





# THE PATH TO PEACE

CAN A HIKE  
THROUGH THE  
HAUNTED BEAUTY OF  
THE BALKANS  
HEAL THE WOUNDS  
OF WAR?

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**AFTER TWO FULL DAYS** of trekking through flat landscapes, Duško and I had just conquered our first hill. And he wasn't taking it too well. I stood at the top of the grade on the lonely road, taking in the view and waiting for my walking companion to catch

up. The Danube River's twists and turns cut through the flat, swampy countryside; hops and wheat fields, punctuated by the occasional Croatian village, spread out to the horizon. On the other side of the river, where we'd just come from, was Serbia. "Can we just hitchhike, please?" he yelled up to me.

"No!" I yelled back. "I told you. We're walking the entire thing. And you'll like it!"

It felt like we were an old married couple. Yet we'd known each other only a few days. I was grumpy from the day's long walk with the late spring sun pounding down on us. We had 15 miles more to go, and, truth be told, fantasies of being miraculously beamed to my next hotel bed began infiltrating my thoughts. A few minutes later, a car zoomed past us, then its brake lights suddenly flashed, and it backed up in our direction. The passenger window came down, and a guy in his early 40s, about the same age as Duško and me, leaned out. "Want a ride?"

Once in the car, I noticed the sides of the driver's head were shaved, and crooked scars ran from his temples to his ears. A cross and a plastic 100-dollar bill dangled from his rearview mirror. As he and Duško chatted, my mind trailed off, wondering if our miracle worker with Croatian license plates on his car had fought against the Serbs 20 years ago, and if he could tell that Duško was Serbian—there isn't a huge difference in the languages that Serbs and Croatians speak. Before I could think too much about it, the car stopped in front of our pension in the village of Zlatna Greda, which marked about the halfway point of our walk from northwestern Serbia into eastern Croatia.

We were hiking the Via Pacis Pannoniae—*Panonski Put Mira* in both Serbian and Croatian, or the Pannonian Peace Trail in English. The 55-mile network of dirt and paved roads connects the Serbian region of Vojvodina and the Croatian region of Slavonia, and was established



*Liberland is a patch of no-man's-land between Serbia and Croatia, but it has its own flag.*



Mirko and Helena Aleksander, above left, hosted writer David Farley in Bilje, Croatia. The last leg of the walk took Farley to Osijek, the Croatian city where the Peace Trail ends.



An old Roma house in Bački Monoštor, Serbia, above left, is a typical sight along the Pannonian Peace Trail, cofounded by Duško Medić, above right. Other scenes along the Peace Trail, below, include a rustic Serbian guesthouse and beekeepers gathering honey.



to instill a sense of reconciliation between the two countries. Croatia and Serbia were once united under the umbrella of Yugoslavia, along with Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Slovenia, and Macedonia. Until the breakup of Yugoslavia and the rise of nationalism in the early 1990s, there had been no border between Croatia and Serbia, and the main distinction between peoples was their faith: Croats were mostly Catholic, Serbs mostly Christian Orthodox.

When I heard about the Peace Trail, I sent an email through its website and received a response from Duško Medić (pronounced DOOSH-koh MED-eech), the trail's founder. He not only helped me plan my trip, he also asked if he could join me on my walk. Duško, who lives in Novi Sad in Serbia, explained that he hatched the idea for the trail in 2005, a decade after 1991–1995 Croatian War of Independence, in hopes of bridging the divide between the two Balkan countries, which share a 195-mile border, including 150 miles of the Danube River.

I have to admit, I was skeptical that a hiking trail could induce common understanding between two countries that had been killing each other, amassing an estimated 20,000 fatalities, just 20 years ago. But I was intrigued: What if, even on a micro level, it actually worked?

#### BEFORE DUŠKO AND I SET OFF ON OUR

walk last May, we met his project partner, Gojko Mišković, for coffee in Sombor, a leafy low-rise town near the eastern and northern end of the trail in a corner of the country where Serbia, Hungary, and Croatia come together. Duško, a journalist and environmentalist who had taken part in the little-known Serbian antiwar movement, secured funding for the trail from USAID and Catholic Relief Services, but he and Gojko had to overcome local politics and bureaucracy as well as remnants of Serbian nationalism and Croatian wariness. "Everything that comes from Serbia since the war is suspect," Gojko said. "Our main challenge was winning the support and trust of the Croats, and we did that."

