three months earlier. There was nothing due to start for another two months, and we had no intention of being in Tirana in two months' time. It was a pity, as maintaining a healthy respect for classical music is one thing that Eastern European communism seems to have generally got right.

The opera house was draped in an enormous banner of Mother Teresa's face – it must have literally covered about a hundred square metres. Two more banners were draped on either side of the face of the National Museum across the way, all of them imposing reminders of the ten-year anniversary of her death. Why such an effort for Mother Teresa in Tirana of all places, you might ask? Because the Albanians claim her as their own. While she was born in Macedonia and never visited Albania in her life, she was of ethnic Albanian background, and when she was canonised it was the Albanian flag that was rolled out across the Vatican.

It took someone else to point out to me how strange it all really was, that Albania had gone out of its way to claim her nationality. Forget that she never once stood on Albanian soil; can you imagine the government of any other Muslim-majority country commemorating the life and death of a Catholic nun? The fact that it doesn't immediately seem that weird within Albania is testament to exactly how unconcerned everyone really is about religion. And to some is an example of a government that leverages its power by pandering to other governments, specifically those of the EU, rather than prioritising the views of its own people.

A new cable car up Mount Dajti had been opened during the previous year, and we thought it might be worth eating lunch with a view over the city, but managed to make a mess out of finding the bus we needed. After identifying what we thought was the right one on the map, we tried a confirming query of "*Teleferik?*" looking for an indication of yes or no from an old woman at the stop.

In Albania you put yourself at risk with yes/no questions, as you could get a head signal as your answer, and while people now try nodding for yes and shaking their heads for no, to adapt to western convention, traditionally their meanings are swapped. So you can never be sure what they mean. Plus "yo" means no and "po" means yes, which is just completely counter-intuitive to me.

The old lady in question combined her "yo" with a point across the square, to ensure us that we were definitely in the wrong place, so we held our breaths and crossed the kamikaze-like swirl of traffic to the bus stop on the other side. There a young medical student named Valmira provided us with both conversation and further directions, before taking SJ by the arm and

guiding us back across the madness to where we'd come from. We were happy to follow her though, as she refused to leave until the correct bus arrived, and then briefed an old man on board to look after us, and cheek-kissed us each goodbye.

We smiled at the old man, in absence of a common language, and started frantically inspecting our various maps, trying to confirm what direction we were being sent in. Not having yet recognised that the opera house was incorrectly placed in our Lonely Planet, we were quickly convinced that the bus was going south instead of east, and that we were to be inescapably lost. We tried jumping off at the first stop to walk back and correct our mistake (or rather, to just catch a taxi), but the old man came close to grabbing us by the scruffs of our necks in his determination to keep us on board. It took someone a few rows back who had understood our flustering to confirm for us that the bus was going to the *teleferik*, and that our map was not completely reliable. In the commotion we didn't see the conductor, and before we had a chance to stop him the old man had paid for our tickets, and refused to be reimbursed.

And that's why I wanted to be more like the Albanian people, because that small act of kindness made me feel like a miserly wretch. Imagine paying for a tourist's ticket when they're quite obviously a whole lot more wealthy than you are; without them asking, or being short of money, or anything like that, but just to let them know that they really are welcome in your country.

I still have that bus ticket.

After our mountain lunch, which included my first and last taste of *raki*, we raced for Sky Towers while the light faded faster than we'd anticipated. Sky Towers is one of the smartest and tallest buildings in Tirana, if not the tallest, at all of 16 storeys. The appeal was the revolving Sky Bar at the top, with an enticing combination of cocktails, a tacky interior and really good views of the city. We found a table at the window and at first ordered two small draughts from the overpriced menu before both thinking "What the hell?" at the same time. If we weren't going to enjoy an overpriced cocktail when in a red velvet-bedecked revolving bar overlooking multi-coloured buildings glowing at sunset, in what was Europe's last bastion of Stalinism, then when on earth were we? So the order was changed to a daiquiri and a caipirinha, charged at nothing more than Camps Bay prices.

We had arranged to meet Sophie and Colli for drinks there – SJ had sat next to the French Sophie on the London flight into Tirana, and Colli, her Albanian husband, had given SJ a lift from the airport to the hostel. She wanted to buy them a round in thanks, but we were one ahead of them by the time they arrived. Our refills were served alongside their more modest choices, and with a drink in hand, Colli told me how as a 12-year-old, he had escaped his small northern town without his parents' knowledge, and caught a boat to Greece to join his older brother. He lived there for a year before moving to Italy with a friend, and met Sophie in the UK,

where she was studying on exchange. They were 22 and 20, respectively. His illegal status made their relationship vulnerable, so they moved in together after three months, were engaged after four and married by five. His new EU papers meant that he was able to visit his family in Albania for the first time since leaving, but it took Sophie a year and a half to work up the courage to tell her father that she was married, and to an Albanian.

They've been married for four years now, living in London, and were in Albania for a week's visit – something Colli was now able to do regularly. Each time he took with him as many gifts as possible – things that his Albanian family could not afford, could not access, or just things that they needed more than he did: pharmaceuticals, perfumes, a DVD player. Each time he left his bags would be filled with parting gifts of whatever the house had to offer; this trip yielded apples and socks. The generosity is endemic and it was evident when the bill arrived, and our drinks were covered without hesitation, and despite our ardent protest. Not just the round we shared with them, but also the one before to our embarrassment, since our extravagant cocktail binge took up two-thirds of the cost. We eventually had to accept sheepishly, with SJ swearing to me later that she would have them around for a meal in London, which she did.

Edvin Pacara lived in Tirana, but was sure to mention that he was a northerner – born in Kukësi with roots in Kosova. I'd been put in touch with him by a good friend, who had studied with him for a year at an international university in Budapest, and warned me before I left to be wary of Edvin, who was something of a ladies' man. I was therefore pleased to be meeting him along with Kadri, his Estonian girlfriend from the same university, who was visiting him briefly. They were only able to see us at 9pm, as they'd returned late from a few days in Kosova, so we met them in Blloku, previous home to the party elite, now Tirana's centre of cafés and nightclubs, buzzing with young people.

Edvin proved himself to be outspoken, strongly opinionated, and a proud nationalist. He was a thorough storyteller with a detailed, if biased, knowledge of local and Kosovan history. Any question asked to him was answered from the very beginning, at whatever initial event shaped the final answer, be it ten years ago or a hundred, but there's plenty of capacity for embellishment when telling tales that long, and I initially took a lot of what he told me to be just that. He had the type of smooth-talking manner that made me think he was compromising facts for the benefit of the story, and I was later pleasantly surprised to find out that many of his more engrossing anecdotes were actually true. It's hard to tell with tales about Albania. A lot of crazy things have happened there, and you can't always differentiate between the tall stories and the crazy ones. One of the latter was about a woman named Luiza Hoxha (no relation to the dictator), who was a part of the mob that attacked Vlora's Intelligence Services building in March 1997, and brutally killed two policemen there. She was photographed disfiguring one of the dying men, holding an axe over his body and head, licking his blood and painting her face with it. She went on to hold various positions in government when the Socialist Party came into power a few months later,

and eventually became head of the Albanian postal system in 2005, though she was arrested in 2006 for embezzlement. Edvin emphasised that Albanians were shocked at the barbarism the 1997 uprising had brought out of citizens, but I struggled to understand how someone could be forgiven for such an act so quickly, and then gain a position in government too.

I was initially sceptical when he claimed that the Greek government had illicitly provided at least 1 000 Kalashnikovs to fuel the 1997 riots, and I knew Greece was hardly likely to make such admissions publicly, but after reading more about the vitriolic undertones to the two nations' business relationship, it suddenly didn't seem unfeasible. He later sent me literature claiming that Greece had for years been getting secret agents into Albania by having them ordained as Greek Orthodox priests, and by then the whole situation seemed bizarre enough for even that Bond-like tactic to be possible. I never doubted Edvin at all when he spoke of not being able to leave his home for three days when the violence reached Tirana; of his father being the only one shooting fireworks instead of his gun during New Year's celebrations; of rocket launchers being fired by civilians from the roofs of their apartment buildings; and of tanks being driven down residential streets.

Like everyone else I met, Edvin believed that the government was hopelessly corrupt. Things were only done through bribery: to get a degree, to get a job, to build a house, to start a business, somebody had to be bribed. The prime minister had been emphasising his zero tolerance approach to corruption and the progress that had been made in the past few years, but at that point the World Bank still had Albania labelled as one of the world's most corrupt countries, and it wasn't news to anyone who lived there.

Pranvera Hoxha may have misread public demand when building a great big pyramid in honour of her father, but she was spot on in building a castle for Skanderbeg. He is *the* Albanian national hero, mostly because he's responsible for making a nation (in sentiment at least) out of what were previously just divided tribes, but also because for 34 years he reclaimed control of his country from the Ottomans.

In 1415 the Ottomans captured the northern citadel of Kruja, and in exchange for being allowed to continue his rule, its Albanian chieftain sent his 10-year-old son, Gjergj Kastrioti, to undergo Ottoman military training in Turkey. He was renamed Iskander, after Alexander the Great, and was eventually promoted to general (*bey*), creating the name Skanderbeg. After 28 years in the Ottoman army he took the opportunity to defect when a battle in Serbia was lost, and rode the 260 kilometres to Kruja to retake his father's seat. He soon managed to convince the other Albanian clans to forget their differences and unite against their common enemy, and in the following 34 years repelled 13 Ottoman invasions. He was helped by his insider knowledge of Ottoman military tactics and his familiarity with the mountainous terrain, and his victories won him credit for protecting much of Italy from becoming Ottoman territory, and in doing so shaping a

considerable part of modern Europe. In recognition of his achievements he was named "Captain General of the Holy See" by Pope Calixtus III. Albania was again lost to Ottoman rule after Skanderbeg's death from malaria at the age of 63, and only managed to throw off its shackles when gaining independence in the 20th century.

