

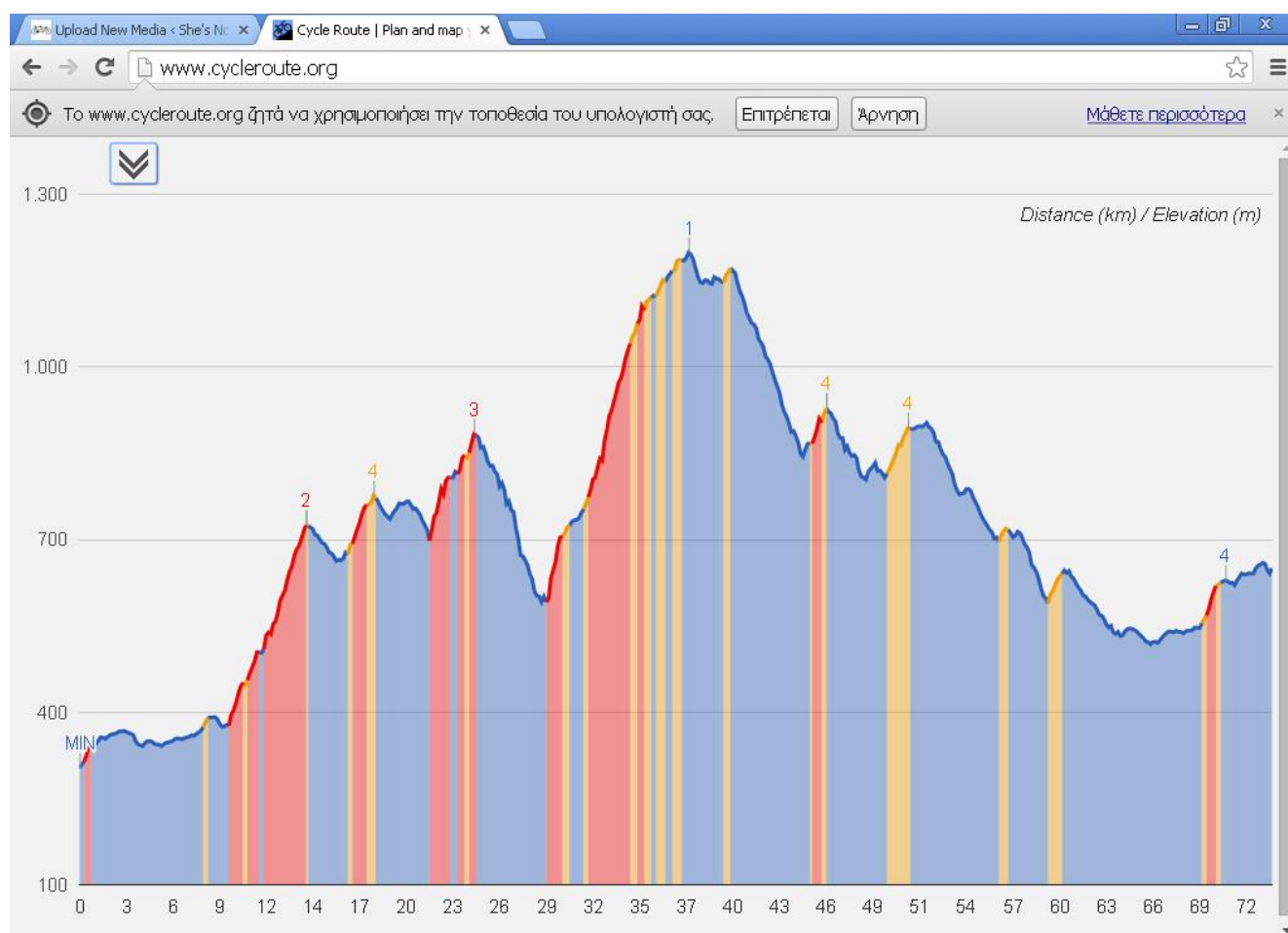
Albania and The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania

written by Marcus | 11 December, 2014



At some stage I'll write a review for the various apps and websites that we've been using so far during our trip as there are so many clever tools that have been invaluable to us. Sometimes getting a signal for free WiFi can be a bit too much of a distraction as it's easy to lose an hour catching up on not much in particular but overall travelling in the age of the smartphone makes life a whole lot easier. One site in particular has become our planning tool of choice now that the landscape is becoming a bit lumpier and that's Cyclroute.org. This is a very straightforward mapping tool that allows you to ask the way from A to B and then picks a suitable cycling route for you. Plenty of other sites do the same but this one is very simple and crucially includes an elevation profile for

the route too. Suddenly the 120km from A to B doesn't seem such a great idea when you know it'll include 3000m of climbing at 20% gradients so we know to scale things back a bit or find another way round. Googlemaps has started to include something similar but with limited coverage whereas Cyclroute seems to be worldwide which is great for us as there are a few mountain ranges along our route.