With Sombor's massive, neoclassical town hall looming behind us, Duško and I marched out of town. As we turned onto a country road, Duško informed me we'd be deviating from the trail a bit. He wanted to swing a few miles southward to Apatin, where he was born. "I originally wanted the trail to go through my hometown," he said, as we turned to walk down an abandoned railway line flanked by hops fields. "But the mayor at that time was a big

Serb nationalist and wanted nothing to do with the Peace Trail."

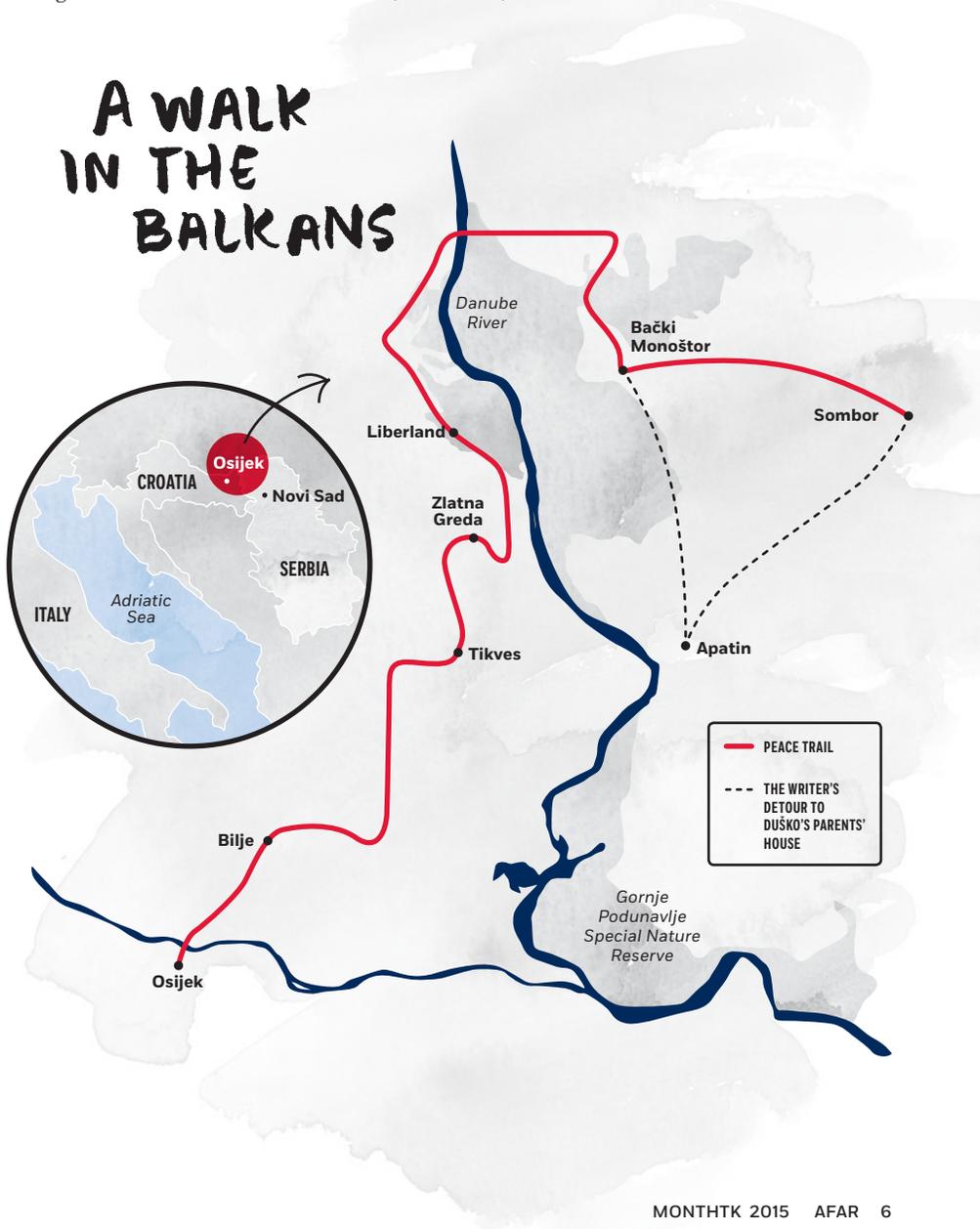
When the train tracks disappeared into thickets of tall weeds and tree branches, Duško steered me through a dirt field so vast it gave me vertigo. About three hours later, we dragged ourselves into Apatin, our mouths dry as the dust we had traipsed through. We had packed no water, just a bottle of vodka from one of Duško's friends, and I discouraged Duško from breaking it out. Our reward for reaching this Danube town of about 17,000 people was a joyous greeting from Duško's parents, Mira and Mirko, some cold, locally made Jelen beers, and several shots of Mirko's homemade *rakia*, the stomach-melting brandy that seems to fuel the Balkans.