The Skanderbeg Museum in Kruja is a huge stone edifice that looks like a fake castle, because that's what it is. I'm yet to read a bad word about it (if you don't count me rereading this), but to me it seemed to be modelled on the type of castle you'd get with a Medieval Princess Barbie.

We'd decided to visit Kruja as a last daytrip before SJ's flight and so explored the museum's levels in a mild hurry, each one filled with details of Skanderbeg's battles, and information that became more random and disconnected as we climbed higher. It turned out that the very top held the best and worst of what was on offer, the latter being a map of Europe pinpointing every location where a book on Skanderbeg has been published. It was as if they were concerned you might not respect him enough based on his achievements alone. Photographs showed Skanderbeg statues from around the world, including one in Michigan, which I didn't see coming. Apparently more than 200 000 Albanians live there (more than anywhere else in America), and one can only surmise that they had something to do with it.

What did prove his wider reputation to me was the amount of European writers and poets that used him as inspiration between the 16th and 19th centuries, because of his strength as a symbol of Christian resistance to the Ottoman scourge. They include Christopher Marlowe, Pierre de Ronsard, Lord Byron and Benjamin Disraeli. Voltaire apparently noted that he thought the Byzantine empire would have survived if it had a leader like Skanderbeg; and in 1718 Vivaldi composed an opera entitled "Scanderbeg" for a theatre opening in Florence, 250 years after the Albanian's death. The man was obviously a hero outside his own borders, but no full version of the opera exists anymore, so unfortunately for Skanderbeg's legacy and Vivaldi's pride, it couldn't have been very well received.

The Afrikaans-Speaking Albanian

Gillian Gloyer had me sold. On page 177 of the Bradt Guide to Albania she promises that “The journey along Lake Komani deserves to be one of the world’s classic boat trips, up there with the *Hurtigrut* along the Norwegian coast or the ferry from Puerto Montt to Puerto Natales in Chile.” She goes on to describe its narrow stretches of emerald-green water lined by sheer cliffs. I’d never heard of the *Hurtigrut* or either of the Puertos, but I was in. At least I’d have Komani ticked if the World’s Classic Boat Trips ever came up in a pub quiz.

Gillian’s book became my chief companion after Sarah-Jane left, sadly enough, and she warned me that to take the ferry I would need to catch the 5am minibus to Bajram Curri (oddly pronounced buy-rum tsoerri), a town far up in the country’s northeast corner, very near the Kosovan border. Unrest around that region was not unheard of, and tourists were still urged to stay on main routes to avoid inadvertently unearthing landmines, so SJ was a little nervous to leave knowing that she would be the one explaining my kidnapping by bandits to our father. I honestly had no idea if it would really be risky or not, but suspected that most of what the guidebooks said was overstated for the benefit of Americans, and noted that Edvin and Kadri had just happily taken a trip around Kosova, and he thought it completely safe. I chose to ignore that he was ethnically Kosovan and thus completely biased.

I stepped into dark Tirana streets at 4.20 on a Sunday morning, and started my march up the seven blocks that would take me to the waiting *furgon*, or minibus. There was, unsurprisingly, no-one on the street. Everything was locked, and just two cars went by; for the first time I wandered if I was possibly being silly, and perhaps the trust this nation’s people had won from me wasn’t really valid at 4:20am on the deserted streets of the capital city.

I comforted myself by remembering that the only crime that Gillian could think to mention in her guidebook was a rape that happened back in 1999, since such things didn’t even merit statistics in a place as friendly as this. So when a taxi pulled up next to me and the driver said something I didn’t understand, I was stubborn enough in my trust to want to keep walking, despite how much sense it made for me to get in. I was convinced that he thought he could rip me off just because I was a lone woman strolling along nervously at 4.20, which he probably could.

Ignoring him would have been rude though, so I said “Bajram Curri *furgon*,” thinking that he was probably asking where I was going, and he answered “No problem,” along with something else that I didn’t understand. SJ had taught me that *quanto* was Italian for “how much?” before she left, so I used it then, but he just repeated the same incomprehensible phrase again, and “No problem,” and gestured for me to get in.

The fact that the taxi was licensed meant that I could at least tell myself that he wasn’t planning on abducting me, but getting into a foreign taxi without a predetermined price is just

foolish, so I repeated "Quanto?", this time rubbing my thumb and forefinger together in the crude but international sign for money, and just got the same reply again.

When I said it for the third time I was holding my fingers up and counting them off, asking for a number, and it suddenly dawned on me that it was actually boorish of me to be demanding "Quanto?" and rubbing my fingers in his face. Because in Albania it was entirely possible that this man, who made his living from driving people around in the wee hours, had identified me as a guest in his country by my backpack, and simply wanted to offer me a free lift. So I took a chance and got in, and he drove me straight to the *furgon*, carried my pack across for me, smiled and said goodbye. I thanked him humbly and felt like a shit.

The *furgon* was filled with women. The only male besides the driver and co-driver was a little boy of about eight years old, who got in with his mother and an electric fan that got its own seat. We drove in the dark past long strips of wedding shops, their dresses all illuminated in upstairs displays as if this was a country with all the power supply it could wish for. As the sky lightened I counted three horse-drawn carts on the road in ten minutes, and knew we were entering northern territory. Agriculture in Albania is catching up to the rest of the world at a very slow rate, and it's got a long way to go. It makes up a quarter of the GDP, but those carts were driven by men who used scythes for their harvesting. Country roads are a time warp up there.

As we wound into the hills the open fields disappeared, and we started driving alongside a silver-blue lake, ringed by pines and mountains. Its bottom was visible through the shallow edges, and its centre gave a bright reflection of the clouds. It was clean too! I'd escaped the litter at last. No-one lived here, no-one threw rubbish out their back door and presumed it would just disappear. Or at least I thought that until we passed the occasional ramshackle home, but while each one did its best to screw up its little section of the shore, there were too few of them to do a thorough job, and the lake remained beautiful. I was enchanted.

We'd picked up two policemen as passengers before climbing into the mountains, and they proved useful when we arrived at the ferry station, as their offensive hand gestures to the guard got us directed to the front of the queue of vehicles. When we arrived the ferry had not yet made an appearance, and after seeing the driver, co-driver and two policemen all amble away, I correctly presumed that we'd be hanging about for a while, so got out and found myself a sunny spot on the bridge where I waited out 90 minutes. At least the music had stopped. I'd had to listen to what sounded like a fight between a synthesiser and a eunuch for the previous hour.

The women all stayed put. It was a warm day, we were out amongst mountains and lakes, and not one of them budged from the *furgon*. They never spoke to each other, I didn't see a single one of them with a book or a magazine or any other form of entertainment – they just sat. When the cars started moving, we made our way through a tunnel behind a fume-belching bus, with the windows wide open so that we could suck in as many vehicle emissions as possible – and then emerged on the other side to be attacked by a raging mob.

There were probably only about 40 of them, and they were mostly women and children, but when they saw us they charged as one unit from where they'd been sitting and surrounded our *furgon*, grasping through the drivers' open windows while scrumming and shouting. It seemed that they very desperately wanted a lift back in the other direction, which confused me as I thought I was taking one *furgon* all the way through to Bajram Curri. I knew I was wrong when the women on board slowly gathered their bags and sons and electric fans, and started to fight their way out against those fighting to get it.

I had no idea what to do. If I got out there, how would I get into Bajram Curri on the other side? All the other *furgons* getting onto the ferry looked full, and for the first time the language problem became a problem. Eventually it was just me, the driver and one other girl left inside, and she looked at me and said, "We have to get off here." I nearly embraced her. It wasn't what I wanted to hear, but at least I understood it. She introduced herself as Esmiranda Zenelat, and assured me that the driver would first find us seats on another *furgon*, which he did after parting the crowds for us and helping with our bags. I was going to make it to my destination.

It happened again on the ferry – the women stayed put on the bus. For two hours with no entertainment, in the bottom of the boat, squashed between all the other cars and *furgons*, in the hot, breathy fug of eight other women's recycled air, they sat. This being their choice when the alternative was to stand up on deck and breathe in mountain air while taking in scenery so enveloping that it ties you into an inescapable knot of sky and cliffs and water. It was spectacular, and when I later asked Esmiranda why she didn't come up to the deck she shrugged and said, "I have seen it many times." Which I accepted for a while, until I realised that I still marvel at Table Mountain every time I drive past it, and I'm not about to stop asking for a table with a view when I eat out in my own city.

So I wandered around by myself on deck, taking far too many photos, and started closing in on an Israeli tour group when I heard some of them speaking some English. I was initially disappointed to find that my risky border-region ferry trip was mainstream enough to attract tour groups, but I was still glad to be doing it, and even gladder after striking up a conversation with their Albanian translator, Ilia Grillo.

He was from Tirana and taught the English course in the main university there for most of the year, while working for a tour group in the holidays. I liked him immediately, not just because he was friendly, but because when I told him I was from South Africa he didn't stroke his cheek and say, "*Afrika?*", but smiled and exclaimed, "Ah! *Hoe gaan dit met jou?*"

He had learnt to speak six European languages fluently in his life, but English was the one he moved to Tirana to study at age 15, and English was the only one he really still spoke. He learnt some Afrikaans in the late 1990s when working as a translator for a group of South African engineers. They were looking to invest in the Albanian chrome mines, and for a while the project

meant he would have to spend some time in Johannesburg, but it never ended up happening so he had not seen South Africa. He was however very well travelled for an Albanian, thanks to his previous work as a government translator. He'd been to New York a few times, as well as Italy, the UK, Bulgaria, Sweden, Hungary, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia, Greece and Turkey – quite a feat on one of the world's most disrespected passports. He said that he would love to travel more, but refused to do so now unless it was arranged for him for business, as he had grown tired of how badly embassies treated him because he was Albanian.