Profile for Kukes to Peshkopi

It's a 40km spin from Prizren in Kosovo to Kukes in Albania and the connecting road is big wide and smooth. Someone's spent some money on this bit of highway but for some reason most of the traffic is on the old road alongside so we have it mostly to ourselves.



Huge cutting on the road from Prizren to Kukes



Sunset ride into Albania

Once across the border our introduction to Albania is a view of 3 cows ambling the wrong way down the dual carriageway. Shortly after we find that the drivers have a similar defiance to the traffic laws as a couple of cars join our side of the road having driven 500m in the wrong direction before finding a gap in the crash barrier.



Traffic on the Albanian dual carriageway

We drop in Kukës just after dark and are immediately surrounded by a group of boys on bikes and roller blades and then a power cut plunges the whole town into darkness. It doesn't last long though and one of the boys, who we later learn is genuinely called Elvis, offers to show us to a hotel. He also recommends a place called Kastrati as being a good place to eat but the name is a bit off putting. Best not order the meat balls.



Elvis (and friend), our guide in Kukes

Once checked in we venture back into town and ask a couple of policemen the way to Kastrati. They oblige by escorting us up the middle of the street (very few people seem to use the pavements and there are very few cars). Eventually they point us down a very dark alley which looks to be exactly where a police escort would have been useful but they leave us to it. It turns out Kastrati isn't serving food tonight but they are setting up for a wedding and the barman encourage us to have our photo taken in the ceremonial thrones.



The happy couple in Kastrati

Back out on the main street we find the policemen again and get another escort to another restaurant that will actually serve us. It's a tasty mix of grilled meats and vegetables only slightly dampened by the football match on the TV in the background and the occasional shout of 'Frank Lampard!' amongst the Albanian commentary, just like a Fast Show sketch.

Cyclroute.org had warned us that the following day would be a toughie: 75km with 2000m of climbing at uncomfortable gradients so we fuel up with porridge and headed for the hills with some trepidation. After a pleasant warm up along the valley floor the road kicked up and by the height of the peaks around us we knew we'd be climbing for a while. the default gradient seemed to be around 8-10% minimum but there was plenty of it at 18-20% too.



Roadside sheep



And a lot of the time we were moving very slowly. In our lowest winching gear it requires 1.14 revolutions of the pedals for 1 revolution of the wheels and with it we can crawl up some very steep hills but it requires patience. 4kph on a 20% gradient is normal before we're at risk from toppling over. As a little extra tester in the villages we also had to negotiate thick lengths of rope that were stapled to the road to serve as a speed bump. Very effective for cars but very uncomfortable for a slow moving tandem.



But as we climb higher the views open out and reward our efforts with spectacular steep sided valleys. Thankfully the road is very well surfaced too as it was completely rebuilt just 3 years ago. A lot of the main roads in Albania are relatively new as there was a huge amount of building work after the collapse of the communist regime in the early 90's. Up until 1991 there were only 6000 cars in the whole country and all them were owned by members of the communist party. As soon as private car ownership was allowed they realised they'd need some proper roads to drive on so a number of Greek contractors came along and built them.



But out here in the mountain regions most people are either walking, riding a horse or for longer journeys they use one of the many mini buses that have been edging past us and obviously find the hills nearly as hard.



We get calls of 'Hello!' and 'How are you!' from shepherds, boys up trees, men walking along the road in the middle of nowhere and women with babies on the back of donkeys. At one point a group of children run alongside us (well actually walk slowly alongside us) taking selfies with their phones and asking us to stop. But we can't because we'd never get started again on the steep hill.



Our highest point is 1250m and we're in the clouds at zero degrees with the light beginning to fade. By the time we roll into Peshkopi after a long and treacherous descent it's been dark for an hour and so we check into the Hotel Piazza on account that we'd seen it's name several hundred times painted on the side of the road. An effective advertising campaign for these customers. Kirsty haggles 15 euros off the price, gets them to include breakfast and we dine on several of the best kebabs we've ever tasted.



Where should we stay tonight?

In Albania there is litter everywhere as it seems inherent in their culture to just chuck what they don't want into a convenient ditch. We see a couple of people tipping barrowloads of rubbish by the side of the road without a second thought. We'd seen the same in Kosovo and one of Darius's projects is to try and educate some of the local communities and start a clear up but he said it was a very difficult task.



