

# *Mulling the Balkans From Malta to Venice*



*April 10-19, 2009*

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*Trip sponsored by the  
MIT Alumni Travel Program  
and Zegrahm Expeditions*

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## Preface

Making a trip like the Balkan expedition a reality is a bit like making a film. No one person is responsible. It takes actors, directors, editors, writers, crew – the whole 99 yards. I want to acknowledge those who helped make our Balkan travel experience unforgettable.

From the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> of April 2009, 77 travelers, 15 of them from MIT, made the rounds of the Dalmatian coast and environs. Expedition Leader Lia Oprea and her Cruise Director Julie Christensen were the advance guard. We can't thank them enough for the easy, unpretentious, and incredibly effective way they went about making the Balkans make us feel welcome.

Thanks are also due to Zegrahm Expeditions for putting together such an imaginative itinerary and for having the foresight to employ, besides Lia and Julie, a handful of lecturers who shed light on a region much in need of illumination. Paul Harris, Allan Langdale, Olga and Ian Stone, and Ian Cooke did those honors. We are grateful to them for making the Balkans so much more accessible than it would have been without the advantage of their daily insightful, entertaining, and enlightening commentary.

And then there is the 4,200-ton, 297-foot long *Island Sky*. Captain Georg Thomsen, Cruise Director Jannie Cloete, and the entire crew made sailing aboard the ship as close to sleeping at home as it is possible to come with a Force 8 gale raging outside.

For the MIT travelers, the behind-the-scenes direction of MIT Alumni Travel Program Director Melissa Chapman Gresh and Assistant Director Heather Garcia begs for acknowledgment. These are the people who probe the world of travel tour operators, find the ones who do it best, and make it possible for MIT alumnae and alumni to take advantage of their experience and wise choices.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my wife, Nancy Kelly. I can safely say that without her, I would not have made this trip.

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Itinerary (original, not actual) →

Cover Photograph: Kotor, Montenegro, taken from Fort St. John, with *Island Sky* at far left.



## Saturday, April 11 – Valletta, Hagar Qim, and *Island Sky* Embarkation, Malta

Malta's Three Cities are Senglea, Vittorioso, and Conspicua. The first is named after Grandmaster Claude de la Sengle. The second and third are nods to the victorious Knights of St. John and the 1565 Siege of Malta, that titanic event in Maltese history that pitted Mustapha Pasha, commander of the Turkish land forces, and his brother, Piale Pasha, commander of the Turkish navy, against Jean Parisot de la Valette, 48<sup>th</sup> Grandmaster of the Knights of St. John. Malta's capital city, **Valletta**, is named after him. His portrait hangs



in the throne room of the Grandmaster's palace. In it he is wearing an outer garment that looks like the Maltese flag with sleeves.

Malta's written history begins with the Phoenicians, who inhabited the island around 800BC. It was a whipping post during the Punic Wars, finally ending up in the hands of the Romans until the dissolution of the Roman Empire. Then it changed hands like a hot potato – Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, the Spanish. King James the First of Aragon expelled all the Muslims on the island around 1250AD. The Spanish were always expelling someone – Arabs, Muslims, Jews – and always to their own detriment since in every case it put their economic clock back at least a hundred years. In 1530 Charles V offered Malta to the Knights of St. John. The locals didn't have a say in the matter. Charles was looking for a cheap first line of defense against the Turks.

The great siege began on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 1565 with an attack on **Fort St. Elmo**. Suleyman the Magnificent was intent on using Malta as a stepping-stone to Sicily and then Europe. He sent a land and a sea force to do the job. The Ottoman naval attack was under the command of Dragut, the 80-year-old commander who, 14 years earlier, in 1551 had defeated the very same Knights at the Battle of Tripoli. After a month of remorseless bombardment, Fort St. Elmo succumbed, but not before a cannonball put an end to the old man himself. News of St. Elmo's fall reached Dragut just moments before he died. He is reported to have made several signs of joy, including raising his eyes heavenward "as if in thankfulness for its mercies." Then he closed them forever. At his death Mustapha Pasha, whose land forces suffered a loss of 8,000 men, is recorded as having asked, "If so small a son has cost us so dear, what price must we pay for the father?" By the son he meant St. Elmo. The father, of course, was St. Angelo.



What interests me about this battle is the way in which the two leaders, Jean de la Valette – a 71-year-old Christian – and Dragut – an 80-year-old Muslim, announced their intention to fight to the death. Upon



breaching the walls of Fort St. Elmo, Mustapha Pasha found 60 Knights of St. John's still alive out of the original force of roughly 150. He promptly decapitated all of them save nine. (I wonder why nine and not 12, one for each apostle.) These he nailed to wooden crosses in mockery of the crucifixion and sent them floating, crosses and all, across the harbor to **Fort St. Angelo**. De la Valette showed that he, too, had an imagination the

equal of Mustapha Pasha's. He decapitated all his Turkish prisoners, stuffed their heads into cannon, and fired them back across the harbor to St. Elmo's.

The battle was one of the most momentous not only in Maltese history, but in the history of Europe itself. Jean de la Valette had bravely held out against the Turks for three-and-a-half months. He was pretty much at the end of his tether. Fortunately, the calvary came to the rescue in the shape of the Grand Viceroy of Sicily who sent a 9,000-man relief force. This was the so-called Grand Soccorso. There is a frieze commemorating it in the throne room at the Grandmaster's palace. This relief force was enough to send Piale Pascha and Mustapha Pascha back to Suleyman the Magnificent with a shrug of their shoulders that said, "Not this time." Suleyman said, "With me alone do my armies triumph." He, too, was an old man.

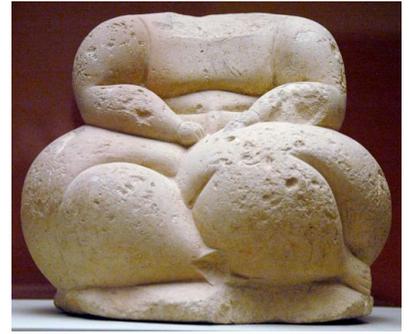
More than 12,000 men died in this battle, including 400 Knights of St. John, and yet the image of octogenarian Dragut sending nine crucified Knights floating toward de la Valette and the septuagenarian de la Valette retaliating by stuffing cannon with the heads of dead Turks and sky-rocketing them back to Dragut strikes me as, well, if not funny, at least bloodcurdlingly ridiculous. What would they have done if they had been forced to face one another directly? Claw at one another's beards? Stomp petulantly on the ground until one of them died of apoplexy? I am awestruck at the endlessly creative ways mankind, especially old mankind, has devised to kill off its young men.

I look out over the waters of Dockyard Creek at Fort St. Angelo and Senglea and count the expensive yachts moored to the quays. I watch the tiny tourist boats skittering beneath the citadels like water spiders. As I look at the brand new condos, whose balconies overlook the 444-year-old slaughterhouse of Fort St. Elmo, each condo costing at least 700,000 Euros for 800 square meters of space, it is hard for me to see the history of what happened here as anything other than absurd. But that, I suppose, makes it no different from any other conflict in the history of the world, a history in which men have chosen to resolve their differences by killing their adversaries instead of their impulses.

Malta is not so much an island as it is the top of a mountain; 14,000 years ago, the glacier that covered Europe began to recede. As it did, the water level of the Mediterranean rose some 120 meters, enough to separate Malta from its mainland. Just 80 kilometers separates the island from Sicily's Cape Passero. On a clear day you can see Mt. Etna.

