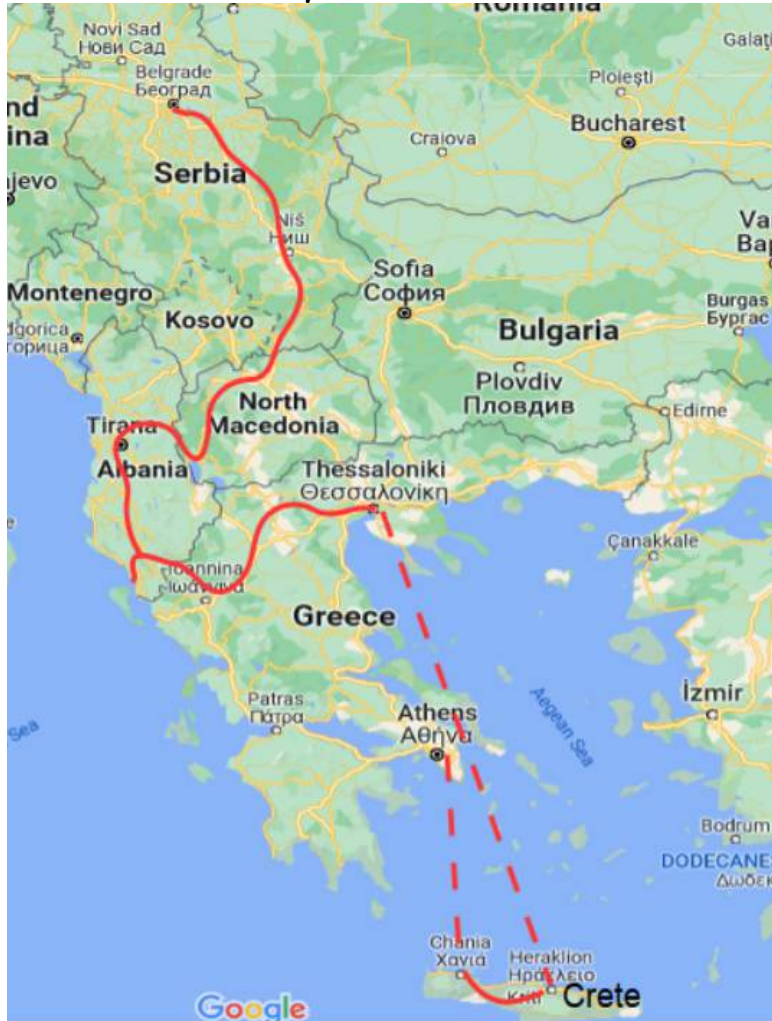


Rich Odendahl - Greece, Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia
May/June 2022



I was anxious to get back to international traveling after my loss of Cheryll five months earlier, so I booked a 30-day group tour with OAT Travel to Greece, Crete, Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. This was my first overseas trip in several years. My first trip to Greece was in 1998 when Cheryll and I met my dad and stepmother when they were cruising around the world on their sailboat. The itinerary for this trip went to many portions of Greece that I had yet to see.

I paid \$300 extra for Lufthansa premium economy with connections through Frankfurt. That entitled me to a little more legroom, a double-width armrest and slightly better meals. Today's premium economy is equivalent to regular economy from 20 years ago. American airlines had recently dropped the mask requirement, but Germany was still requiring masks onboard. In Greece masks are required indoors everywhere except when eating.

Cheryll and I had used several tour companies during our previous trips to Europe, however OAT is selling a premium product with small groups, hotels in excellent locations, top-end guides and so forth. There is much loyalty among my fellow travelers. I was the only one of 15 group members on their first OAT trip. Personally, I found the pace to be a little slow as most of the travelers are septuagenarians.



The crowds have returned to the area around the Acropolis.