Dogs and litter. Welcome to Albania.



Litter-fall

From Peshkopi it's not far to the border of Macedonia, or the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) as the UN insist it's called after a dispute with the Greeks about where the original, ancient region of Macedonia actually lies. Once we're across the border things look a bit tidier and the houses are noticeably smarter but almost all are not quite finished which is something to do with tax avoidance.



Arriving in Macedonia

We stop at the first town, Debar, to try and withdraw some Macedonian currency and when we ask for directions we get our

very own guide who shows us not only to the bank but also the cafe and the supermarket. He seems very proud to be able to walk through the crowded streets with the 2 strange people and their long bike.



Macedonian Bus Stop

The road takes us alongside Lake Debar, a huge reservoir and we follow it up to the point where it narrows down into a river running through a gorge then climb up past a dam to another reservoir. The climbing is more gradual and feels much easier than the day before but we still notch up a fair amount of ascent.



Deba Reservoir



Deba Reservoir



Gorge from Deba

The reservoirs soon seem tiny compared to Lake Ohrid which is our destination that day. It's a massive, turquoise expanse of water on a plateau 750m above sea level with Macedonia occupying one side and Albania the other and is somewhere that we'd been told by several people to go and visit.



Seagulls, Lake Ohrid



Lunchtime at Lake Ohrid

In the lakeside town of Struga we're leapt upon while stopped at traffic lights and asked if we need a room. We say maybe but want to investigate the options first. After a coffee overlooking the lake, and being entertained by the amazing sight of a flock of starlings moving through the air like a shoal of fish, we return to the bike to find the same man waiting for us and he doesn't seem to want to take no for an answer. So we look at the room and it's cold and grubby. I offer him half his original offer just to see what happens and unfortunately he accepts. While he's off fetching more bedding we decide to do a runner but he returns as we're making for the door. We make our apologies, he's very unhappy and we make a swift exit in the direction of somewhere that is actually habitable.



Flocking starlings, Lake Ohrid



Flocking Starlings, Lake Ohrid



Flocking Starlings, Lake Ohrid

After a short ride to the town of Ohrid the next day the same

thing happens again and again. Each time we stop at some lights or to cross the road or by a garage someone offers us a room. Everyone in Ohrid seems to have an apartment to rent. We settle for a Hostel this time and on our way there one man pulls a u-turn on his bike and begins to give chase. We wind up the pace as best we can but he's persistent and manages to come alongside slightly panting to ask if we want a room. 'NO!'.



Trabant, Ohrid

Apparently there used to be 365 churches in Ohrid, one for every day of the year, and there are still plenty remaining. Amongst the narrow, cobbled streets there are little archways and towers everywhere. It's nice to have the afternoon to have a look round and to give our legs a break after the punishment the hills had given them for the last couple of days.



One of the many churches in Ohrid



Church in Ohrid

We decide to continue round the lake on the Macedonian side

the next day and ride past countless resorts and hotels. Much like Lake Balaton in Hungary, this is a popular destination in the summer. It's also the venue for a 30km swimming marathon that takes place every August. Shame we're too late.



Bunker overlooking Lake Ohrid

At the southern end we cross back into Albania. Our plan now is to spend a bit of time crossing to the coast and then to head south to stay warm. As we cross the border we bump into two Spanish cycle tourists, Hugo and Bega who have come the opposite direction to us. After a few tales from the road, comparing kit and realising that they're route has some similarity to ours (they are on a 4 year round the world trip) we exchange blog addresses and hope to see them again somewhere further on.



Hugo and Bego who have ridden from Spain on their way around the world. www.aquatanagustito.blogspot.com

Gone are the smart hotels and instead we get the worst road we've had to ride so far. It's a complete mess of pot holes, part surfaced sections, gravel and mud. Apparently they have been working to upgrade this stretch for 2 years but the work won't be complete until next summer. The only slight distraction from the bumps are the road side fish sellers who dangle their latest catch at arms length for us to consider as we ride past. I'm not sure the exhaust fumes from all the battered Mercedes and dust being kicked up would add much to the flavour.



Fancy an eel for dinner?

During the communist times the lake was heavily guarded as it was an obvious escape route for those trying to flee Albania. In Lin the hotel owner tells us he used to have to get official permission just to travel from his village to the next town a few km away and there were military checkpoints everywhere.



Boats at Lake Ohrid

From Lake Ohrid Cyclroute.org was showing a much more pleasing profile. Up a bit then mostly downhill for 80km. At the top of the climb we pass a cluster of bunkers. We'd seen these all over Albania and at one time there were 700,000 of them, one for every 4 Albanians to help defend their country if anyone felt the urge to try and invade.