It could have been much easier if he took a Greek passport, which he was able to do since his father was born in the Himara region, but Ilia is also a self-proclaimed nationalist, and although he has childhood friends who have taken the Greeks up on their offer, he doesn't want to do the same. He calls the Greek government's relationship towards Albania "chauvinistic", and was also certain that Greece had still not dissolved its official state of war with Albania.

"Would it be a loss of integrity, to take their passport?" I asked.

"Yes. And I am suspicious of their intentions. I worry that they will make claims on southern Albania when there are enough people there with Greek passports."

Under the instruction of the party, Ilia had taught in Peshkopia, a small town on the Macedonian border, for 15 years. That was how life was – you were told what to study, if you were lucky enough to get a tertiary education, and were then told where in the country your skills were needed. As a child, the 10-month school year included a month of military training and a month of labour camp. And while my mind immediately conjured up horrible images of overworked, skinny children, he shook his head and said, "It wasn't like you'd think. We liked it; we had fun. We would all take a bus down to the south and live and work together there for a month." The citrus and olive groves that we'd driven past on the hills to Himara had been prepared and planted by Ilia and his classmates, amongst many thousands of others. He made it sound as cheerful as any school camp.

As we neared civilisation litter started to float past the ferry, and I clenched my teeth watching a few people toss packets over the edge. Where we pulled into the dock on the lake's far side the litter had piled in drifts against the shore, and I wanted to cry at the short-sightedness, and implored Ilia for an explanation, but the best he could give me, as did Colli and Edvin and everyone else, was a lack of education. It was starting to wear thin.

Hospitality and the Etiquette of No Toilet Paper

Albania was the only country to come out of World War II with a larger Jewish population than it began with, and that's about the best evidence I can give of exactly how hospitable its people are. Northern Albanian life has always been guided by a strict set of laws, which for the past 500 years or so have been clustered under a *kanun* (canon), of which the versions differ depending on the region you come from. The basic principles remain unchanged though, and the two foremost pillars of life remain honour (both family and personal honour) and hospitality. It's that important – there are 64 articles in the *Kanun* regarding hospitality and the correct treatment of a guest. It is accepted that a guest's life is more important than your own, which is why you can read stories about Jewish refugees coming into Albania during the war, and not only being safely hidden, but having one of their host's sons hidden with them, as a sign of faith. The commitment is unquestioning, and it explains why I was treated so well as a foreigner.

It's been said that, "There are no foreigners in Albania, there are only guests," and to abuse that attitude would be shameful, but when Esmiranda turned to me on the *furgon* and said, "If you have no hotel in Bajram Curri, would you like to come stay at my home?" I jumped at the chance.

Her parents were waiting for us at the middle-of-nowhere patch of road where she instructed the driver to stop. This was Bujan, the village where she had grown up, still several kilometres before Bajram Curri. They spoke no English but greeted me kindly, with big smiles, and after climbing the small hill to their home the whole family sat on one side of the lounge (grandmother included) and I was directed to sit on the other. Esmiranda said that her parents had asked her to translate for them and continued, "They say that now you are in their house, they will be your mother and father," and they beamed at me and I beamed back at them.

Esmiranda had learnt her English through a course she did after moving to Tirana. She had struggled to finish high school, as it was "difficult" for a girl to go to school in the north in the late 1990s, with the internal conflict on top of the Kosovan war, being raged just a day trip away. She worked in Tirana now as a dental technician, and tried to come home at least once a month, but the trip involved travelling for eight hours on a Sunday (she worked Saturdays), staying one night and then getting up at 4.30am on Monday to be back at work by lunchtime.

It was exhausting loyalty, but she was obviously happy to do it. She was 27, and had never been anywhere but home and Tirana and the road and lake in between. She had never seen the glorious, turquoise Adriatic and Ionian seas that edged her country. She considered me very brave for travelling by myself, saying that she had heard before of women doing so, but had always assumed that they were on their way to meet family. And yet, for her to have moved to the big city, she couldn't be as conservative as she seemed.

Her two older brothers both still stayed at home, but that was custom – women move from their villages to live in the home of their husband's family, and so it was that her oldest brother's pregnant wife stayed with him in a room upstairs, in his parents' house. Esmiranda's parents seemed to still be very much in love, and were affectionate with each other while I was there, but the history of northern marriages is far harsher. Where weddings created strategic alignments between families, love was seen as "the unfortunate inclination of the young and inexperienced and was definitely not expected to decide the future of a household... Love and marriage existed apart from one another." Love was seen as a weakness in women, and while sexual desire was acceptable in a man, love would make him an unreliable fool. The nervous young bride, having been betrothed since birth, would only meet her groom on the day of the wedding, whereupon her parents would traditionally provide him with a cartridge, for him to shoot her in the back if she ever committed adultery, or betrayed the hospitality of a guest.

The *Kanun* lays out 11 ways in which a man can be dishonoured, amongst them "if someone calls him a liar in front of a group of men", "if his wife is insulted or if she runs off with someone" and "if someone removes the cover of a cooking pot in his hearth". Once dishonoured, the only solution is to enter mediation with the offending party, or to kill them, and start the cycle of a "blood feud". Part of Albania's reputation for gun-slinging lawlessness started when the western world got wind of the highland tradition of blood feuds, and while women and "children" are protected, men are fair game for shooting from the age of eight, when they are considered capable of handling weapons. How it works, in short, is that if you dishonour me or my family, I kill one of your men, which in turn dishonours your family, so you kill one of mine, and so on, until mediation begins.

One Albanian proverb says, "Kill a man but do not insult him," as killing can be honourable, but insulting someone will only get you killed. It's not considered murder, hence police are mostly not involved, and the killing is done to regain honour publicly so it is in no way hidden. It also cannot be escaped – years of cases show victims being tracked down in towns across Albania as well as other countries, and modern migration has allowed feuds to continue in Greece, Italy and the UK. It's estimated that more than 1 000 Albanian children are currently being hidden from blood feuds, and forgoing schooling and any other life outside of their homes as a result.

The feuds were thought to have nearly died out under communism, when they were outlawed, but the mess of the redistribution and privatisation of land from the co-operative farms thereafter started a whole new spate of them, as well as seeing some feuds dug up that had been dormant for fifty years. Up until the 1920s it's estimated that as much as 30% of the northern Albanian male population died as a result of blood feuds, which in itself created another cultural peculiarity: the sworn virgin.

The *Kanun's* position on women is that "A woman is known as a sack made to endure as long as she lives in her husband's house." Women traditionally had no rights, and were considered the property of their husbands. They therefore could not own anything themselves, and could not inherit. Families with no male heirs found themselves in trouble when their land was bound to be seized by distant relations, and to solve the problem a daughter would occasionally be raised as a son. Either that, or she would decide of her own accord to rather live life as a man, and therefore take on the right to inherit. The change involves the swearing of a *besa*, a sacred oath, which is mostly done publicly rather than being a clandestine procedure. The sworn virgin will then change her name to a masculine one, and as the term suggests, abstain from sexual relations or marriage for the rest of her life. She lives a man's life from then on, that is to say, a far more privileged one, taking on his rights and his responsibilities, as it's her role then to avenge the family in blood feuds. The change has no link to lesbianism, as is the frequent western assumption. Lesbianism is a concept so foreign in Albania that it wasn't even mentioned in the communist-era legislation against homosexuality. Everyone was pretty sure that it was only men that could do that.

Soon after arriving I was escorted to the kitchen table (and shown the brand new dishwasher, not yet hooked up), where a palette of small piles of food awaited me. Sliced white onion, chopped tomato, cucumber and gherkin, a slab of salty homemade goats' milk cheese, thick slices of spicy Kosovan sausage, and two battered and fried egg yolks, all accompanied by a big dish of homemade bread, a bowl of yoghurt and a dish of grapes from the vines that surrounded the house. I was thrilled.

Esmiranda's brothers arrived while she and I ate, and lit up cigarettes that didn't seem to stop burning until I left the next morning, miserable by then that my smelly everyday travelling uniform now smelt of cigarette smoke too. The Albanian tendency for working abroad whenever possible has made them a nation of amateur polyglots, and when someone was unable to speak English, they would usually try talking to me in Italian, Dutch or German before giving up. I was able to speak Afrikaans to Esmiranda's older brother, who had worked in the Netherlands, and between the two of them they would translate everything back to their grandmother and parents, who would smile and nod and occasionally say, "Ah!"

"You would like to see the outhouse?" Esmiranda asked me hesitatingly. One of my books had warned me that half of "village" families still have an outhouse with a hole dug in the ground, rather than an indoor toilet, but Esmiranda had shown me a western bathroom inside earlier when giving me a tour, so I accepted even more hesitatingly, not wanting to be impolite but wondering if I wasn't allowed to use that one. What we proceeded to do was tour the veggie garden and the cowshed, and I was enormously pleased that it was a case of her speaking poor English rather than me being banned from the internal ablutions.

Each trip outside was a pain – only house shoes go inside, and I was wearing tackies that I had to laboriously lace and unlace six times that day, while everyone stood by and waited for me patiently. I had been asked several times if I wouldn't like to see Bajram Curri, and each time graciously declined, saying that I had seen many Albanian towns, but this was the first home I had been into, and I was happy to enjoy the experience. Yet they kept insisting as if they didn't believe me, and they were right not to, as I was lying. Guidebooks tend to err on the side of optimism, and if neither of mine had managed to say a single good thing about Bajram Curri, I was very happy to leave it unseen. I'd done my lake, and I was in the north. A purpose-built litter-strewn district capital I did not need to see. However Esmiranda's mother proposal that we visit Tyrbeja Luzhe, the "very beautiful" village that she came from, did interest me, and so mother, daughter, one son and the African tourist all climbed into the Mercedes.