The first inhabitants reached Malta around 5200BC, roughly 2,500 years before the building of the Palace of King Minos at Knossos. The oldest freestanding stone structures in the world are here. They date from 4000 to 2500BC. These structures belong to the so-called Temple Period. They were not dwellings but ceremonial buildings in which god knows what went on. Orgies, maybe. Or sun worship. Or just plain old gossip-mongering. We don't know who the people were or where they came from, except that it was probably over water from Sicily.

We have fragments of their art – temple art, those **concupiscent female figures** with their arms folded across their fat bellies and their thighs bulging like weather balloons. Botero could easily have sculpted these figures. Or rather Botero could easily have made his reputation by copying them.



If you were to take these corpulent figures and stretch them out like pieces of salt water taffy, so that the legs are no longer massive but straight limbed, and leave the arms folded across the stomach just the way we see them now, you would have the typical figures found in the Cyclades, those islands at the mouth of the Aegean Sea.



I'm not sure what all of this means – the temple figures, the Cycladic figures, Botero – except to say that when it comes to artistic intelligence, there really is nothing new under the sun. Every age has had its geniuses. The only thing that has changed is the technology that allows the same ideas to be expressed in different ways. The templatic sculptures of **Hagar Qim** are as good as any piece of abstract sculpture on the market today, as far as I am concerned.

There is one exception to this notion that the ancients were as good as any of us. I am thinking of the ability of sculptors to present the human figure realistically. That didn't happen, as far as I can see, until 600BC around the time of Phidias and the Parthenon. Michaelangelo and Bernini brought it to its highest level in the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD. Indeed, Michelangelo's *Pietà* has my vote for the world's greatest statue. In any event, realism took about 2,100 years to emerge. From then on, it has been same old, same old.

When I first arrived in Malta, I had a strong feeling of *déjà vu*. But I knew that was impossible. Then I realized what it was. I'd seen *The Da Vinci Code* and *Swept Away* and *Gladiator* and *Troy*. They were all filmed here. If I had to live on Malta, I would go stir crazy. The island is 18 miles long and 9 miles wide. Nothing is more than an hour's drive from anything else, and most of that time is spent in traffic. Aside from the monuments like the **Co-Cathedral of St. John** (where John de la Valette is buried), the **Grand Master's Palace**, the forts, the monumental fortifications, and the walled city of Mdina, I get the feeling that Malta is



either an unattractive slather of cheap concrete tenements or a very expensive summer home for the wealthy. Some of the yachts moored in Dockyard Creek looked as if they could launch another attack on Fort St. Elmo. How viable is a society like this, especially during the current global economic crisis? The rich come in for a couple of months, bask in the sun, and then hop it for wherever they keep their money, while the native Maltese watch them come and go and wonder whether this is just one more wave of invaders like the Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs, and the Normans.

It would be nice to spend a year here so that I could see if what I sense is really true. But then it would be nice to spend a year in Rio de Janeiro or Rome or Kyoto. No one ever has enough lifetimes for that.

### Sunday, April 12 – Syracuse and Ortygia, Sicily

Sicily was a virtual Times Square of the ancient world. At one time or another practically everybody who was anybody came here, albeit with blood in his eyes. Everybody and her brother had won or lost a piece of the place. Syracuse is as good an illustration as any. Founded as a Corinthian colony in 734BC, about the same time that Corinth invaded Corfu, within a century it rivaled Athens in power and prestige. That, of course, meant enemies.

Threatened alternatively by the Athenians, the Carthaginians, and the Romans, Syracuse's early history was one war after another. What made it war worthy is reflected in its celebrities. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Aeschylus and Pindar worked here. When the city fell to the Romans in 212BC, Archimedes was killed here. St. Paul slept here.

The presence of Archimedes in Syracuse made it all that much harder for the Romans to conquer the town. One of Archimedes inventions was the *Architronito* or steam cannon. At one end of a barrel was a chamber filled with rocks. When the rocks were heated, steam generated by dousing them with water propelled a stone ball the length of six football fields. The Romans wanted Archimedes captured alive. Instead a Roman soldier ran him through while he was doing math in the sand.

The centerpiece of Syracusan ruins is a part of the Neapolis Archaeological Park. An **amphitheater** 453 feet across and, at its largest, 59 rows high, it was built by the Greeks in 475BC and enlarged in 230BC.



Aeschylus' *Persai* (*The Persians*), an account of the Greek victory at the Battle of Salamis in 480BC, was premiered here in 472BC. The battle had taken place a mere eight years earlier.

A mountain stream brings fresh water into the upper reaches of the amphitheater – the third balcony, as it were. One can easily imagine the Syracusans moving back and forth between the fountain and the play. Like the Japanese Noh theatre, these spectacles went on for days. Our guide thinks the fountain's main purpose

was to provide inspiration for the actors, rather like a water cooler to office workers. Maybe. Her guess is as good as anyone's.

Behind the theater is the stone quarry. It was used to build not only the superstructure of the amphitheater – its seats were carved out of solid rock, which is why they have survived until today (you can't steal a mountainside) – but everything else in the vicinity – houses, temples, administrative buildings. It was also used as a concentration camp.

According to Thucydides, at one time 7,000 Athenians were imprisoned here. They would have been herded into a black hole hewn out of the rock by stonecutters. Today the roof has long since caved in. It looks more like a rock garden for giants than a prison.

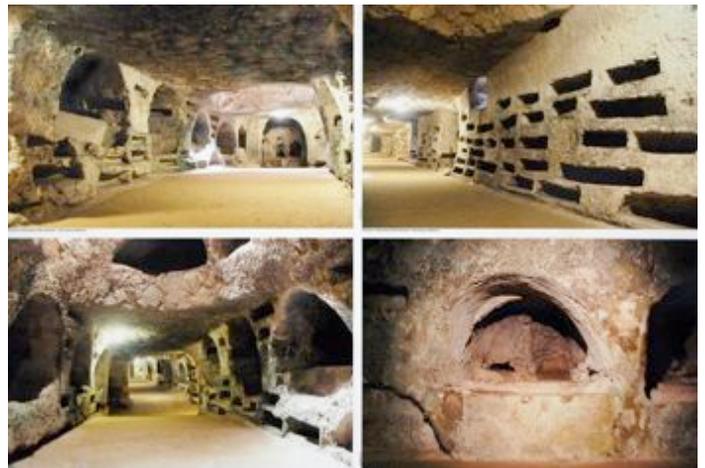


One quarry cavern remains undamaged. Called the **Ear of Dionysius** because of its remarkable acoustic properties (you can hear a whisper at one end when you are standing out of sight at the other, a la the whispering scene in *La Dolce Vita*), the guides are filled with complicated stories about the genesis of this cavern. They call it the amphitheatre's sounding board and explain that it was left this way in order to amplify the voices of the actors in the amphitheatre next door. Our guide is dubious and so am I. The hole at the top of the cavern is much too small to allow the cavern to resonate. When we visit the



amphitheatre, workmen have begun to hide the stone seats beneath wooden covers to protect the stone itself and the 1,000-person-per-night audience coming to see *Medea*, *Oedipus the King*, and *The Eumenides*.

We bury our dead in as many imaginative ways as we kill one another. Beneath Syracuse's **Basilica of San Giovanni** are the catacombs where 25,000 souls were interred in pigeonholes. It is like a battery of post



office boxes for dead bodies. It is often said that death is the great leveler. Not so. The **catacombs** were strictly reserved for Christians. Even in death, birds of a feather flock together. This only goes to show that how we bury our dead is not, in fact, for the dead but for the living. Our guide describes how one tomb has three holes drilled into its top slab in order to allow milk and honey to be infused in the grave in hopes of awakening the dead. As someone in our group remarked, "It didn't work."

