

# A Long Walk for Peace

## THE BALKANS PEACE PARK PROJECT

In July of 2003 thirty-six people from eight countries made a cross-border trek through Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo/a as a further step toward creating a transnational Peace Park for the Balkans. The potential park boundaries join three wilderness areas in Northern Albania, Western Kosovo/a and Southeastern Montenegro. The cross-border scheme aims to protect this truly magical high Alpine area – the last mountain wilderness in Europe.

There already exist three national parks in the three contiguous regions. Only Albania is an autonomous national state; Montenegro and Kosovo/a have an autonomous but ambiguous, even disputed, status. The region is thinly populated and includes several ethnic groups and three major religions – Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox. The rural villages in this mountainous region have been depopulated and suffer economically as a result of the civil wars of the 1990's.

The scenery, wildlife, solitude, paths, and the villagers' hospitality and traditions are the greatest treasures of this transnational area. The Peace Park would link the economy with the ecology in this region to enhance the standard of living for all of its inhabitants. It would also secure the preservation of the area's dazzling array of flora and fauna, thereby establishing the Peace Park as one of the world's greatest regions for responsible travel.



# Kosovo/a - Rugova Valley

The object of the trek extended beyond walking. Its purpose was to engage as many local people as possible as guides, interpreters, hosts and facilitators in an effort to establish the foundation for responsible travel. This would help to provide a sustainable living for the peoples of this magnificently beautiful region who have suffered both politically and from war.

The group was of 8 nationalities from diverse backgrounds with ages ranging from 19-67. Four Colgate University summer interns managed much of the planning to ensure the trek went smoothly. Local students accompanied the trek as interpreters and assistants. All had the common aim to see that the success of the trek should ensure greater prosperity in the future for those in the regions. The environmental NGO Aquila based in Péc/Peja (Kosovo/a), the youth NGO - IRSH which is based in Shkodra (Albania), and HALIL (Montenegro), all helped to facilitate the trek.

The first four nights were based at Camp Rugova, 10kms from Péc/Peja in Kosovo/a. There were walks to lakes through vast mountainside alpine meadows. Some trekkers opted for longer mountain hikes and stayed overnight in shepherd huts. All trekkers chose their guided excursions based on their energy and ability levels. The participants enjoyed encounters with local villagers who shared their hospitality and made trekkers welcome with home produced cheeses, goat's milk, coffee, and *raki*.

*The Rugova area is a rich natural environment stretching from the great gorge of the River Mbushtria to the surrounding mountains. There is ample opportunity for walking. The valley sides are a patchwork of forest and cleared alpine pastures abundant with wildflowers and herbs. Towering above it all, the peaks rise to a height of 2,500m and are home to the Golden Eagle.*



Photo: Chris Rossi

A family in the Rugova valley makes trekkers welcome.

Photo: Chris Rossi



Hiking through Rugova's alpine meadows with a guide.

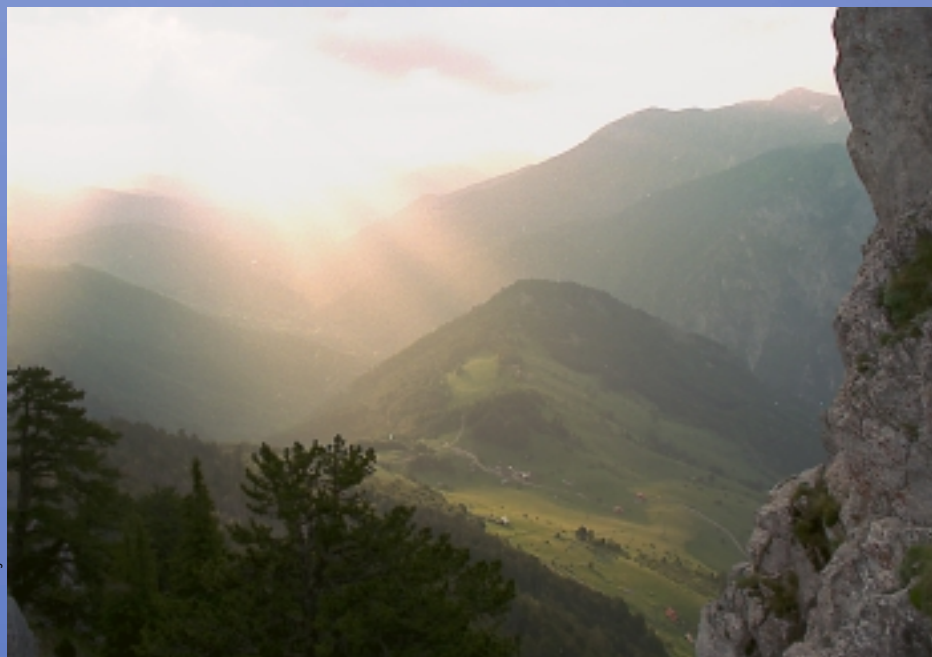


Photo: Lindsay Mackenzie

Sunlit view of Kosovo/a landscape.

# Montenegro - The Prokletija Mountains



Photo: Chris Rossi

View on the walk from Dcaj to Bozov.



Photo: Chris Rossi

Villagers of Dačić say farewell to the trekkers after providing a sumptuous lunch.