It was a rough landing – the backseat's springs seem to have given up quite some time ago, and for the first time in my life as a short person, I sat in the back of a car with my folded knees up at eye level. Esmiranda's mother had decided late in life to make up for lost time and her Stalinist government's pettiness, and had started learning to drive. After crossing the car-less main road, her youngest son, Kirejald, therefore pulled over and let her into the driver's seat. I can't say I wasn't nervous – there was as much shouting and tension as there would be in any son-mother driving lesson, but when it got dramatic Mrs Zenelat would look at her son while shouting at him. He would in turn grab at the steering wheel to correct it, and I would continue my fervent but surreptitious hunt for the seatbelt clip. Esmiranda kept smiling reassuringly at me and asking if I was scared, which always received a hearty "Nooo!" as a reply. Her mother grinned when I congratulated her with "Bravo! Bravo!" as we pulled up at the house, and nearly hit four of her nephews.

"Come here, motherfucker!" yelled one of the boys.

Allow me to set the scene. I was sitting on a couch surrounded by three generations of women, politely sipping the syrupy cordial I'd been given as a symbol of a sweet welcome. The older women, in headscarves, were quite excited at my presence, and while their Albanian conversation mostly drifted over me, my ears pricked up and I smiled at them whenever I heard "*Afrika*". Every time I was passed a fresh plate of grapes (three times in one sitting), I thanked them with *faleminderit*, to everyone's delight, and they all repeated it joyfully after me.

The four unruly nephews never stopped running – they were aged between about 6 and 14 and they were constantly sprinting around the yard, through the lounge, giving a quick kiss to a great aunt and then shouting off after each other again, with their grubby jerseys tucked into their tracksuit pants. My novelty value meant that they would occasionally yell the few English phrases that they'd learnt in school: "Hello! Howareyou? Whatareyousaying? Bye-bye! Bye-bye! Bye-bye!"

None of the women reacted – they understood no English; so when the 10-year-old came careering through the door with a “Come here, motherfucker!” no-one batted an eyelid. And I came close to choking up my cordial while trying not to laugh.

Later I crouched at the thick ankles of our hostess, Mrs Zenelat's sister-in-law, watching her make the literal daily bread, with a bowl the size of the circle of my arms and a wooden spoon that reached halfway up her thigh. Everyone else was amused at my amusement, but the scale of what she was doing, and did every day to feed her huge household, was a terrifying amount of work. Sliced bread suddenly did seem like a terribly worthwhile invention.

At least this mother of four boys probably wasn't now also forced to hold down a factory job. Under communism, women were granted the joys of equality, which for them meant a harder life than ever before. Their compulsory day jobs on co-operative farms or in industrial plants were just added on top of their physically demanding domestic duties – which back then included chopping and collecting firewood and fetching water – while “equality” for men included no liability for sharing housework. Abortion was illegal until 1991, and contraceptives also banned, providing no respite from ever-growing families. They were in fact encouraged as Hoxha tried to get the birth rate booming (then peaking at three times its current rate), and the party paid bonuses for each newborn. Medals of encouragement were given to women who really popped them out with enthusiasm: a Mother's Medal for six kids, a Glory Medal for nine and the Heroine Mother's Medal for twelve. That's a lot of sex to have with someone who sees you as a sack.

I woke in the backseat to see Esmiranda tossing a chip packet out the window, and was incensed. I didn't want to believe it. I had taken eight days of mindless littering and it was about to break me. I hate having to admit the inexplicably bad in someone I've decided to like, but what on earth could I say to her when she'd opened her home to me? I hadn't even wanted to raise the subject of littering with her over lunch, when every other English-speaking Albanian I met had been grilled on it.

Within seconds the sign for Bajram Curri went by, and I realised that my tour group had decided to take me there when I was caught napping, and then I was really grumpy. I didn't *want* to see their horrid town, and when we got there it proved itself to be an even bigger shit-hole than I was expecting. Or rather, even smaller, meaning its residents hadn't had to waste much time to transform the place into a dump. I sulked at their diligence while I watched three dogs, two boys and one cow scratch through the heaps of filth surrounding a cluster of overflowing rubbish tips.

I wanted to turn to Esmiranda and start finger-wagging, and go, “You see this? This filth? This is what all your surroundings turn to if you don't stop dumping your crap wherever the fuck you want.” Except it would have fallen on deaf ears, because no-one's bothered about what their city looks like – as long as the rubbish isn't in their own homes. But if South Africa lets Albanian

passport-holders in one day and they come throw their crap around like that in *my* surroundings, I will be right on top of them in a second.

To be fair, Bajram Curri was beautiful from a distance. I had stood in Mrs Zenelat's village, at the edge of a vineyard, and admired its seat below dramatically folded grey and green mountains. It is this mountainous part of the country that greeted 465 000 ethnic Albanian Kosovan refugees in 1999, after they crossed the nearby border to be saved by the hospitality they'd been raised to respect. It is also this mountainous part of the country that was loved and well known by one of Albania's heroines, and probably its most unlikely one.

Edith Durham was born in London in 1863, and started a promising career as an artist before having to sideline her own ambitions in order to nurse her ailing mother. Her doctor insisted that she take two months' holiday outside of England each year to avoid falling into depression herself, and so she began travelling around the Balkans. She started in 1900 with a cruise down the Dalmatian Coast, which she sealed by hiring a horse and riding across the mountains into Montenegro. The experience inspired her to learn Serbian upon her return to London, and her trips thereafter took her to Montenegro four times, through much of Serbia, into Kosovo, and to Albania for the first time in 1903.

She was a tough horsewoman who comprehensively covered Albania's infamous northern mountains in the years thereafter – ground very few foreign men had dared traverse before – and befriended hundreds of clansmen along the way, earning herself the title of “The Highlanders' Queen”. Her aim was to learn as much as possible about Albanian people and their land in an attempt to find answers to the Balkan Question – a history of border disputes that had long occupied the world's Great Powers. She won respect for her international representation of the Albanian cause and her humanitarian work during times of northern conflict (when she provided aid at her own expense), and the country still has roads and schools named after the incongruous Englishwoman who rode the mountains in her waterproof Burberry skirt and Scotch plaid golf cape.

National admiration was displayed through the awarding of the Order of Skanderbeg to Durham by King Zog, who was probably an even more interesting character than she was, though not someone of whom she was particularly fond, referring to him as “ignorant and uncultured”. Zog was also a northerner, and ruled Albania prior to World War II, after advancing himself from minister to prime minister to president, before deciding that Albania would be better off with a king, and making himself such in 1928. He retained the title (largely by only his own claims) until Mussolini's annexation of Albania in 1939, when he fled the country with his wife, two-day-old son, and the rest of his court, after snatching 550 000 gold francs from the national treasury on his way out. While he was in power his household expenses had made up nearly 2% of the national budget, so he doubtless had no qualms in justifying the credit.

Zog had spent much of his time as king hiding from the 600 blood feuds that wanted his life, and is said to have survived 55 attacks. One of them occurred outside a Venetian opera house, and is noted for being the only assassination attempt in modern history when a Head of State actually returned fire on his attackers.

After ten years as a bachelor king, his desperation to wed saw him sending his gaggle of sisters (known by the foreign press as "the Zoglets") out across Europe's ballrooms to hunt down a bride. Countess Geraldine Apponyi de Nagy-Apponyi was found selling souvenirs in a Budapest museum, and the photo that was sent home of her was immediately approved. He proposed to her within 18 hours of their first meeting; he was 42, she was twenty years his junior. Their wedding gifts included a "scarlet supercharged Mercedes convertible" from Hitler (identical to his own), and within a year Geraldine had proved her worth by bearing the kingdom a male heir. During the life in exile that followed for the royal family, Zog never stopped trying to rally international support for a return to his throne. He died on the French Riviera at the age of 66, looking not a day under 85 – probably helped by his almost implausible smoking habit which reportedly saw him go through 250 cigarettes a day.

Leka Zogu, the heir to the throne, was kicked out of Thailand for arms smuggling before he settled down and found himself a queen in Susan Cullen-Ward, an Australian commoner whose family claimed lineage from King Edward I. The quest to regain the Zogu throne in Albania then became even more difficult when the supposed royal family's connections to the country were so tenuous. The queen mother was a Hungarian who'd spent only 14 months there, the king had left at all of two days old and had never been back since, and the new queen had never been anywhere near the borders.

The happy couple based themselves in Spain until Leka was caught with Thai bodyguards and an arms cache – evidence fishy enough for another government to ask him to leave. (When I told Will, SJ's boyfriend, about the pretender-to-the-throne's arms-dealing hobby, he spluttered in outrage and took it as proof of "the natural criminality coursing through his veins", despite Leka having only ever spent two days in the country.) The family then settled in Rhodesia until Mugabe came to power in 1980, when they befriended the South African government instead. The National Party happily granted them diplomatic status and allowed them to live in Bryanston for the next twenty years, even going so far as to declare their Johannesburg maternity ward as Albanian soil for the hour of their son's birth, to be sure that the crown prince was born in the land of his supposed future crown. Life was also made easier by their connections with the CIA, Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon, who was a cousin of Geraldine's. In 1997 Leka won only a third of the votes in a referendum to restore Albania's monarchy, but moved permanently to the country with Queen Geraldine, Queen Susan and Prince Leka in 2002. It was only in 2006, when living in Tirana, that Leka senior finally gave up on his father's dreams, and announced his retirement from political life.