I find catacombs a bit on the far side, though not so far out as, say, the practice of the Capuchin monks in Rome who take the bones of some 4,000 dead brothers and fashion them into altars, clocks, crosses, and other pieces of ecclesiastical furniture. The designs are inspired. You can see them on display in Rome beneath Santa Maria della Concezione, the Capuchin church on Via Veneto near the Piazza Barberini.

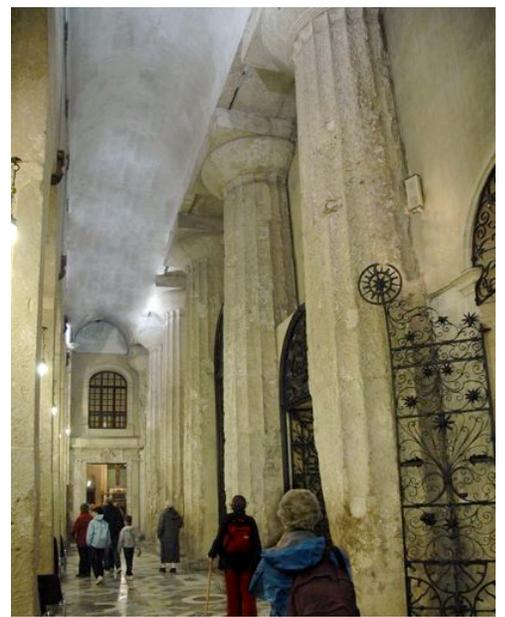
By far my favorite way of burying the dead is on display at University College, London. There you can find its benefactor, the great utilitarian philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, not in a pigeonhole or a crypt or in the shape of a writing desk. Rather, he is sitting upright in a glass cabinet, stuffed where he needs to be and clothed as he was when he walked the streets of London in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His real head is in a tin box under his chair. At least it used to be. The probably apocryphal story I heard when I was teaching there was that it fell off when a heavily loaded lorry drove by. Today a wax replica sits on his dead neck, well hidden by a high collar, and if I remember correctly, a broad brimmed light brown hat shades his waxen head. The university officials keep him in a cabinet in a corner of the main building. If you ask the beadle outside the Provost's Office to wheel Jeremy out into the open, he is obliged by Bentham's will to do so. Bentham meant his last remains to be an anti-religious piece of propaganda. He called it an "auto-icon."

There are two things about the island of Sicily that have surprised me. The first, of course, was the ruins themselves; they are ubiquitous, suggestive, sad, and, in many instances, incredibly beautiful. I think the Doric temple of Segesta, for example, is better than anything I've seen in Greece, save the Parthenon. The second is the ruinous metropolises that have grown up around them. Palermo, once one of the most beautiful cities in the world, has been obliterated by the Mafia-inspired building surge that is remarkable as much for its origins as it is for its execrable taste. In Agrigento a revived Mafia has done the same. Ditto Catania.

Ditto Syracuse, another city overrun by a scabrous architecture. Now a new modern French-designed cathedral adds insult to injury. Its dome rises above the rooftops like a grey concrete tepee. I ask Leanna, our guide, what the people of Syracuse think of it. She asks if there are any Frenchmen among us. Then she says, "We don't like it." Neither do I. Leanna is gracious. She points out that the French hated the Eiffel Tower and now it is that country's icon. "Maybe it will turn out to be really good," she says.



Only **Ortygia** seems to have emerged unscathed from the architectural plague of the 1950s on. This gorgeous headland at the tip of Syracuse – in fact, the site of the first settlement 2,700 years ago – is a beautiful oasis in a sea of cheap cement. In its center is the **Duomo**, built on the site of a 6<sup>th</sup> century BC temple to Minerva. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Minerva's temple was replaced by one to Athena, probably to celebrate the defeat of the Carthaginians



in 480BC by Theron of Agrigento and Gelon of Syracuse. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD Bishop Zosimus converted Athena into a Christian church. The **columns of the original temple** are visible. The stonework of the church has simply enfolded them. It is a remarkable example of how, in architecture, a church by any other name smells as sweet. (This selfsame process saved the superb Temple of Concord in Agrigento.)

If you are married in Ortygia because you have the great good fortune to come from there, where, I wonder, do you go on your honeymoon? Ortygia has barely been touched by the Mafia-generated building blight, and now it looks as if it won't be. The boom has stopped. This is not because Sicily has run out of people to build houses for. Rather it is because the French connection collapsed in 1970. When Marseilles was busted, the Sicilian Mafia picked up the heroin trade. Here is a corroborating statistic. In 1974 eight Italians overdosed on heroin. By 1980 Italy had 200,000 addicts, hundreds of which died each year. In 1989, for example, the number of deaths was 951. So the Mafia got out of the construction business and into drug trafficking. Good for the città, bad for the cittadino.

Two things happened in Syracuse that stick in my mind. The first involves the Emperor Constans II who, in 663, decided to move his capital back to the west from Constantinople. He had tried Rome but found it too much of a backwater. He preferred Syracuse, so he moved the Byzantine capital there. He ruled the Empire for five years until, according to John Julius Norwich, "a dissatisfied chamberlain, in an access (sic) of nostalgia, surprised him in his bath and felled him with his soap dish."

The second concerns Archimedes who, charged with finding out whether a crown was pure gold or not, hit upon the idea of testing the suspect crown by the amount of water it displaced compared to the displacement of the real thing. The idea struck him while he was taking a bath. He was reputed to have run home from the bathhouse, completely naked, yelling "Eureka" (I have found it).

If anyone believes this, I have some stock to sell that is guaranteed at an annual rate of 10 percent.



We leave Syracuse on the *Island Sky* at 12:30PM on the dot, bound for southern Albania. We are headed out into the Ionian Sea where a Force 8 gale on the Beaufort scale awaits us. This means 13-foot seas and 30-40 knot winds. Everyone on board is reeling from wall-to-wall like drunks at a New Year's Eve party. The crew has helpfully distributed barf bags at convenient distances along the handrails of the corridors, convenient meaning one barf bag every three feet. Only 20 people show up for dinner.

Everyone else is either lying in bed or barfing in a bag. And people wonder why I describe myself as a reluctant traveler.

Nancy is one of those in bed. She started feeling queasy about 4 o'clock. I checked in on her around 6. She wanted something light to eat. The staff said we could order from our room. She has soup, a salad, and ginger ale. I have onion soup, shrimp cocktail, roast beef, salad, two rolls with butter, and tea, the whole nine yards. I don't get seasick, and I'm feeling pretty smug about it. It's just about then that the ship takes a deep breath, holds it for a few weightless seconds, then lets it out in a starboard roll that dumps the dinner, plates, and beverages all in my lap. And people wonder why I describe myself as a reluctant traveler.

## Monday, April 13 – Corfu, Greece

Last night I slept like a lump of dough in a bread machine. That I didn't need. This morning I woke up to see bird droppings on my cabin window. In the bathroom I noticed that the brand of tissues is called *Funny*. I wonder if the other cabins have the same brand, or if someone is trying to send me a message. I head for the library first thing to update my blog. The room looks like Savonarola had been preparing for a book burning.

And now, in preparation for Albania, Paul Harris gives us a picture of the country. Allan Langdale follows with a talk on basilicas and baptistries at Butrint.

Unfortunately, we won't be able to put what either has taught us to the test. It seems that the ship is being stalked by a low-pressure system. The upshot of that bad behavior is that, since all the harbors in southern Albania open to the southeast, the ship could make it into harbor but not out. The powers that be have come up with Plan B. We detour to the Greek island of Corfu where, in a few short hours, a whole new itinerary has been arranged. When we dock, three buses and a contingent of guides are ready to take us to the Achilleion Palace.

Franz Josef was married to Elizabeth of Austria. He, however, preferred an actress. Sissi, as she was called, built Achilleion and retreated there as often as she could, until she was stabbed to death in Geneva while on a private visit. Her last words were "What happened to me?"