Bunkers on the hillside



Goats on the hillside

After admiring the view we begin the long drop down. In every layby there is someone offering car washing services and they advertise this by letting their hoses fire straight into the air at full blast. Supposedly the one that has the highest fountain is the best one to go to and the men who can afford an electric pressure washer are doing the best trade. Water must be very cheap as it seems like an incredible waste.



The long downhill has a few too many parts that feel suspiciously like uphill and each one is marked with a 7% gradient sign but we end the day a few hundred metres lower than where we started and camp on the banks of the river we've been following all day



War Memorial, Pishkash



Knitting while herding

In the morning we discover that storing milk in an old yoghurt bottle, no matter how well it's been rinsed, only results in more yoghurt so we resort to finding a cafe for breakfast. It's not hard to find a cafe in Albania as every other building seems to be full of men smoking and drinking coffee. We wonder into one but our request for food via Google Translate causes a bit of confusion. First they bring out paracetamol, then alka seltzer. In our disheveled state we must look hung over. Then it clicks that we're not ill, just hungry so they produce what could well be cold goat soup. Not that hungry. 'Rice?' 'Errr not really'. Eventually we get some fantastically fresh yoghurt (not from our bottle), fetta, mandarin and bread all produced within a few km of the cafe.

Meanwhile a woman is busy herding a flock of turkeys across the road. There are flocks of these things gobbling everywhere but we wonder if it'll be earlily quiet after Christmas. The impromptu breakfast is all very exciting for the owner Patrick and he sends us away with a wave and a couple of fresh lemons which will be perfect for a G&T later. If we had any G. Or T.



Turkey Herding

We take the highway to Vlorë and arrive just as an inky black cloud is forming over the seaside town. That night a huge

thunderstorm hits along with heavy rain so we're thankful that our search for a camping spot was abandoned and that we'd found a hotel instead. Despite paying for accommodation more often of late, everything else has been so cheap that our overall living costs haven't really been affected much.



Coloured buildings in Fier

Splashing through big puddles next day on 'The Albanian Riviera' the weather still looks decidedly unsettled so our plan to climb up and over the next set of mountains may need reassessing. In Orikum there appears to be a power cut as all the cafes are running generators but we find someone that has enough juice to run a WiFi router and check the weather forecast. The prediction of thunderstorms and gusts of up to 65 kph is enough to tell us that it wouldn't be much fun at over 1000m above sea level so we pitch the tent on the beach and settle in for the afternoon instead. I even manage a quick dip in the sea for the first time in a long while.



Storm on the mountains



Waiting for the storm to pass.



First swim since leaving the Baltic

The wait was worthwhile as in the morning the sky is much clearer and it's warm enough for shorts and t-shirts again. The climb is much as we'd expect from Albanian road builders: long and steep. Our heavy breathing is accompanied by an orchestra of cow bells, goat bells and sheep bells. The constant gobble gobble of turkeys provide the vocals.



Climbing up from Orikum



Climbing up to the Llogara Pass



But at the top, after being greeted by an excited dog who seems very happy to celebrate the fact we've made it to the summit, we're rewarded with a truly magnificent view and a thin ribbon of road snaking it's way down the precipitous hillside. This is the Llogara Pass and is one of the finest stretches of road we've ever ridden.



Top of the Llogara Pass



Top of the Llogara Pass

Tight switchbacks, fast traverses of the hillside and all the

time enormous cliff faces looming over us on one side and a view down to an aquamarine coast line on the other. We're quite glad we waited the day to allow the clouds to clear. By the bottom the drag brake has steam pouring off it having worked hard to keep us under control all the way down.











Looking back at the Llogara Pass

After the pass things don't let up and we're back into a roller coaster road of double figure gradients both up and down. Villages cling to the side of the mountain with some several hundred metres up above the main road. There are mandarin and persimmons being grown everywhere so it's not hard to find an orchard to camp in before our final days ride into Sarandë. Top Gear had used the stretch between Vlorë and Sarandë for a segment of film that lasts a few minutes on screen but it had taken us 2 days to ride it.





The road just dropped away



Goat and beach



Fresh madarins in the porridge for breakfast

Since leaving Ohrid and finding our way to the coast things have warmed up considerably and in the last few days it's been over 20 degrees so it seems our mission to head south and escape the cold for the Winter is proving worthwhile. Sarandë is a port so we can catch a ferry to various places including Italy or southern Greece but in a couple of days it'll be Kirsty's birthday so we decide it might be nice to celebrate it on Corfu. Hopefully we can find some gin and tonic to go with the lemons.



Views towards Corfu



The road to Sarande



That's what we need!