Mr Zenelat welcomed me back to the house with a big smile and a clap of his hands, to reassure me that we were having a good time. He would routinely let me know how happy he was to have me as his guest by catching my eye across a room, beaming at me and shaking his fists in the air. I enjoyed his company and wished we could have at least had a conversation, but by that point being in an unfamiliar home was making me irritable. I was surrounded by lace doilies and baskets of fake flowers, I stank of cigarette smoke, Whitney Houston was on the radio, Will Smith was on the TV, and all the while different family members were taking turns to yell over Skype at cousins who lived in America. The language even sounded different to what I'd become used to, and it was – the northerners speak a dialect called Gheg while the rest of the country speaks Tosk, and I was now surrounded by “th” sounds, as if everyone suddenly had a lisping problem. There's actually a town in the north called Thethi.

All the time more people kept arriving and leaving in shifts, and staying for just a quick chat in the lounge. In total I met 29 family members that day, the last of which was Zamira Zenelat, Esmiranda's similarly aged cousin who was engaged to an Albanian engineer living (legally) in the UK. She was awaiting the papers that would allow her to move over and marry him, and was therefore particularly keen to practise her English with me.

Albanians seem to think that only about 1,5 million of their compatriots live abroad, but international estimates note it as the only country in the world with as many nationals living outside its borders as within them – and there are 3,6 million of them inside. The numbers vary widely, and some research lists the number of expatriate Albanians at up to 7 million, but what is certain is that the country depends on them heavily. 14% to 25% of the Albanian GDP is said to come from income sent home by relatives working overseas, one of whom was Zamira's fiancé. The concern is that most of those who live abroad now will probably stay there, and slowly lose their connections with the distant relatives they once supported. Albania needs to find a balance between the dogged self-sufficiency of its communist years, and its current dependency on foreign aid and escaped relatives, before both of the latter disappear.

When mutton stew was served at 10 o'clock (the normal supper time) I observed the Muslim custom of not eating with my left hand, because for the first time I had had to use my left hand for the most traumatic thing that regular users of western toilet systems can contemplate. I had been on my way to the normal toilet upstairs when Esmiranda redirected me to the nearer “Turkish” one instead. It was a very familiar set-up, and I'd used similar systems many times before, even during that trip, but never without toilet paper in an hour of need. I tried to wipe the experience from my mind while eating, but kept finding myself staring at my left hand as if it were no longer a part of my body.

After dinner I had to return to the scene of my humiliation, as the shower was positioned directly over the same white hole in the bathroom floor, and I placed my feet cautiously on either side of it and prayed not to slip. I was to sleep on a spare bed in the main bedroom, while Esmiranda and her mother would share the double bed, with its red velvet cover and polyester frills. I crawled thankfully into my flowered sheets beneath a heart on the wall made up of different coloured Christmas lights, and was lulled to sleep to the sound of one of the brothers yelling at someone over Skype. I tried not to dream of toilets in the brief hours before 4:15, when my alarm was due to go off.

It was drizzling the next morning when we started the trip back to Tirana in the dark, and my mood hit a low point after chasing a man's discarded paper cup across the ferry deck in the wind. I had taken some photos of the dock in the dawn light before boarding, and had therefore been freshly reminded of the disgusting drifts of litter washed up on the shore. There was no need to act cheerful about it since Esmiranda was predictably hiding in the *furgon*. Ilia spotted me in my grumpy state though and invited me to come down to the cabin and meet his boss, Fatos. Their tour group had passed over to Montenegro and had become the responsibility of another travel company, but Fatos' presence was an indication of the level to which corruption had affected business. As the company's owner he had to come along on this trip to negotiate with the border police, in case there was any trouble.

I was torn: my last chance to stand on deck and take in the spectacular lake scenery, versus a further conversation with two English-speaking Albanians. I couldn't stare at the offending litterers for much longer without hitting them, so I opted to meet Fatos, and managed to bring up the litter problem within about five minutes. When he also gave me the excuse of education, I finally protested.

"Surely you can't place that responsibility on schools? Isn't respect for your environment something you should learn in your home, from your own parents and family, and schools should only really be responsible for reinforcing those lessons? How do you break the cycle if you teach school children not to litter but their parents keep doing it in front of them?"

He apologised that his English wasn't very good, and said that he didn't know.

After working in the Tirana airport during communism, Fatos started his travel company in 1991, which made it one of the oldest private companies in the country. He had passed up the opportunity to take a Green Card several times, and was therefore a rare species for me: an Albanian that didn't want to be an American. He told me about his brother, who was a professor of Balkan History at Harvard. He had been in the States for ten years; his sons were now grown and had American wives, and without them in the house, he and his wife were starting to miss Albania, and feel disconnected from family life. They'd recently bought an apartment in Tirana, and he was looking forward to retiring and moving back there permanently within two years.

Fatos was confident that his American pension would provide them with a very comfortable standard of living in Albania.

And suddenly the obvious fact of national pride came to me – that despite America having helped him become eminent in his field, and having provided his family with a stable base, it was not home to him. Albania, with its power cuts and water cuts and corruption and struggling economy was where Ilia and Fatos and Fatos' brother all wanted to live, and personally witness its slow improvement. I felt stupid for thinking that America was where they really wanted to be. Certainly many Albanians do, and most who go probably choose to stay, but it's not that they'd all rather be American than Albanian. They just want to see Albania have the same kind of success – America is their goalpost.

University of Cape Town

Rather Bad Ice-Cream than a Bad Suitor

I was cowering inside the *furgon*. The driver had pulled up to the petrol pump, jumped out while the engine was still running, and was now lighting up a cigarette while chatting to the attendant. He was the first *furgon* driver I'd had that could have competed with some of South Africa's more lawless minibus taxis. The bus drivers had all been fantastic so far, but this guy was just stupid behind the wheel. While I was contemplating the odds of having my short life ended at the hands of a reckless idiot somewhere in Albania, he hooted up the back of a learner driver's car, and overtook him so that the Mercedes coming in the opposite direction was forced to create a new lane halfway off the road. And then gave a fat snort and spat a wad of mucus out the window.

The Albanian roads are generally not a safe place to be, and just how bad they are is illustrated in the memorial stones that are visible everywhere you drive. They're ornate affairs: big slabs of sculpted granite holding framed photos of the dead and always a luminescent selection of fake flowers. And yet, with accident statistics like theirs, absolutely no-one in Albania wears seatbelts. Women sit merrily in the passenger seat with their babies on their laps, and no-one gives a thought to preventing their child's picture ending up on yet another roadside tombstone.

I was on my way to Pogradec. It took me two days to get that right – that it was Pogradec, not Podgorica, the confusingly similar sounding capital of neighbouring Montenegro (to the north). Pogradec is on the Macedonian border (in the east), and I was going there to see the Albanian half of Lake Ohrid, simply because I thought it might be pretty.

Just before 8am we made a breakfast stop, and when Meat Lump in Soup was served then too, it was proved to me beyond doubt that it was the only roadside meal available in the country, regardless of the time of day. I opted against it again, and chose to rather read outside, where I picked at the remains of a bag of mixed nuts and raisins that I found in my pack, and tossed the chickpeas into a pot plant, like a fussy kid.

After about ten minutes one of the young men from the *furgon* came outside with a Coke, gestured that it was for me, and placed it on my table. Just like that. He said nothing, but had obviously thought that I might like something to drink, as all the other passengers were sitting together inside with their meals, so he bought me a Coke, and then left me alone again. I was so touched by the gesture that I drank most of it, forgetting my cardinal rule of always parching myself on public transport so as to avoid dodgy toilets.

My plans for Pogradec were simple: eat *koran*. It's a type of local salmon, and under communism only party members were allowed to fish it from the lake. In the early 1990s when the party had lost control and the country was wracked by food shortages, Pogradec started to fish for *koran*, and the species is now on the Red List, with its surviving numbers unknown.

Guidebook Gillian was the leave-only-footprints variety of traveller, and noted that I could enjoy the very tasty salmon guilt-free if I ate it from the restaurant on the *koran* farm – to be found eight kilometres down the road in Driloni. I assumed that the farm would probably not be all that well known outside of Greenpeace circles, and they probably didn't stop by Pogradec very often, so I spent some time with my nose in my translation dictionary before hunting down a taxi driver.

"Pogradec. Driloni. *Koran fermë. Drekë. Kthim* Pogradec. *Quanto?*" I got the hang of it pretty quickly (to my ears at least), and I was happy with the price my selected taxi man scribbled down on the paper I gave him, so we set off, and ended up at a hotel in Driloni with big fish ponds. I have no doubt that they served *koran* – everywhere in Driloni did – but they didn't look like they were farming them. I repeated "*Koran fermë. Koran fermë,*" a few times, as I was all out of other options and decided to give a chance to the If-No-One-Understands-You-Speak-Louder-And-Repeat-Yourself approach. We got back in the Mercedes and he tried another spot, with a bigger fish pond, and I gave up. Not to say that I went back to the hotel: I decided that I'd had a bash at going green, and things hadn't worked out. I wasn't going to leave Pogradec without eating my salmon, so I was going to eat whatever *koran* was on offer right there. And it happened to be fantastic *koran*, in a quaint and lovely setting. In fact it happened to actually be the *koran* farm I'd been looking for, although I only realised that when I watched some of them being caught from the pond as I was leaving.

I sat on a wooden deck beneath willow trees along a winding pond that held various fish, ducks, geese and swans, and took my shoes off, zipped off the bottom half of my pants, and put my feet up on the railing in the sun. I got to finally have a Korça Pils, a beer that I'd been trying to find for a long time, but now that Korça was only half an hour away, it seemed that stock was finally not a problem.