Several years later Kaiser Wilhelm II bought Achilleion. In one of the rooms his writing desk is on display. For a seat it had a saddle instead of a chair. Apparently, he loved riding, even when he was writing.

I am not very fond of kings and queens, so it is hard for me to break through a certain democratic antipathy toward the luxury of the place as low key as it is compared, say, to Versailles. Furthermore, the photographs of Kaiser Wilhelm standing ramrod straight with his arched back and his Fuller brush moustache, hand resting lightly on sword hilt, are infuriating. Wilhelm wanted war. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand at Sarajevo was for him what weapons of mass destruction were for George W. Bush.

At one end of the **wisteria garden outside the Achilleion Palace**, there is a statue of Achilles triumphant. At the other end there is the fallen Achilles. The lesson of the two statues is crystal clear, but military power is an aphrodisiac that is hard to resist.





Back on our buses, we continue our tour of Corfu, stopping in the Kanoni hilltops at an **overlook with views of Ptichia and Mouse Islands**. The wind is so strong, it is an effort to face it.

Like so many of the islands of the Aegean, Corfu has been conquered more times than you can shake a stick at – the Romans, the Arabs, the Normans, the Italians, the British. Conspicuously missing from the list is, of course, the Ottomans. They have never managed to conquer Corfu, though not for want of trying.

In the esplanade where we disembarked for a stroll through Corfu Town, there is a statue to Marshal Johann Matthias von der Schulenberg who, in 1716, repulsed the last attack of the Ottoman Turks against Corfu. Sultan Ahmed III had ordered a force of 30,000 men and 3,000 horses to breach the citadel that stands opposite the esplanade. The siege lasted five months. Finally, on August 18, Schulenberg with 800 picked men launched a surprise counter-attack, creeping out of the citadel just before dawn and attacking the Turks from the rear. The maneuver was a success and also incredibly well timed. The next day a horrific storm broke that not only tore the Turkish tents to shreds and reduced their battleground to a mud hole, but destroyed several of their ships in the harbor. The Turks fled. One year almost to the day a bolt of lightning hit the same citadel. It ignited three ammunition stores. The explosion did what the Turks had so miserably failed to do.

During our tour of Corfu Town, we visit the Church of **Saint Spyridon**, named after the beloved miracle-working patron saint of the island, whose mummified body is enshrined in a **silver coffin** housed in a tiny room off the main interior of the church. Several days a year, the coffin is opened to allow the faithful to kiss his slipper-clad feet.



As we drive back to the ship, we pass a row of car ferries ready to take cars and their drivers to Greece and points beyond. Their bows are open wide and resting on the quay like so many sheep dogs with their tongues hanging out.

### **Tuesday, April 14 – Durrës and Tirana, Albania**

Paul Harris' description of Albania makes the country sound like a Marx Brothers movie with real bullets. He says that every house in Albania has a Kalashnikov rifle and that nine out of every ten cars is a stolen Mercedes. I didn't believe him. That night I asked the captain of the ship. He said that, sadly, it is true. There is a huge trade in stolen vehicles. Kela, our Albanian guide, tells me that it was true about the Kalashnikov rifles, but only up through 1997. Now they are all gone. But I'm not sure I believe her. She says the only rule Albanians follow is that there is no rule. Her comment, made only half in jest, adds to the picture of Albania as the Wild West of southern Europe. When a few days later I asked Kristina, our Dubrovnik guide, what the Croats think of the Albanians, she said that they didn't think of them at all.

Another interesting fact about Albania, according to Paul, is that about ten years ago, Al-Qaeda tried to form cells there. Albania is 70-percent Muslim. The attempt failed. After three years they left. I doubt this was due to tribal affiliation. Rather, I suspect it was due to the fact that Albanians, like Indonesians, practice a mellow form of Islam. It's just hard to get them worked up.

Durrës was one of the major cities along the Via Egnatia, an ancient road that linked Durazzo (the Venetian name for Durrës) with Constantinople. Knights of the First Crusade came through Durrës in 1097. Some, like Raymond of Toulouse, sought and received letters of safe conduct from Emperor Alexius Comnenus' family as Raymond and his fellow knights made their way to Constantinople and ultimately Jerusalem.

When I stepped off the boat at Durrës, I saw a dockside with what looked like three huge coffee tins sitting atop giant tripods. They were maybe 35 feet high. The colors were drab. No lettering, just plain, faded yellow and blue monster canisters that were completely anomalous and just as anonymous. Storage tanks, no doubt, but their blunt heads were like Norman helmets. They faced the harbor like meaningless sentinels.

I find it strange to reconcile the past with the present. The First Crusade is the beginning of a violent clash between two cultures that a thousand years later invades my own life. It is like a feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys that will never go away. The Crusades have taken on mythic proportions. When I see a place where one of its ghosts still marches, a place like Durrës, I find it hard to reconcile my conjured idea of the mythic past with its dingy, dusty, dreary, and mundane present. Perhaps, I think to myself, the past was just as dingy.

On the back road to Tirana, Albania's capital, we pass hemispheres peeking up out of the earth like R2-D2 clones that had been buried alive. These were **bunkers** built by the Communist dictator, Enver Hoxha,

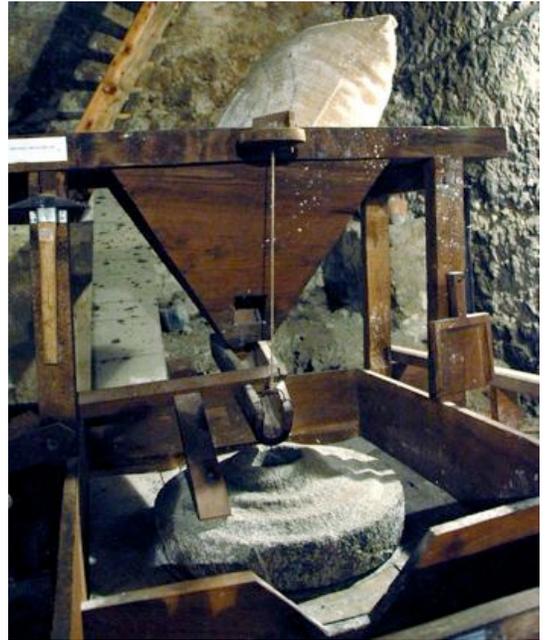


shortly after he took power at the end of the World War II. They added paranoia to the anomaly and anonymity. Not looking good.

For a thousand years there were no nation states in the Balkans, just groups of tribes united by common languages. The land here fell within the hegemonic grasp first of the Byzantines and then of the Ottomans. Some historians do not see a sharp distinction between the two eras. The distinguished Romanian historian, Nicolae Iorga, argued that there had been "a Byzantium after Byzantium." And, of course, from the 11<sup>th</sup> century through the 18<sup>th</sup> there were those pesky Venetians dominating the Dalmatian coast.

In Kruja we visited the **Ethnological Museum**. At one point the guide, an old man who spoke English in phrases rather than sentences, pointed to two stone wheels. “**Stones for grinding flour**,” he said. “Are 200 years old.” That’s about as old as Albania as a nation. Montenegro, on the other end, has been an independent state for just three short years.

What brought nationhood to the Balkans? The answer is the great powers of Western Europe. The Balkans was caught up in the struggles between a Christian Europe and Eastern Orthodoxy and then between a Christian Europe and the Ottoman Empire. For 500 years, the Ottomans called the area they acquired in 1453 with the conquest of Constantinople the *Rumeli*, “Land of the Roman” – not the Balkans. So what was it that brought national boundaries to a boundaryless land and, along with it, the vast eruptions of violence that many of us have witnessed during our own lifetimes? Arnold Toynbee put it this way in a passage quoted in Mark Mazower’s *Balkans: A Short History*:



The introduction of the Western formula [of the principle of nationalism] among these peoples has resulted in massacre . . . Such massacres are only the extreme form of a national struggle between mutually indispensable neighbors, instigated by this fatal Western idea.