After a shower and a brief rest, I wandered into the living room to find a gaggle of people sitting around a table. Unbeknownst to me,

it was Duško's father's birthday, and an epic meal was underway: chicken schnitzel, roasted pork, stewed lamb shoulder, *sarma*—a Turkish dish, minced meat stuffed into sour cabbage leaves—and plenty of *rakia*. Anytime my glass was half empty, Mirko topped it off.

The man sitting next to me, a gaunt fellow with sunken cheeks, struck up a conversation. Like me, he had lived in Prague, and we chatted in Czech. It turned out he was originally from Bosnia and in the mid-'90s had spent more time in a Bosnian refugee camp than he cared to remember. "Will there be lasting peace in the region, now that Croatia is in the European Union and Serbia is on the road to membership?" I asked.

"Maybe," he said. "But war seems to erupt here every 50 years." He looked deep into my eyes, tapped his index finger on his temple and said, "It's how we think."





Just then, Duško interrupted us to tell me every partygoer's ethnic origin. I had assumed most people in the room were Serbian, but the crowd also included a Slovak, a German-Slovak, a Croat, a Croat-Serb, a Croat-Hungarian, a Bosnian, and me, an American. About every half hour someone would refill everyone's rakia glass and shout, "Živeli!"—"to life." We'd clink our glasses and then, all together, drink. I realized my thinking might be naïve, but with so much mirth in the room, it was hard to imagine the hateful slaughter of two decades past.

A couple of hours later, Duško and I dropped by his friend's house, where another party was in full swing. While fielding questions from Duško's curious acquaintances, I sensed some vague hostility coming my way from one chisel-jawed fellow. The next day, Duško explained that the man had served in the Serbian army in the early '90s and participated in the 87-day siege of Vukovar. In 1991, under orders from Slobodan Milošević, 36,000 Yugoslav (mostly Serb) forces "liberated" the Serbs living in that Croatian city, killing hundreds of Croatian civil-

ians and troops and displacing another 31,000 residents. The ex-soldier was clearly ill at ease in the presence of someone from the United States—which led the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia—who had come as a journalist to write about the Peace Trail.

Later that night, after the parties, while I was trying to get some sleep before the next day's hike, my door suddenly burst open. "David?" It was Mira, Duško's mom. "*Schlafst du?*" she called out in German: "Are you asleep?" I grunted an acknowledgment that I was conscious. "*Komme,*" she said, and walked out of the room. When I arrived in the kitchen, two middle-aged women, neighbors I assumed, were sitting at the table with Mira. I was introduced as "the journalist from New York!" and took a seat in front of a beer and a glass of rakia. Aside from the stilted German that Mira and I spoke, there was no common language between us, but I felt as if I'd long been part of the clan and had just returned from a long trip. The next morning, before Duško and I set out, I gave Mira and Mirko

long hugs, and Mirko gave me a bottle of rakia, naturally.

The Balkan Peninsula takes its name from the mountain range that stretches from Serbia to the Black Sea, but *Balkan* is commonly believed to derive from the Turkish words for honey (*bal*) and blood (*kan*). In less than 24 hours, I'd experienced both—the hot blood of a possible war criminal and the honey of unconditional love from a circle of family and friends.

**T**HE ROUTE TO our next stop, Bački Monoštor, skirted the Danube River and some of its manmade canals. As we passed the periphery of a protected natural reserve, Duško identified the trees—"there's an oak, there's a beech"—and even pulled an acacia flower from a branch and ate it, saying, "Sweet. Consider that my dessert."