It was probably the best grilled salmon I've ever had – sweet, moist and flaking – and after devouring a whole fish along with the three salads and hand-cut chips that came with it, I felt obliged to make my *xhiro* along the promenade a vigorous one that evening.

Pogradec looked like it was sponsored by Foster's. Big "Surf's Up" billboards featured tanned Australians in their beach gear, and advertised the Foster's ASP Men's World Tour. None of it made any sense in a conservative little Albanian lake town, and I'm not sure if the marketing director ever thought of that set-up when adamantly declaring that his brand messaging was going to be consistent, regardless of where it went in the world. The blue Foster's awnings and garden furniture that filled the lawns along the lakeside were definitely appreciated though, and during *xhiro* they housed dozens of domino-playing old men, who filled the evening with their shouts and the clatter of hundreds of tiles slapping tables. They dressed only in blue, grey and brown, and wore jerseys, jackets and caps, seemingly with no regard to the late summer weather.

The benches held old women in housecoats and long socks, who took the opportunity to remove their plastic slippers and put up their swollen feet while having a natter.

My evening was cut short when a middle-aged Italian man named Giuseppe set his sights on me and insisted on buying me a drink. We had no common language, but he refused to give up on a conversation, and managed to communicate that he was from Rome, was 40 years old (unlikely – he looked at least 50), and had no wife or children. Our conversation was understandably stunted, and in the pauses he would stare at me and say "Bellissimo. Bellissimo," which quickly became uncomfortable (though it was good to not be thought of as a sack), so once my bottle of water was finished I excused myself and said I needed to sleep. Considering that it was 8pm, he didn't believe me and I was annoyed at his astuteness, but didn't know how to stop him from walking me back to my hotel. I couldn't risk running into him again in the very small town, so I was confined to the hotel for the rest of the night, and hid myself behind a pillar to have an ice-cream in the restaurant. My order was disappointing, as I knew it would be – ice-cream and gnocchi being the two Italian things that Albania hasn't got right yet – but I still couldn't stop myself. At that point I'd been proactively disappointing myself with substandard ice-cream at least once every two days.

I ambled to my room up staircases and down corridors where no lights worked, and everything felt a bit like a set from *The Shining*. My shower was useless and chose to shoot water out the sides of the showerhead rather than the nozzles, so I drenched the bathroom before managing to get myself half damp, and went to bed bored with Pogradec.

When Apathy Causes Cancer

I arrived in Korça already lost. Yet again no-one in the *furgon* recognised a map of the place, and I climbed out with no idea as to where I might be. I was growing despondent with how regularly my maps were rendered useless if I was the only one who understood them. I decided to walk in one direction until seeing somewhere likely to have an English speaker, but as soon as I saw the first *Mobilieri* sign I knew I was in trouble. My experience of driving through Tirana's outskirts had taught me that furniture stores, like bridal stores, flock together. If you have one, you have a kilometre-long stretch of them, and sure enough when I looked into the distance the signs were lined up to the horizon, each one as unlikely as the next to ever deal with English-speaking customers.

I needed a new plan, and when I looked to my left the large yellow sign of a Raiffeisen Bank called to me like a loudhailer. I almost skipped across the road, and once inside was soothed by the perfect English of one of the young bank employees who sent me trotting merrily down Rruga Miss Edith Durham to find my hotel of choice. I found a favourite new landmark on the way in a billboard that shouted "Ice Cold Sexy Drink!" You can't ask for much more than that in a product name – I was a bit put out that I never got to try one.

Through the market stalls, round the muddy puddles, beneath the archways, I found Han i Elbasanit, my extraordinarily cheap hotel for the night. It was set in a 19th-century Ottoman home; double-storied with a huge courtyard in the middle, overlooked by a circular wooden balcony onto which all the rooms led. I was welcomed by a stooped and wrinkled man of few teeth and huge ears, who seemed delighted to see me. He looked very frail, and would interrupt himself occasionally with coughs, each time sticking his pointed little tongue out the side of his mouth. At first I took him to be a manager or owner, then realised he was a full-time boarder who just found company in chatting to foreign visitors. His name was Ilia Kita (Ilia being a common first name), and he had been staying in a sad and bare little hotel room on a sad and bare little pension since his house was burnt down in the 1997 turmoil. Yet after detailing for me the trying conditions in which he lived, he was always sure to add, "But I am not depression."

Regardless, I was frustration with him when I returned to the hotel after three hours of exploring to find that he'd pawned the other half of my room off on a German girl. He was thrilled to see me since he needed my keys back, which were apparently the only set. It may be worth noting here that I had no intention of sharing my room when I checked in, and was mildly miffed with my elderly friend that he had put it on offer without consulting me. He persistently told me what a "nice girl" she was, and that there were no other "high quality" rooms left, and he couldn't possibly put her in a "bad quality" room. The latter were the domain of the "others" – nation-less wanderers who hung their laundry over the balcony. The difference was not in the room so much

as the shared bathroom. Either way you were sharing, but the “bad quality” bathroom was located by the stench of urine by which it was surrounded. Ilia’s room was right next door, and I had worried at first that the smell was his.

I had little choice with the room-sharing – I’d lost faith in Ilia’s character judgment since he’d sent me off on a bus a few hours earlier with “two nice French boys,” who turned out to be two mutes in their forties. They were either socially inept or felt no need to hide the fact that they had absolutely no desire to talk to me, so we escaped from each others’ company (if you could call it that) as soon as was possible. Still, I could hardly condone the injustice of a German girl staying in a low quality room for one night, so I handed over my keys (for the room and the bathroom) and strode off moodily to sulk at a café with a spinach and cheese *byrek* in one hand and an ice-cream in the other.

“Are you doing homework?” asked the guy at the next table.

I had noticed him sitting alone while writing in my notebook and watching the circus of parallel parking happening next to me. I’d purposefully avoided eye contact as I didn’t feel up to the pointless exchange of words which would lead to us agreeing that we didn’t have a language in common, so his question took me by surprise.

His name was Ardit Baliko, he was 28 years old, and he was one of Albania’s envied young winners of the Green Card lottery. He had moved to St Louis four years earlier, without knowing a word of English, and was now managing the car valet service at the downtown Marriott Hotel, while studying for his MBA part-time. He was home for two months’ holiday, and was bored to death, so was only too pleased to kill time by taking me on a tour of the city. I was still grateful for an apple that a fruit vendor hadn’t let me pay for that morning, so Korça was earning big hospitality points now that I had a free personal tour guide.

The family Mercedes was causing him grief. He’d grown accustomed to driving “stick shift” from his job, and nearly stalled the car when taking us up a hill to the forgotten old church I had requested to see. Really just because it apparently had one of those gloriously macabre frescoes that show the types of beastly punishments that await sinners in hell – snake attacks and rape and such. I went to a Buddhist temple once that had life-sized sculptures of men being held upside down and sawn in half lengthways by demons, but this wasn’t nearly as good, so we didn’t stay long.

After being shown other churches, schools, the university where he had studied, a soccer stadium, and all of the coffee shops in which Ardit had been passing the previous month, we ended up at the Korça brewery. And when in a brewery, one should drink beer, so we did. We drank at a plastic table in the dust, under the shade of vines and fir trees, and with half a litre of freshly pulled draught in me and witty banter at hand, I was in a much happier space to go back and meet the “nice German girl”.

And she actually was a nice German girl, who I found out had somehow managed to sleep in the hotel room next door to mine the previous night in Pogradec, without us ever seeing each other. She had been in Albania for two weeks already, also having spent the first week with her sister, and was convinced that the two of us must be the only foreign women in the country travelling by ourselves. I had to mention the Australian girl that SJ and I had met at Butrint, but she had probably crossed the border by then, so maybe we were. And we liked feeling a bit intrepid.

Elke had been studying anthropology in Hamburg for seven years, and was in Albania deciding if she was quite done yet. Technically she was taking a month's holiday, but her masters thesis was written on Albanian migration, and she was having a look around to see if she felt like doing her PhD too, which would mean moving to Tirana for six months and learning Albanian.

Ilia interrupted our conversation after a while to tell me that the museum would be closing soon, and as I wanted to see it I had promised him that we could walk there together. He spoke Russian, Italian and Greek, but had learnt English only six years before, and insisted I correct him as we walked. Years ago he had dreamt of working as a waiter on a cruise ship, he told me, and learning foreign languages was a way of improving his chances. I couldn't get the timing to add up: I had judged him to be about 80 from his appearance, but he couldn't have started working towards being a waiter in his 70s, surely? And he did walk very well for an octogenarian. I hoped he wasn't watching my eyebrows when he said he was 65.

The explanation for early aging came out later – Ilia had been a maths teacher during communism, and was at one point reported to the Sigurimi (secret police) by his colleagues, for his resistance to toeing the party line. His punishment was a year's labour in a chrome mine prison camp. The horrors of the regime suddenly became real to me when taking in the cause for his prematurely crooked frame. It was noted by Western observers that no other communist country had a secret police force as large as Albania's plainclothes Sigurimi, proportionate to the size of its population. Some records say that one in every three Albanians either spent time in a prison camp or was interrogated by the Sigurimi during Hoxha's rule, and their interrogation methods were noted in a 1961 report in *TIME* as being gruesomely inventive, including the use of poisonous snakes and electric cages. Physical and mental torture of those in the prison camps was common, and 1 000 prisoners are recorded as being killed during sporadic rebellions, while many others were tried and then executed thereafter; often by firing squad. Sentences were sometimes passed without trial in the first place, and often applied to whole families that would then be sent off to the camps as a group, despite the supposed guilt of only one relative.