Mazower expands on Toynbee’s point:

“Ethnic cleansing” – whether in the Balkans in 1912-1913, in Anatolia in 1912-1922 or in erstwhile Yugoslavia in 1991-1995 – was not, then, the spontaneous eruption of primeval hatreds but the deliberate use of organized violence against civilians by paramilitary squads and army units; it represented the extreme force required by nationalists to break apart a society that was otherwise capable of ignoring the mundane fractures of class and ethnicity.

In other words, according to Toynbee/Mazower, the Balkan Peninsula was the Africa of southeastern Europe. Just as the great powers of Europe descended on the Dark Continent during the so-called “scramble for Africa” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and arbitrarily divided up the spoils of a land unhampered by national boundaries to the vast detriment of tribal boundaries, so, too, did they force national boundaries on the Balkans, opening the way for the bloody and fractured history that we have come to know from a distance during our own lifetimes.

As we visit the various Balkan nations, then, beginning with Albania and making our way through Montenegro and Croatia, we will be looking at the results of overlaying nationalism on regions that were “otherwise capable of ignoring the mundane fractures of class and ethnicity.”

It is well beyond my capabilities as a travel journalist to unpeel the complicated onion of each country, but that, I think, is the task facing the historian of this area and what every tourist passing through the Balkans must keep in mind. Begin with the harsh fact that tribal units were forced at the point of a gun into the Procrustean bed of nation states. Then work back to see what infernal mischief that wrought.

That is the rub with Albania. Tomorrow when we visit Kotor in Montenegro, we will find a tidy city with one of the world’s best natural harbors. The town is beautifully maintained – clean streets, winding alleyways, picturesque aspects at every turn of the head from the vantage point of an immaculate public

square. The elegant influence of the Venetians, to whom the people of Kotor turned in 1420 when they found themselves besieged by local clans and unable to protect themselves, is evident everywhere.

In Tirana, on the other hand, the only influence visible is that of the communist regime of Enver Hoxha, a merciless regime that traumatized the Albanians for 42 years, driving the populace into a state of cultural catatonia. Take our visit to the **National Historical Museum**. The doors



open at 10AM, and we step into a room lined with **pictures of dead men and women**. It is as if our first taste of cultural Albania is the city morgue. There are film loops playing constantly showing the execution by the Communists of members of King Zog's government. Not all the dead are court-ordered executions. Many were shot trying to escape Albania after the Communist takeover.

Why in the world would Albania put such an angry first step forward in introducing visitors to its country? I think the answer is that it wasn't tourists the museum authorities had in mind when they designed their dreary recollection of Albanians dead and dying.

In 1836 John Stuart Mill, the great British philosopher, wrote:

. . . the spectacle and even the very idea of pain is kept more and more out of sight by those classes who enjoy in their fulness the benefits of civilization . . . it is in avoiding the presence not only of actual pain, but of whatever suggests offensive or disagreeable ideas that a great part of refinement consists.

We have seen an excellent example of that during the Iraq War. The Bush administration forbade photographs of dead American soldiers returning home in caskets. The reason given was not wanting to intrude on the privacy of the surviving families, which is another way of saying that we didn't want to let the Nation grieve with them. Obama rescinded the policy as soon as he took office.

In the museum I watch a group of school children pass in front of the exhibit. There must have been 25 of them. Only one wore a head covering in a country that is predominantly Muslim. But whatever the religious makeup of the children might be, it was clear to me that this exhibit is for them. If Albania doesn't look like a country of refinement, I suspect it is because the Albanians don't want it to be. I think they want to remember how miserable the recent past has been. The exhibit is a warning of what was and what will come again if they don't remember.

Everyone has been struck by how much trash one sees in Albania. The banks of the river that runs through town look like the town dump. Along the roadside wherever there is open land waiting for a builder's backhoe, you will see a tangle of plastic bottles, empty paper boxes, discarded Styrofoam cartons – the flotsam and jetsam of a consuming society. These eyesores strike us as an outward manifestation of a slovenly character.



Perhaps. But perhaps the **trash in the rivers and by the roadside** and in the streets is not the sign of a country whose citizens don't give a damn, but rather the sign of a country that needs to be reminded of where it has been. The spontaneous outdoor dumps of Albania are not a reflection of a slovenly populace but the expression of an angry one. Perhaps the trash is meant to say, "This is what we've been for the last half century – a nation whose leaders treated us like trash. Let's not forget that." It is a form of samizdat.



That is changing, I'm sure. Edi Rama, Mayor of Tirana, is now into his third term. He returned to Albania in 1998 from a career as a painter and artist in Paris. The impact of that is apparent in the **painted buildings**

along the main drag of the city – anything to bury the drabness of the last 50 years. He has encouraged the opening of movie houses that show foreign films – perhaps old hat to us, but something entirely new to Tirana.



The Albanians may not know where they are going, but they know where they have been and they don't like it. That is not completely true. When we drive to Kruja, we visit a museum that Paul Harris touts as the best in Albania – the **Skanderbeg Museum**. It is devoted completely to the 15<sup>th</sup> century Albanian hero who single-handedly reined in

the seven warring tribes of the area and rode them against the occupying Ottomans like the wagon master behind the Budweiser Clydesdales. Statues have him looking like a bearded Arnold Schwarzenegger. If the Albanians don't look to their streets with pride, they look to **Skanderbeg**. There is a **statue** of him in the center of Tirana.



Skanderbeg's real name was Gjergj Kastrioti. As a child he was sent to Turkey to be educated. There his military talents emerged, and he was given a new name, Icsander (i.e., Alexander). "Beg" was a suffixed title – Lord Alexander, no doubt meant to recall Alexander the Great.

Did Skanderbeg really exist? Well, of course he did. But was he the hero that the Albanians say he was or the hero the Albanians need? Every emerging country needs an identity. Virgil's *Aeneid* was written to provide Rome with a past. Skanderbeg is Albania's Aeneas. Once we were kings, the memory says. In Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Skanderbeg is seen not through the eyes of the Albanians but with a far more jaundiced eye:

The enthusiasm of chivalry and religion has ranked him with the names of Alexander and Pyrrhus; nor would they blush to acknowledge their intrepid countryman: but his narrow dominion and slender powers must leave him at a humble distance below the heroes of antiquity, who triumphed over the East and the Roman legions.

The problem with the kind of thinking that looks to the past for present dignity is that it signals a lack of imagination. The desire of the Muslim world to return to the brilliance of its Ottoman past is another example of this lack. My hope is that Albania won't allow itself to continue looking back in anger. It may take something akin to a good swift kick in the pants. Here's hoping.

### Wednesday, April 15 – Kotor, Montenegro, and arrival at Dubrovnik, Croatia



We motor to Kotor in southwestern Montenegro, through a 16-nautical-mile passage, the longest and deepest fjord in southern Europe. It is a movie set of a town that, like a lot of the towns along the Dalmatian coast, goes back to Neolithic times.

As we travel through the narrows, a passage about 300 meters wide, past **Our Lady of the Rock**, and approach the town dock, I can see a fortress 600 feet up on the side of Mt. Lovćen. In 1420, after being attacked by local clans,



**Kotor** sought Venetian protection. The Venetians built **Fort St. John** as part of a chain of fortifications raised to fight the Turks.