About halfway along our 12-mile walk, we found ourselves across the river from what might be the site of the next Balkan conflict.



In April 2015, a libertarian-leaning Czech politician named Vít Jedlička planted a flag on a 2.7-square-mile patch of land that is considered *terra nullius*, nobody's land, due to an ongoing disagreement between Croatia and Serbia. He declared that he was the president of the world's newest nation, Liberland. But a month earlier, Matthew Phillips, an Australian who is the leader of his own micro nation in Antarctica, had apparently staked his claim to the very same area and named it the Autonomous Region of Pannonia (the ancient Roman word for this area). In response to Jedlička's interloping, Phillips asked him to vacate the territory, and then posted on the Facebook page of his "nation" the following message: "The time given to Liberland in the ultimatum has expired. War will be declared in about one week." Despite the absurdity of the dispute, both Croatia and Serbia stationed police at the borders near Liberland to prevent anyone from entering the territory of the would-be new nation. The tensions paled in comparison to the Syrian migrant crisis that arrived that

autumn, severely straining the fragile relations between Croatia and Serbia, but they showed that even the smallest ripples can threaten to become waves in the tumultuous region.

As we approached Bački Monoštor, we were greeted by plumes of smoke rising from a junk fire. At the main intersection in the center of town, old women clad in several layers of dark-hued gowns, babushka scarves wrapped over their heads, pedaled by on bikes in one direction. A horse pulled a carriage piled with logs in the other. The town's 4,000 inhabitants are mostly Šokci—people of Croatian descent living in Serbia who don't identify as Croatian, as if the puzzle of Balkan ethnicity wasn't complex enough already.

After our overnight in Bački Monoštor, we followed a long and winding paved road west to the Danube. "This is it," Duško said. Once we walked across the bridge over the river, we'd be in Croatia. Before the breakup of Yugoslavia, many people had told me, crossing the Danube was simply crossing a river. Now it was different. The Croatian border guard stamped my

U.S. passport freely, no questions asked. When Duško laid down his Serbian passport, and the guard looked up to study his face, it was clear that questions were coming.

What was our reason for coming to Croatia? What did we each do for a living? What is the address of where we'd be staying? How long would we be here?

Duško responded at length. I couldn't understand everything he was saying, but I could make out that he was telling her about the Peace Trail. Finally, exasperated, she waved us through. Once we cleared the border and started trudging up the hill that would soon have Duško suggesting we hitchhike, he told me he had expected to be harassed and had been intentionally verbose so the guard would get impatient and just stamp his passport and shoo us away.

After our hike to the village of Zlatna Greda became the miraculous car ride, Duško and I spent the evening feasting on Croatian prosciutto from the Dalmatian coast, soft country bread, local cheese, and several bottles of the

region's exceptional red wine.

The next morning's walk took us out of Zlatna Greda's jumble of mostly abandoned 19th-century buildings, through fields with herds of deer and the occasional wild boar, and past Tikveš, a 19th-century castle where Marshal Josip Broz Tito often stayed during his 37-year reign as Yugoslavia's uniter-in-chief and where Serbia's president, Slobodan Milošević, and his Croatian counterpart, Franjo Tuđman, were reported to have met to discuss the potential partitioning of Bosnia-Herzegovina. After a few twists and turns, we were walking on an

elevated path that cut right through the swampy landscape of Kopački Rit, one of the largest wetlands in Europe. Large purple herons and white storks sailed overhead. The next 15 miles to our penultimate destination, Bilje, felt twice that long in the scorching heat. By the time we limped into town, I was walking about 100 feet in front of Duško, who had nearly petered out a couple of miles back.

We randomly chose to stay at Pension Aleksander, a comfortable place run by a couple, Helena and Mirko Aleksander, and their two daughters, one a teenager, the other

in her early 20s. Within a few minutes of checking in, we were sitting in the leafy back garden, talking and, of course, sipping Mirko's homemade rakia. We were idly chitchatting, in both English and Croatian/Serbian, when I asked what I thought was an innocent question: "Are you originally from Bilje?"

Helena shook her head from side to side and said they'd only lived here for 10 years. Before that, they lived in Istria, in northwest Croatia.

"Oh. So where are you originally from?" I asked.

There was a pause, a stillness in the air. Helena's eyes darted nervously around. She gave Duško a long glance, then stared down at the table full of rakia glasses and said, "Vukovar."