From Kosovo/a the trekkers took minivans over the northern border into Montenegro towards the town of Rožaje. The village of Dačić hosted a magnificent lunch. Locally produced cheeses were served with bread, yogurt and fresh produce. The meal concluded with honey from the villagers' hives. From Dačić the group walked for several hours through a region which had suffered greatly from recent wars. The day culminated in another generous meal of regional foods provided by the villagers of Božov. Stories and songs were shared over a roaring campfire late into the night. Trekkers slept in a newly built wooden bunkhouse created by the villagers.

The following day some members of the group continued by foot on a very ambitious walk through the countryside to the lakeside town of Plav (18 hours.) Two nights were spent in Plav, at a lovely small family hotel, with visits to the neighboring town of Gusinje. Some trekkers opted to stay in a mountain house at the hamlet of Grbaja. While there they enjoyed the glorious and atmospheric mountain vistas and made day hikes.



Photo: Chris Rossi

Swimming in the resort town of Plav.



Photo: Bill and Mary Burnham

Hiking at Grabaja.

*The Prokletija mountains are also known as the Accursed Mountains. Glaciation is evident in the sculptural qualities of the valleys with mountainous limestone fangs reaching high above the valley floors.*

# Albania - Vermosh to Thethi



Photo: Bill and Mary Burnham

Children greet trekkers in Thethi.



Photo: Chris Rossi

A host family and trekkers in Vermosh.

Political problems made it impossible for the trekkers to walk the 11kms into Albania from Grbaja as originally planned. Instead, it was necessary to travel 240kms by minivan to the Albanian border on Shkodra Lake at Han i Hotit. From the border crossing it was another 100kms by other minivans back north up to the village of Vermosh, high in the alpine mountains. Several Vermosh families hosted the trekkers providing beds and vast hot dinners of locally produced food. The next day saw hikes through the countryside to the little village of Lepushë.

From Lepushë a small group of trekkers completed a twelve hour walk through the mountains ending in the extraordinarily beautiful valley of Thethi. Thethi's deep valley was home to 149 families at the fall of Communism in 1991: now fewer than 26 families remain. After a leisurely day exploring the valley and some of the surrounding mountains, trekkers were treated to a sumptuous starlit picnic of a whole roasted lamb with dishes of yogurt, cheeses and other regional foods. The same night a new lamb was born.



Photo: Lindsay Mackenzie

A stone house in the beautiful Thethi valley.



Photo: Bill and Mary Burnham

Shepherds with their flocks in high alpine pastures near Thethi.

*Thethi National Forest Park (Parku Kombëtar Thethi) is composed of lush alpine pastures and fierce limestone peaks. The area has an abundance of wildlife. Inhabitants of the park farm and tend their livestock in traditional ways using scythes and horse power for haying.*

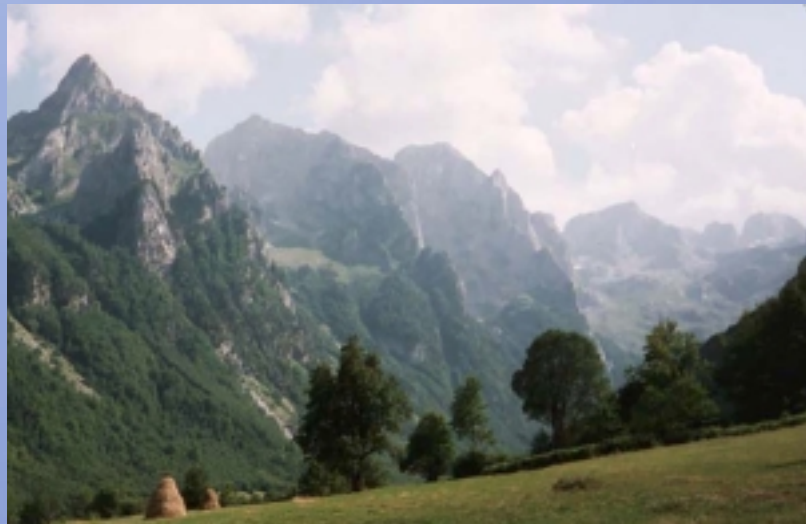
# Conference

The trek concluded with a conference in the Albanian city of Shkodra. The NGO, IRSH worked to make this a success with funding from the US Embassy in Tirana. Approximately 100 participants, both local and from further afield, discussed future activities for the development of the Peace Park. The conference also served as a debriefing for trekkers and the media. At the end of the conference there was still time to enjoy Shkodra, the beautiful city of Illyrian origin with its ancient castle and magnificent lake.



Conference participants discuss future plans for the Peace Park.

Photo: Nigel Young



The magnificent view from the mountain house at Grbaja, Montenegro.

Photo: Chris Rossi

*The move to establish the Peace Park is underway. However, there are urgent tasks at hand: improving trails and signs; funding the basic necessities such as roofing and water supplies; hiring school teachers and expanding mediation projects, as well as replanting woodlands, saving cultural monuments and reconstructing bridges. All these projects give hope for a future to the area and rebuild links across these unique mountains that the eagle, the bears, the wolves and the shepherds have long seen as a single home, unified by these majestic highlands.*

## With Thanks

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Participating NGOs:  
AQUILA (Kosovo/a)  
ERA (Kosovo/a)  
HALIL (Montenegro)  
IRSH "Youth Intellectuals - Hope" (Albania)  
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*Exhibition Designed by Chris Rossi*