The moment I lay eyes on it, my stomach is in knots. Whenever there is anything high or far or deep when we travel, Nancy will want to go there. I will feel compelled to follow the way a tail follows its dog. The staff is not helping. They describe the view from the top as spectacular. Julie speculates that the fort is anywhere between 900 and 1,000 steps. I listen intently. My fate will depend upon whether they are going to sound encouraging or off-putting. They are encouraging. Damn their eyes.

We are to meet at 10:30AM behind the cathedral if we want to climb to the fortress. Nancy says, "I've been thinking it over. It's too hard a climb for us. Let's not go." Translated into human speak, that means, *If we don't go, I'll make your life miserable.*

"I want to go," I say, meaning, *I'd enjoy climbing up that path about as much as I would enjoy chugalugging Milk of Magnesia.*

"Are you sure?" asks Nancy, meaning, *I know perfectly well you'd rather swallow glass.*

"Couldn't be surer," I say as we turn down the tiny street that leads to the beginning of the ordeal.

I suppose if the account of my climb to the top of St. John's needs a title it would be something like "I get high with a little help from my friends." Paul Fruchbom tells me that there is a special way to climb a long and arduous flight of steps. He says the trick is to walk like a cow. In 1927 a group of MIT students walked a cow to the roof of one of the dormitories. It was a hack, the joke being that cows can walk up stairs, but they can't walk down. A cow didn't seem like a good role model.

“Is there some other animal you could choose?” I ask. Paul demonstrates the cow walk. You take one step at a time, and at each step, you let your knees lock so that your legs are totally straight, bone on bone. Apparently, that split-second lock allows your leg muscles to relax. It seems to work – that and the fact that the ship’s doctor is walking up with me.



The view is as advertised, a panoramic 270° view of **Kotor and Boka Kotorska**, the splendid fjord separating Mt. Lovćen and Mt. Orjen. The sky is powder blue and the temperature in the 60s. There is a flurry of photographs. You’d think we’d conquered Everest.

Onboard the *Island Sky*, we motor back to the Adriatic Sea and up the southern coastline of Croatia to Dubrovnik, pulling into dock around 7PM. Dubrovnik is Kotor on steroids. Fugitives from Cavtat, a small fishing village that we shall visit tomorrow, founded it. That, in fact, is Cavtat’s major claim to fame.

For much of its history Dubrovnik’s ties with Venice were much closer than its ties with cities this side of the Adriatic. During the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries it was a major maritime power with over 500 ships under its belt. The discovery of America in 1492 was a major boost to its economy. Venetian dominance lasted 150 years – from 1205 to 1358. When the town achieved formal independence as a city-state in 1382, it called itself the Republic of Ragusa. It may have thrown off Venetian chains, but not Venetian influence.

Ragusa, an Italian word meaning ‘ship’ (the same word as English *argosy*) has six letters. That may be significant. The number six is Dubrovnik’s unlucky number. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of April in 1667, an earthquake killed 5,000 of its inhabitants and destroyed so much of the town that it went from a Gothic- and Renaissance-style town with ornate porticoes and overhanging balconies to the straitened face of the Placa Stradun, its main street. Today the treeless avenues, flat-faced facades, and street-floor shops, all compulsory after the

earthquake, give the Stradun the look of a shaved head. You can see a hint of what the pre-quake town looked like in the portico of the Sponza Palace or by walking up a side street where overhanging balconies survived the quake.



The second terrible day also involved a six: December 6, 1991, when Slobodan Milošević and his Yugoslav People's Army shelled half the houses of the town and a significant number of its monuments. **Dubrovnik** thought it was out of harm's way. Who could possibly want to hurt the *Pearl of the Adriatic*? The local powers had failed to take into account the grandiose desire of Milošević for a gateway to the sea in his ultimately failed attempt to build a

greater Serbia that would unite the Serbs in Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia. In the end the boundaries of today's Serbia, rather than expanding, fell back to those of 1878.

The level of cultural achievement in Dubrovnik is apparent in the **Dominican Monastery** where there are some genuine masterpieces by local artists. The *Miracle of St. Dominic* by Vlaho Bukovac is one example – a beautifully executed adorational piece in the pre-Raphaelite style. Nikola Bozidarević's triptych is another. The polyptych in the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin is touted as having been painted in Titian's workshop, perhaps in part by Titian himself. The painting is badly in need of restoration and thus hard to assess.

In fact, it is hard to assess a great deal that we have seen. Tours like these are a bit like drive-by shootings. There is no time to stop and smell the irises. I am not disappointed. I consider myself to be window-shopping. When I find something I really want to buy, I'll come back.



#### Thursday, April 16 – Dubrovnik, Croatia

Walking along Dubrovnik's Stradun, you can see pock marks in the marble blocks of the pavement, shallow indentations radiating stress fractures. They look like fossils. In fact they are pits made by Milošević's mortar shells. It is hard for me to imagine bombs raining down on this idyllic town. The Stradun sits atop a filled in canal that once separated the mainland from the island of Ragusa. The marble pavement was laid down in 1468 – 308 years before the Declaration of Independence.



We make the usual rounds with the guides – the Onofrio de la Cava fountain, the Dominican Monastery, the Maritime Museum, the walk along the walls of **Dubrovnik**.



Kristina, our guide, tells us that Croatia is 85-percent Catholic. This might make you think that this is a very devout country. I ask her what percentage of that population goes to church on Sunday. She pauses for a moment and then says about 40 percent.

“Are you a Catholic?” I ask. She nods. “How often do you go to church?” “Only at Easter and Christmas time,” she says. I believe her. France, like Croatia, is 85-percent Catholic. There an even smaller percentage

of the population attends church regularly. Compare that to the United States. We have more religions than Carter has liver pills. Church attendance in America is far higher than in France or, taking Kristina at face value, Croatia. Why should that be?

One of the major functions of a religion is to provide people with a community of like people. It makes one feel safer. In countries like France or Croatia where the vast majority of the people share the same religion, the need to congregate inside the same building is not acute. In countries as big as the United States, on the other hand, it is far more difficult to feel part of a single community. So Americans fracture and form smaller, more recognizable communities – hence, the multiplicity of religions.

How does Albania with its 70-percent Muslim population fit into this picture? I'm not sure. For one thing it is the most un-Muslim Muslim society I have ever been in. I didn't see a single woman in a burka and only one school child wearing a headscarf. Our Albanian guide told us that everyone drinks and smokes, Muslim or not. It is hard to say in what sense this Muslim society is Muslim. Even Al-Qaeda threw in the towel. I'll bet a dollar to a dime that church attendance in Albania is down around the French numbers. They don't need a church to tell them what society they belong to.



After lunch, we drive to **Cavtat**, the forerunner of Dubrovnik, for a stroll around the town and then a visit to a flour mill for a taste of Croatian **walnut and cherry liquors and Croatian-style raki**. We have provolone cheese and prosciutto in a nearby bower and imagine we are already in Italy.

The Ljuta River powers the flour mill. A pull of a cord, and the operator engages a water wheel that turns a grindstone that turns corn into flour. He tells me that this kind of flour making will come back. Just now people buy their bread and polenta at the mini market. Soon a taste for natural food will return and maybe as many as five percent of the population – that's his figure – will return to the flour mills of yesteryear. Is this the Croatian Mr. Whole Foods speaking?

One of the servers is named **Ivana**. I didn't ask her age. She couldn't have been more than 20 years old. She tells me she is from Gruda. She says she isn't married. When I ask her if she wants to be, she says each year less and less. When I ask why, she says it is difficult to find the right kind of man. When I ask what kind that is, she says one that will help with the dishes.