Silence overcame the four of us until Helena continued. "We fled during the war, but most of our extended family were all killed. Our home was completely destroyed. Mirko lost 80 percent of his ability to hear."

I asked if they'd been back to Vukovar since. Helena shook her head and looked away, holding back tears. Then she looked at Duško. "I just don't want you to feel uncomfortable. I know you're Serbian. But you can't blame ordinary people," she said, folding her arms. "It's people at the top who make the decisions that are to blame. There comes a time when you have to forgive, and we've done that."

The conversation stopped there, but soon more rakia was poured, and talk resumed, shifting to what one does for fun in Bilje.

The next morning, Duško and I sat around the breakfast table with Helena, Mirko, and their daughter Anita. Mirko busted out his electric guitar and played some blues riffs. He handed it to me and I started strumming the only song that came to mind, "Whole Lotta Love." Everyone watched and clapped along as I played, and for a moment at least, we were all united under the flag of Led Zeppelin.

I said goodbye to the Aleksanders, and to Duško, who needed to get back to Novi Sad, and set off by myself to walk the final five miles to Osijek, the end of the trail. I crossed over the one locals destroyed in 1991 to prevent the Serbian soldiers from encroaching further. They had rebuilt the span, and it is now a small but essential link on the trail to peace. **A**

*Contributing writer David Farley wrote about Varanasi, India, in the June-July 2014 issue of AFAR. Photographer Adam Golfer is profiled on page 22.*

## WHY YOU SHOULD VISIT THE BALKANS NOW

An expert in travel to Central and Eastern Europe shares his must-do experiences in five Balkan republics.

Travel to the Balkan region is looking way up since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, notes **Greg Tepper**, president of tour agency Exeter International ([exeterinternational.com](http://exeterinternational.com)). Flight connections are good and getting better for Croatia and Slovenia, and **visa restrictions are minimal**. Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina were slower to rebuild after the war, but they have opened their borders. The best way to get around, he says, is to **hire a car and driver**.

### CROATIA

Croatia has re-emerged as a big-time vacation destination. Visitors can enjoy a **well-developed travel industry**, an improved highway system, a balance of luxurious hotels and homey accommodations, and a national cuisine similar to Italy's, with **excellent wine and fresh seafood**. Dubrovnik teems in the summer, so get off the beaten path, and head to the sea. Visit such off-the-radar islands as Brač, Vis, and Mljet.

### SERBIA

Add Serbia to a Balkan itinerary to get a vivid picture of the region's past—at the crossroads of the Ottoman, Hapsburg, and Russian empires—and an enticing glimpse of its future. **Belgrade**, the capital, is a lively, ever-changing city, buzzing with **nightclubs and cocktail bars**, film festivals, and sports events. Not far from Novi Sad, the second largest city, is Cenej, a settlement where traditional farms remain unchanged from the 17th century.

### SLOVENIA

With every passing year, more fans gravitate to Slovenia, a small country on the northwest border of Croatia. For **skiing, snowboarding, hiking, and rafting**, active travelers should visit **the Julian Alps**, home to Lake Bled and Mount Triglav (the nation's highest peak), as well as the Kamnik-Savinja Alps and the Karavanke and Pohorje mountain ranges.

### MONTENEGRO

Tiny Montenegro, thanks largely to foreign investment, now offers some **superb accommodations** on the western coast, including the Aman Sveti Stefan and the Regent Porto Montenegro on the western coast. The capital, Podgorica, and the former royal capital, Cetinje, are the cultural centers, but the country offers great variety in its landscape—from tall mountain peaks and a low coastal plain to **the fjord-studded Bay of Kotor**—and a unique, hybrid cuisine influenced by Italy, Croatia, Hungary, and the eastern Mediterranean.

### BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

This mountainous, heavily forested Balkan state was the physical center of Yugoslavia. It is a microcosm of the former federation's geography, its **wildly varying climate** (from warm-and-dry Mediterranean to cold-and-continental alpine) and demographics (one of the most **ethnically mixed** of all of the former republics). Bosnians are famous for their **sense for humor**, and because the country has yet to find its place on the wish lists of travelers to southeastern Europe, it's easy to engage in unadulterated local cultural experiences such as the complicated process of preparing robust, foamy Bosnian coffee.