Ilia's stance against the party was understandably now stronger than it had been before his sentence, and he told me several times that communism was worse for Albania than apartheid was for South Africa. His reasoning being that the values of the government could not be aligned to the values of a family, which was why he felt he could never marry and have

children himself. I'm not sure if he ever thought of the perspective of a black family under apartheid, but regardless, his only family was his brother, and their relationship upset him even further. His brother was still convinced of what he had been taught under communism, and believed that Ilia deserved the punishment he was dealt by the party. For Ilia to protest would be to drive a wedge between the two of them, so he bit his tongue and became more distressed at how a government had managed to infiltrate and damage his family and so many others.

His opposition to the current government was practically as firm, mostly because he saw it as unchanged. His main gripe was Sali Berisha, a heart surgeon who had been a party member for 12 years under communism, and was now the prime minister and leader of the Democratic Party. Berisha's main opposition, the Socialist Party, started off as the new look for the PPSH, which was the ruling party during communism. Between the Socialists and the Democrats they've passed control of the country back and forth several times since communism, but too many of them come from the old guard. In Ilia's mind the country was in the hands of the same villains who had pushed it into its worst years, and in his eyes a population of poor, honest people was up against a minority of "rich scoundrels".

"Albania's government is not a democracy but a hypocrisy," he repeatedly said to me. "Write it down. Albania's government is not a democracy but a hypocrisy."

It was nearly closing time when we arrived at the museum, and I was only able to view the gallery of religious icons, which were beautiful enough for me to want one for my home, despite my complete lack of affinity with Christianity. Most of the works were gathered from communities that had looted their churches of everything they could before the party demolished them, with the intention of saving the contents for a saner future. The works that survive are obviously a tiny fraction of everything that a more normal government would have treasured, but the collection that remains is beautifully presented against deep red walls, and its moon-faced saints are still rich in colour and gold after hundreds of years.

When Ilia and I left and made our way back to the hotel, he seemed to be feeling a bit emotional, and said to me at one point, "If I was younger, I would propose to you and go back to South Africa with you, because you are not beautiful, but you are sympathy."

I briefly corrected him and thanked him with some mild sarcasm for his compliment. "Not beautiful?" I double-checked, but he was adamant.

"I am sorry for the grammatical error. No, not beautiful, but sympathetic. And sympathy is better than beauty, because beauty is cold, but sympathy is warm."

And I couldn't really protest anymore, and just thanked him honestly. But also decided that it was perhaps time to change my travelling uniform of three days and put in a smidgen more effort. A good way to start would have been by putting on some clean clothes when going out for supper with Ardit that night, but he was already waiting at the hotel by the time Ilia and I returned at seven. So I sat at the table feeling particularly unattractive (and a bit guilty, since he'd got

himself all spiffed up with a leather jacket and a generous amount of hair product), and we shared a pizza and a carafe of house red that tasted like it had been made that week.

I was amused by how much Ardit said “man” – it was such a giveaway Americanism, but sat so oddly in his explanations of how much he hated Greeks and Greek-speaking Albanians. He spoke specifically about how differently Albanians were treated in Greece compared to Italy. His parents had lived in Italy for eight years before returning to Korça, and he recalled them being politely greeted in the streets by Italian policemen who knew their origins. Greeks on the other hand were, according to him, prone to shooting Albanians spotted illegally crossing the border, rather than arresting them. And then physically assaulting them before trucking them the 40 kilometres back to Korça.

Because so many Albanians are immigrants in other countries, a lot of their judgment of nations rests with how Albanian minorities are treated there. Ardit’s own position as an immigrant meant that he took it even more personally, and he called Americans racist for the way they were inclined to dislike him. He still resented how he had been exploited in jobs before he knew enough English to defend himself.

He had decided that the American life was not for him. He was used to Albanians fussing over him when they heard that he lived there, because in America *everyone* earns big money – how could you not? It’s the land of opportunities to them, but Ardit got annoyed that none of them knew how much hard work it took to make it there. He didn’t like American women, but wouldn’t say why, and would go out of his way to shop at Italian and Greek supermarkets, because “American food has a funny smell”. He still got particularly peeved when Americans assumed that Albania was a part of the USSR, but I told him he should consider himself lucky that they even guessed that close geographically.

As soon as he finishes his MBA he plans to come home and work in government, and wants to see Edi Rama, Tirana’s mayor, become prime minister. Rama is in his third term since first winning the mayoral election in 2000, and initially gained much international support for the tangible change that he brought to the city. The brightly painted buildings are the most noticeable difference, and they’re apparently there to make the best possible impression on foreign VIPs coming through the city, who in turn can make the biggest difference to the future of Tirana and Albania. (Whether garish apartment blocks actually achieve that goal or not is highly subjective.) Rama also reclaimed the city’s parks, and replanted grass and trees where he had driven out illegal businesses and demolished their ramshackle constructions. In 2001 he was presented with a UN Poverty Eradication Award by Kofi Annan, for his efforts to reduce unemployment, and three years later was named as World Mayor 2004, elected by his own community along with thousands of voters across Europe and North America.

Rama continues to get PR from his quirky position as a professional-artist-turned-mayor, but as of 2006 he is also the head of the Socialist Party, and there are concerns now that his

attention has been divided. Residents are unhappy with service levels as streets have again been going uncleaned, and I was told of builders swearing that they'd had to pay him and his team \$200 000 for each construction project they needed approved.

More scary than corruption, though, is the city's inescapable and carcinogenic dust. It's blamed on the construction boom, on the burning of the city's overloaded landfill site, and mostly on old cars burning inferior fuel (that's banned in the EU), but regardless of where blame is pointed, the dust is currently going nowhere. Responsibility for the problem is passed between the Socialist Party's municipality, and the Democratic Party's government, so fingers keep being pointed but little is done. A World Health Organisation report from October 2007 found that air pollution alone was responsible for 200 deaths in Albania each year. 70 kilograms of dust are now created annually for each citizen in Tirana, and in 2004 the count of PM10s (carcinogenic dust particles) was already ten times the WHO limit. Exposing the lungs to PM10s is estimated to reduce lifespan by 20 to 30%.

Rama's third term win was only partly because of his remaining popularity. In the two-horse race of Albanian politics supporters of the Socialist Party would happily vote for a mayor they had no faith in rather than hand their city over to the Democrats. Others were more rational, prioritising service delivery over political ideology. As one indignant resident told me, "Other people would eat dust and kill their organism just for the sake of politics, but I cannot. My life is dearer than the position of Edi Rama."

In the next general election Rama will be a likely candidate to take the role of prime minister from Sali Berisha of the Democratic Party, who he is convinced tried to have him assassinated in the early days of his political career. Because in Albania, things like that happen. And in Albania, the association of government and exploitation will take a long time to change, so regardless of all the good and bad attached to Edi Rama, Ardit was the only person I met who thought there was a good guy to vote for. And he was planning on being home in time to do it.

Censorship and the Lost Eel

Between Korça and Gjirokastra I managed to lose and then find my camera, my phone and my notebook, one by one, and each time fly into a rampant fit of hunting, the first of which involved breaking the footboard off my bed soon after my alarm went off at 4.20. Elke and I were to be travelling together that day, and I think she may have regretted agreeing to accompany me when noting my complete incompetence. The bus trip was due to take seven hours, but it promised to have views that made it all worthwhile. Gillian had described the “long but spectacular trip” as “starting with the gorges and rapids of Vjosa, then climbing through forests to Vila Gërmenji, and finishing with a run through the imposing Gramoz mountains”.

It was one of the most ghastly trips of my life. I got stuck on the sunny side of the bus, in the only seat with no curtaining, and as long as the sun was in the sky, I was hating every roasting second. On the other side of the aisle, in an air-conditioned world, old men dozed in their jerseys, jackets and caps, and I glared at them with contempt. Elke also napped in her shaded seat next to mine, and I paid bitterly for my greediness in having grabbed the window seat in the pre-dawn cool.

Gjirokastra, however, did its best to make up for the misery I'd gone through to get there. I adored it. I didn't want to leave. The new town, where we were dropped off, was made up of the same neglected blocks of concrete as every other urban centre, but the old town was wonderful. It had been steeply built around the hills, and we walked down the middle of its winding roads, having to dodge donkey manure more often than we did cars. The stone-paving was dotted with squashed figs, and as the streets climbed higher they became footpaths that wound between the upper houses, shaded by vines and fruit trees. Gjirokastra is known as the City of Stone, and its Ottoman houses date back mostly to the first half of the 19th century, although the buildings in some parts are 200 years older than that. It's also known as the “City of a Thousand Steps” because of its steepness, and was described by Ismail Kadare in his book, *Chronicle in Stone*, as “surely the only place in the world where if you slipped and fell in the street, you might well land on the roof of a house.” Kadare was born in Gjirokastra, and is one of Albania's most famous exports, having published dozens of books, won the inaugural Man Booker International Prize in 2005, and yet still managing to not be all that well-known. Six of his books were banned during communism, but he stayed in the country until 1990, when he obtained political asylum in Paris.

Gjirokastra's other famed son was the one targeted in those books, and responsible for banning them: Enver Hoxha, who was born there in 1908, 28 years before Kadare. It was lucky for Gjirokastra too, since Hoxha's connection meant that it was made a “museum city” under communism, saving it from the destruction of the 1960s Cultural Revolution, and the horrors of communist town planning. Its defensive stone architecture is unique to the area, and also earned

the city World Heritage Site status in 2005, so Hoxha couldn't have been going on favouritism alone.

We visited the city's 13th-century castle after a traditional lunch of *qifqi* (the local speciality cakes of fried rice, cheese, egg and mint) and Gjirokastra's famous white cheese. In Korça I'd finally sampled the red berries that I'd passed up on my first bus trip, to Saranda, so I was feeling back on the wagon of adventurous eating. I hadn't particularly enjoyed them – they were squishy and bitter and apparently supposed to provide me with a voracious appetite, which I didn't need – but the ball was rolling. Gjirokastra was supposed to be a good place to eat eel, except that the man at the table next to me took great pleasure from telling me he'd ordered and enjoyed the last one, so *qifqi* it was.