## Friday, April 17 – Korcula and Split, Croatia

**Korcula Island** is 29 miles long and between three and five miles wide. It has a 2,000-foot mountain that runs from one end of the island to the other, like the fin on a fish's back. The town is situated on the



northeastern portion of the island. It is a toy town that has, like all of the coastal towns in the area, been the site of human inhabitants since Neolithic times. We are in and out in a few short hours.

The Opatska Riznica (Abbey Treasury) is surprising. Here is an exhibit containing a small drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, a larger one by Raphael and two sketches by Tiepolo, one of which is a large head at the top of the entrance way. The collection also includes a large number of seals once belonging to Austrian Jews. I ask the guide where they came from. She says they were a gift. I take that to mean they were stolen.



In the Cathedral of St. Mark next door you can also see two early paintings by Tintoretto. The statuary compares with those you see on the Italian mainland, including an impressive *Pietà*. On a wall are trophies that herald the participation of Korcula in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. All of this suggests Korcula's close ties to the Venetian mainland. This is, of course, not unique to Korcula. In the Maritime Museum in Kotor there were models of the *St. Tryphon*, a Korculan vessel, that fought at Lepanto.

The Battle of Lepanto is one of the great sea battles of history. It was also one of the bloodiest. The Christian League, to which Korcula and Kotor contributed, lost 15,000 men. The Turks lost twice that number – 8,000 Turks were taken prisoner. On the plus side, 15,000 Christian galley slaves were freed. The hero of Lepanto was the Spanish sea captain, Don Juan; the anti-hero, the Italian Gian Andrea Doria, whose cowardice and bad seamanship, in the words of John Norwich, almost cost the Christian League the battle. Miguel de Cervantes, author of one of the greatest novels in western literature, *Don Quixote*, fought at Lepanto, was wounded in his left hand, and acquired a life-long nickname, *The Cripple of Lepanto*.

From a geo-political point of view, the battle didn't amount to a great deal. The Turks weren't beaten back forever but resumed their westward onslaught. Within three years they had driven the Spanish out of Tunis and had turned the area into an Ottoman precinct.

The real significance of the battle of Lepanto lay in how it changed, thanks to the creativity of Don Juan, the conduct of naval warfare. Don Juan introduced the hitherto unheard of tactic of placing cannon on the deck of a ship. It was a tactical move that spelled defeat for the Turkish armada. It was, in fact, so successful a maneuver that all future naval warfare would be conducted at long distance. No more swashbuckling sword fighting, *mano a mano*. This meant bigger sailing ships and fewer galleys. The days of Errol Flynn ramming the enemy and grappling with them were over. Modern naval warfare had begun.

A concert by an **acapella quartet** of islanders from Vela Luka, the other town on the island, takes place inside All Saints Church. The musicians all have day jobs. One is an electrician, one an ex-seminarian – a guitar player who went into the seminary and fell in love with a nun, who fled with him to the secular side of life – and an undertaker.



Marco Polo may or may not have been born here. Doubt notwithstanding, they are building a museum to him and his family at the alleged homestead behind the Cathedral.

After lunch we sail to **Split** where we split into two groups – one to the archeological site at Solin, the other to the Palace of Diocletian. I choose Diocletian, the first emperor ever to resign from office.



Diocletian must have had retirement in mind for at least ten years – the time it took him to build his palace at Split, the city the Romans called Spalato. Split is a better name. It was – in that domino fashion one so often finds in history – Diocletian who was responsible for the division of the Roman Empire into the East (Constantinople) and the West (Rome). Having decided that the Empire was too large for a single ruler, he imposed the so-called tetrarchy, the rule of two Augusti: he and his companion-in-arms, Maximilian, in 285 and then two Caesars, Galerius and Constantius Chorus, eight years later. The latter was the father of Constantine I, the emperor who defeated Maxentius in Rome in 312, within a year of the death of Diocletian himself.

It was Constantine I, of course, who moved the capital of the Empire from Rome to Constantinople where it remained as competitor to and thorn in the side of western Christianity for over a thousand years, until its fall at the hands of the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

By the time of Constantine’s triumph, Diocletian had been out of power for seven years. His death went unnoticed. At one point, three years after his abdication, he was offered the mantle of Augustus again. His reply is famous: “If you could show the cabbage that I planted with my own hands to your emperor, he definitely wouldn’t dare suggest that I replace the peace and happiness of this place with the storms of a never-satisfied greed.”



Bright stars and black stains mark the reign of **Diocletian**. He is the emperor who brought order to a disintegrating Empire, at least for a time. He is also the author of four edicts leading to the last and worst of the persecutions of the Christians. Walking toward his **palace**, I see the shape of the **seaward wall** of the great building still visible behind the cafes and shops that have attached themselves to it like barnacles to a hull.

As we approach the palace, Bill Ross observes that cities consume their past. He has put it very well. How many cities have we visited that have, in fact, been built on top of cities? The practice resembles that of the inhabitants of the ancient city of Enkomi on the island of Cyprus whose inhabitants buried their dead beneath them in the very houses they were living in. Their dead were just downstairs.



Diocletian's Palace at Split is different, but not, a la Monty Python, completely different. Much of the palace has disappeared. But the **Temple to Jupiter** has been reshaped into the Baptistry of St. John. There is a Mestrovic statue of John looming over the **baptismal font**. The Mausoleum of Diocletian is now the Cathedral of St. Domnium. New gods for old.

The walls of the palace have been incorporated into the modern life of the town the way an artificial limb is incorporated into a body. I take this to be a metaphor of the way things ought to change, not cataclysmically, but in tiny increments.



As you pass through the Silver Gate into the **high-vaulted rooms of the ancient palace**, you are actually looking at the basement. These rooms were either used for storage or nothing at all. They were there to absorb the rising and falling waters of the Adriatic leaving the living space above them high and dry, literally. The workmanship of the rooms is extraordinary. The stone blocks of the walls are as tight fitting as Spandex.

### Saturday, April 18 – Sibenik, Croatia



We arrive in **Sibenik** and depart immediately by bus for Skradin where we are to board a boat that will take us to the Krka National Park and the Krka River waterfalls.



**Skradin** is there, but no boat. That gives us a bit of time to walk about. It is a neat little town that feels as if it could fit into the palm of a large hand. Some of us go into the town square. It is immaculate and very simple. Three facades – one red, one yellow, one ochre – face onto what appears to be an ancient well in the center of the square. There is time enough for coffee while we find out what happened to the boat. One of the coffee drinkers, John McLennan, tells me this story. In the coffee shop he asked the proprietress if the war had come to Skradin. He had asked because the town was so picture perfect. Like Dubrovnik, it hardly seemed possible. The woman answered by bursting into tears. She managed to blurt out that her husband and brother were shot dead while she stood next to them. That, she said, was 15 years ago. She will, of course, never forget.

John's encounter was important. Behind all the conviviality and Riviera-esque sophistication and bustle of Split, the simply neatness and squared-off beauty of Skradin, the picture-postcardness of Dubrovnik, there is the ugly face of war. The contrast with Albania won't go away. One nation faces its past and its present is dreary. One nation has tried (unsuccessfully, I think) to bury its past and its present behind a façade. I wonder if the mask will crack. There are nations like South Africa that face their past with truth commissions. There are nations like Croatia that don't. And where do we fit in? No truth commissions, but neither has the ignominy of Vietnam and Iraq been buried behind an unbroken façade. Which is the best path to national health? Time will tell.

It seems as if the boat left without us, so we have a change in plans. Instead of boating to the **bottom of the waterfalls** and walking up, we bus to the top and walk down. To my way of thinking, that is not just a change, it is a vast improvement. The boat will take us back to the bus and the bus to the ship.





John McLennan has done me another service. As we navigate the **boardwalk** that crisscrosses the falls following its descent to the place where the river re-emerges, I am fixated not on what I'm walking through, but where I'm going. That I am actually walking through a waterfall is lost on me.

"Isn't this incredible?" asks John, coming up behind me. I snap out of it. "Look at this," he says, pointing to a quiet pool of water at our feet surrounded by green leaves and brown branches. I look at where he is pointing. "Now look at that," he says pointing a few feet beyond. The waterfall is rushing at maximum velocity down the mountainside to the Krka River below. "They're just feet apart," he says, gurgling with the same enthusiasm that the falls have brought to the mountainside. "Look at the contrast. It is unbelievable!"

Before I can answer he has shot ahead of me and disappeared around the next bend of the boardwalk. He has stopped me in my tracks. I look around me for the first time. John is right. The contrasts are like no other I've seen. Quiet rivulets next to coursing waterways. Whoever set out this meander through the falls realized what a gem he or she had in hand and made the most of it.

Once we are back on board, the *Island Sky* embarks for Venice, our final port of call. In the afternoon Paul Harris talks about the Balkans in peace and war. He makes a comment that I find intriguing. He says that at the outbreak of World War II, Hitler was successful in creating an Albanian SS troop in Kosovo. At the time Kosovo was 90-percent Albanian. A similar attempt had failed in Albania. Why should this be so? I remember his earlier remark that Al-Qaeda had attempted to gain a foothold among the Muslim population in Albania and that had also failed. Why, then, should the Albanians in Kosovo be susceptible to Nazification while those in Albania not?

I didn't get a chance to ask him until two days later. As it was, it was a close call. Both of us were putting our luggage out in the corridor of the *Island Sky* at 7am on the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup>.

"Paul," I grabbed the opportunity. "Before we both disappear into our own lives, tell me why the Albanians were susceptible to Nazification in Kosovo but not in Albania." His very interesting response was that in Albania, the citizens were tribal members first and Albanian citizens second. What happened was that whenever the Nazis chose someone from an Albanian clan to be a head of a new Nazi unit, someone from another clan would kill him. It wasn't so much that the Albanians hated Nazis. Rather, it was that the

selection of a leader from one tribe upset the balance of power among all the tribes. No such tribal constraint operated in Kosovo.

This strikes me as a very plausible account. It is, in fact, a microcosm of the general view I have formed that Balkan history is a history of fitting round tribal pegs into square nation states. It just can't be done.

### Sunday, April 19 – Venice, Italy

There are several ways to reach Venice: trains, planes, buses, bicycles, cars. But from the sea is the best. When you slip through the Lido inlet, the Isola Le Vignole is just off starboard. Bearing to port, you leave the Isola di Sant Elena to starboard as well – Venice is a city of a hundred islands – and head for the basin of St. Marco at the confluence of the Grand Canal, the Guidecca Canal, and the Canal of **San Marco**. If you thought seeing Venice after seeing its after-images in Dubrovnik, Korcula, and Kotor would render the experience déjà vu, you are pleasantly mistaken.

A city that literally rises up out of the sea takes some getting used to. My experience of islands is of land surrounded by sand surrounded by water. Lots of trees and hills are on my islands. Take Cuttyhunk, for example. That is a typical island for me. Venice couldn't be farther away from Cuttyhunk were it on Mars.



For one thing the **buildings all rise straight up** from the water's edge. First, there is water. Then there is stone and the occasional tree. Its hills are the humps of **bridges that span the canals**. The waterways are as



wide as half a mile, or else so narrow you can jump them. At rush hour the canals float hundreds of boats filled with people, produce, or trash. Water constantly assaults the sides of the canals. The sound of slapping wake is everywhere.



Venice has no cars, no mopeds, no motorcycles, no bicycles. You either walk or **ride on water**. Consequently the sloshing of waves or, away from the water, the murmur of conversation provides an incessant *basso ostinato* to the music of the city. Occasionally bells tolling the hour or calling the faithful to church punctuate both.

As the *Island Sky* makes its slow way into the Giudecca Canal, we pass **San Giovanni Maggiore** on our port

side. Built by Andrea Palladio in 1559-80, it dominates its own little island. Once a home to Benedictine monks, the monastery is now a cultural center. The facade of the Church is orderly. If anything it resembles the coffin ends typical of graves in an Italian cemetery. Inside, in what is called the Chapel of the Dead, is Tintoretto's last painting. It had to be finished by his son, Domenico. The painting, *The Deposition*, depicts Christ being taken down from the cross. The slant and tilt of his body recalls Michaelangelo's *Pietà*. It is hard to get away from death in Venice.



To starboard we pass the incredible Santa Maria della Salute, a massive stone church whose bulk ought to have sunk the entire island. The church was begun in the year 1630 by Baldassare Longhena to give thanks for the end of the bubonic plague in that same year, a plague that took 100,000 Venetians – over half the islands' population, Titian among them. Longhena died in 1682 at the age of 84. The church was completed five years after his death.

The broad walk that follows the Giudecca Canal as we glide toward our berth is called the Zattere. The name, which means raft or pontoon, may have come from the days when the street was used as a docking place for barges loaded with cargo. When Nancy and I first came to Venice about 12 years ago, we stayed in a pensione on the Zattere. As it drifts by, I remember the ancient British actor who took his evening meal

there every night of his annual summer's visit. He must have been in his eighties. His face was familiar to us. That is how we started the conversation. He was nostalgic about England, spoke of his children who did not share his love of the city. He returned, so he said, every year like a lover to the graveside of a lover. He dressed for dinner every night, elegantly so, though there was no party to attend, no reception to adorn. Venice is filled with such people. They will never stop coming back even after they are gone.

The neighborhood is called the **Dorsoduro**. It literally means "hard backbone." It draws its name from the compacted clay that lies beneath the swamp on which Venice was built in the 5<sup>th</sup> century when the Italians took refuge here to escape the Gothic onrush. The method of building is ingenious and, in fact, the John Hancock Building in Boston was raised in much the same way. Basically, pilings are driven through the



swampy ground to the compacted clay beneath. Then buildings are erected on top of the pilings. To form the foundation for **Santa Maria della Salute**, over a million piles were driven into the Dorsoduro. Recently, the piles were inspected for soundness. Apparently, there wasn't the slightest sign of decay.

A day in Venice is about as useful as a teaspoon in a blizzard. Others have had the good sense and luck to stay longer. Given my love of the city, I steel myself against giving in to it. Guided walks through the



**Palazzo Ducale** (Doge's Palace), the Galleria dell'Accademia, and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection are my limit. I don't allow myself to look into the shops or down the side streets or chat with the locals, if you can find a local.

As you walk through the streets of Venice, you see a number of plaques commemorating the visit of one artist or another and being here a long time does not seem to matter. One plaque tells us Goethe spent two weeks in this house, another that Mozart spent a pleasant festival week in that one. There is no dearth of famous people who have stayed here. Across

from the Accademia is the **Palazzo Barbaro** where Whistler and Monet painted and Henry James wrote “The Aspern Papers.”

The award for the longest stay has to go to Ezra Pound, who is buried on the cemetery island of St. Michelle. Ezra Pound’s grave in the Evangelisti or Protestant section of the cemetery is a simple one, a small headstone, its face slightly tilted upward at a 45-degree angle toward the visitor. The name is all that is engraved on it.

One day in Venice is like a pop-up picture book to the real thing. I am glad I was here 12 years ago with the leisure and the energy to take it all in. And, in any case, I’m never very far from Venice. There is a video camera that broadcasts an image of the Piazza San Marco 24 hours a day. I have had it up and running on my computer for several years now. Venice is just a keyboard click away.



In fact, I’m looking at **San Marco** now, as I write these final words.

Samuel Jay Keyser