The castle was an odd and gloomy place, holding dank prison chambers (last used during the Nazi occupation), a modern concert area (with a huge and anachronistic iron sculpture of the numbers "2004"), an underground pub, and the shiny shell of an American 1957 military jet. The aircraft proved a great PR-spinner for the communist government, which was able to weave stories of forcing a capitalist spy plane from the skies, but the somewhat less enthralling truth involved a NATO pilot from Italy having to make an emergency landing after running out of fuel. I think I would have preferred Gillian not telling me the second part.

No taxis. Great. I'd woken at 6am (at least it was after dawn, for a change), and stepped into the square, where the hotel manager had personally guaranteed me an array of taxis would await, and there were none. The main road down to the bus stop was too steep and busy to look like fun, but I had little choice, so I set off grumpily downhill for a breakfast of exhaust fumes and was just imagining being mown down by a Mercedes when one pulled up alongside me. I'm not generally one for hitchhiking, or getting into cars in strange towns with two strange men, but I'd learnt enough to make exceptions in Albania, and without any exchanged words besides "Autobus Tirana" and thanks of "*Faleminderit*," they dropped me off and left again.

Elke was going to spend another day in Gjirokastra, so I was alone again, and was starting my way home, from Gjirokastra to Tirana that morning, and over the next two days on to Athens, Joburg and Cape Town. Travelling solo meant having a seat open next to me on the bus to Tirana though, and the woman who sat down there took it upon herself to look after me. She stared at me, smiling, for close on four hours. She was one of the few non-English-speaking Albanians who stopped talking to me when she realised I didn't understand her, but that didn't mean she gave up on communicating – it was just all through smiles and hand movement. And I wasn't really sure about how to say, "I still don't understand you," without using words. She wouldn't get off the bus at the first meal stop until she was confident that I would also get out, and I ended up feeling like I'd cheated on her when she found me sitting at another woman's table. I

missed her though when she got off and was replaced by a girl who was trying her best not to vomit everywhere.

I had been thrilled the day before when the conductor walked up the aisle on the way to Gjirokastra, handing each passenger a plastic bag. Finally! Someone who understood something rudimentary about litter control. I think I was even more excited than I'd been about Pogradec having bins along its promenade, which at the time was quite literally something to write home about. Elke had immediately laughed off my naivety: they were vomit bags, she said. You'd think Albanians would be accustomed to traversing mountain passes by now, but it seems that a fair amount of them are prone to losing their lunch on cross-country trips.

University of Cape Town

Mirupafshim, Albania

I returned to Tirana on a Friday afternoon, with less than 24 hours left before my flight out of Albania, and checked myself into Tirana's only hostel for the fourth and last time, having returned there after each leg of my hub-and-spoke trip. It was situated in a strip of embassies and large old houses, one of which had a sign outside with a large stamped handprint on it, and the exclamation "MJAFT!" It was on the ferry that someone explained the house to me for the first time: *mjaft* means "enough", and is the name of a youth protest organisation – seemingly something of which Albania is in dire need. They use their media connections and base of 7 000 protestors across the country to raise awareness of any issue that they feel needs the attention, from the power and water shortages to human and organ trafficking to the ubiquitous corruption – fighting civic apathy is their priority. They're staunch government watchdogs, keeping an eye on parliamentary procedures, and in the four years that they've been around their efforts have won them the right type of attention. In 2004 they were presented with the United Nations International Award for Civil Society – a title that is only given to one group internationally each year.

I had lunch with Boiken Abazi, the round-faced, friendly guy in charge of fundraising for the organisation, and was surprised that he ended up talking to me for over an hour after I continuously splattered both of us with my seafood pasta sauce. Boiken had gone to boarding school in Greece until his parents lost much of what they had in the 1997 collapse of the pyramid schemes, and called him home to Tirana just as everything was falling apart. He soon grew accustomed to life with a soundtrack of gunfire, and told how when home from London his brother had dived under the table during dinner when he heard shots fired – while the rest of the family carried on eating and told him to sit back down and stop overreacting. The numbness became inherent. Earlier fighting and violence had also helped condition its audience – Boiken recalled a public hanging of two men during the 1992 uprisings, after they had broken into a flat, raped the two women there and burnt a baby to death – and he still couldn't say who committed the more brutal act between the criminals and the government.

Like Edvin, who had told SJ and me about life in Tirana during the uprising, Boiken also spoke of his family being one of few to not fire guns over New Year's Eve, and begged his parents to be allowed to shoot their rifle. His mother eventually only gave him permission because she preferred him firing a rifle in front of his parents to having him run off with the children from the floor below for the opportunity to play with one of their Kalashnikovs.

It was a crazy and traumatic start to their lives, but I said to him that the young people I'd met that had grown up in that era seemed positive now for Albania's future, and wanted to be a part of it. He raised an eyebrow and asked, "How many of them studied overseas?"

It was a good point. Ardit was probably the most optimistic of the lot, and he wasn't even living in the country. Edvin was a patriot, but had studied in Hungary and anyway wanted to get out of Tirana before living there gave him cancer. Boiken's point was that those who have had to stay in Albania, and survive through everything that the last 17 years have provided, are by now completely disillusioned. Corruption has blocked their way too many times for them to think of being able to succeed without partaking in it. I classified Boiken as an optimist, as he wouldn't have bothered working with MJAFT if he didn't believe it could improve things, but he had also studied in America for a while. Didn't the fact that MJAFT existed and had supporters who hadn't had the chance to live overseas have to be a sign that the youth had hope?

"I don't like MJAFT," said Edvin when I met him for a drink that night. "None of my family or friends like them. They are corrupt and immoral." He told me that they all got drunk and naked at their parties, and used their funds to pay for booze and line their own pockets. As usual I took his opinions with a pinch of salt, but he still got to me – I had liked Boiken and didn't believe that he was doing his work to get rich off funds intended for greater purposes. I had been told at the MJAFT headquarters that afternoon about the bar they were planning to add on the back of the house, to create a social meeting place for students with protest on their minds, so I had no doubt that their gatherings were often alcohol-fuelled ones, but Edvin's tales of nakedness smacked of exaggeration, and his piety was irritating me. He had told me several times that he didn't like drinking, because he was Muslim, and would then laugh about how drunk he'd been at a party in Budapest.

His next comment of not liking MJAFT's promotion of homosexual rights did nothing to calm me, particularly after he justified his opinions as being part of his northern culture. I respected that his culture may have had him believe some things that I didn't agree with, but not so long ago one of those would have been the view that a woman was a sack, to be used until she was worn out, and I didn't think he'd still throw that one around the table very easily. Anyway, I had expected his education to make him somewhat more open-minded than the rest of the northern masses. We said stiff goodbyes after he told me that the legalisation of homosexual marriages was a downward spiral that would lead to humans marrying animals.

I smiled in the morning when walking past Subway One Takeaways for the last time. It used the registered Subway logo, but had no connection to the original brand. Likewise with Yahoo! Fast Food. And since Tirana is the last European capital with no McDonalds, the local Kollonit burger chain has a Happy Kid meal, and a logo that looks like someone snapped the Golden Arches. There is just absolutely no respect for intellectual property in Albania. Disney characters are used brazenly on storefronts, and the cast of the hospital sitcom *Scrubs* would probably be interested

to know that their faces appear all around Tirana's international airport, on the adverts of a Balkan medical insurance company.

But it didn't matter – I was practically skipping down the streets of Tirana now, I liked them so much. I knew where each one I passed would lead me, and recognised the patterns and colours of the buildings that ran along its length. The city had slowly changed over the four times I'd been there, each time seeming a little less grimy and more welcoming, until its familiarity became a comfort. I counted off the yellow Mercedes taxis in the traffic, and under the roar of the pavement generators said silent goodbyes to the people and places I recognised as I walked past them for the last time: the man who spent the day at the payphone charging people to use his card, who had greeted me every time I passed him since my first arrival; the fruit and vegetable vendor with the best nectarines; the English-speaking money changers; and the rotisserie chicken man, whose rows of birds were always neatly skewered, with each one's head up the next one's bottom, and their neighbour's legs tucked beneath their wings.

Everything looked a little bit neater to me since I'd started noticing the people paid to sweep Tirana's curbs in the middle of the night, and the street-cleaning vehicles parked on the main boulevard (regardless of how ineffective they may have actually been). The city was still dusty and left my nostrils caked with gunge, but I liked it now – it was a grimy little city that I knew, where *byrek* stalls lined up at bus stops, and old men played dominoes on empty boxes in the street. In my last few hours I soaked up the smiles and greetings of the decent people that had come to represent Albania for me. It was a place where taxi drivers gave lifts for free, bus conductors saved you seats, strangers paid for your ticket, gave you apples and Cokes, and invited you into their homes. In 24 hours I would be back in South Africa, where my vigilance and mistrust would probably return instinctively, but while still in Tirana I took pleasure in being able to walk alone through a park with everything I had on my back, and know unquestioningly that the people I passed were more likely to invite me to share a meal with them in their homes than think of taking advantage of my vulnerability.

The Lana River still smelt like sewerage, Albania's countryside was a litter-strewn mess, and I never learnt how to predict when both the water and power were on for a hot shower, but change was slowly happening. There were people that were not willing to settle for the current Albania, and were fighting for the improvements they knew they deserved. I just needed to believe that there were enough of them. And in a country where the crooked reputation given to its people internationally is almost impossible to align with their inimitable generosity and kindness, I decided it was time for Albania to be given the benefit of the doubt.