The first six days were a "pretour" with eight clients. An additional seven group members would later join the main tour. After a visit to the Acropolis and the Parthenon, I took a taxi an hour or so to the small town of Lavrion to look at a boat that my brother was considering buying. Greek law requires masks in taxis. The taxi driver offered me a cigarette in hopes that I would not object to him taking off his mask and smoking one as well. So much for public health. The boat seemed very fast and a good balance between speed and cruising comfort, however there is a 3-year backlog in orders so he won't be seeing one anytime soon and has since bought another type. The boat in Greece is however available for charter.

After returning to Athens our pre-trip group of eight took a short flight to Crete. I enjoyed walking along the ancient Venetian harbor and seeing the mountains which were still snow capped in mid-May. We took a side trip out to the botanical gardens for a hike and a cooking class. We learned to make tzatziki and stuffed grape leaves.



One of the biggest highlights of Greece is the food. I really enjoyed the Greek salads, the souvlaki, the gyros, and the olives. Greeks take great pride in their cheeses and olive oil. I spent several hours enjoying the seaside view from some lovely sidewalk tavernas.



The flight from Crete to Thessaloniki in northern Greece took about an hour, where we met the main group at our centrally located hotel. We spent one day touring the churches of Thessaloniki.



This picture was taken during a hike at the base of Mount Olympus. Zeus wasn't at home at the top of the mountain, however I did run into him on the trail and we had a nice chat. Those of you who've been sending him letters should probably stop as he said the gods of Olympus no longer use snail mail. He suggested that you send him a private message on his Facebook page if you want to get in touch. Regrettably, the selfie that we took together came out blurry.

Much of this tour was about ancient history. Greece is littered with ancient sites displaying shards of dried clay that have been painstakingly glued back together and over-interpreted by archaeology students desperate to earn their PhD's. We toured several excellent museums, although I will have to admit to getting tired of looking at old pots. But the Tomb of Phillip II was different. It was apparently never looted in over 2300 years and contained exceptional golden artifacts and paintings alongside the contents of royal funerary urns.



Our next stop was to see the hanging monasteries of Meteora. I've tried to expunge the words "awesome" and "amazing" from my vocabulary because so many young people have rendered the words meaningless through everyday use to describe anything good. "I'll meet you for lunch at noon." "Awesome." No, it's not awesome. "I just bought some new amazing socks." Uhh, no you didn't. Socks are not amazing. Without these two words it's difficult to describe what I saw in Meteora, so I'll let the pictures speak for themselves. Apparently living on top of a rock was the price of practicing Christianity back when the Muslim Ottomans were in charge.



The further we traveled into the mountains the more spectacular the scenery. We spent two nights at the Aristi Mountain Lodge enjoying the fabulous views. The group took a leisurely hike through a gorge that was beautiful but at a pace more suitable for the less fit. We also had a raft trip through a neighboring gorge with Class 1 rapids.



The guides informed us that tourism in Greece is improving, but it's not back to where it was in 2019. Greece used to receive a lot of tourists from Asia and Russia, but those markets are basically gone. As we prepared to cross the border into Albania, Greece left me feeling that I want a third trip. The next one will definitely be independent.

We had to get off the the bus and have our passports stamped to leave Greece, reboard, take the short drive across the border and again get off to clear Albanian Immigration. Things went smoothly and no bags were searched. It appears that the bus driver saw to it that the Albanian border guards were adequately bribed. I'm told that Border Guard is one of the most lucrative positions in Albania. Of course, the person who decides who passes out Border Guard jobs is likely ultra-wealthy.

During the Communist period that ended in 1991 the Albanian government did its utmost to assure that the population was paranoid of nuclear war with the west and hundreds of thousands of concrete bunkers were constructed across the country. A couple of them have been turned into art / history museums and make for an interesting tour.

Personally, I think that The Simpsons did a better job of explaining this difficult time;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8s4AvjnPFk>



Three of my fellow travelers grew up in Shanghai and experienced the cultural revolution. They found it remarkable that the Albanians have museums documenting the history of life under communism, whereas the Chinese authorities have made every attempt to erase that era of their history.

Communism made religion illegal for 30 years in Albania, so today there are a few churches and mosques scattered about, but the general attitude towards religion seems indifferent. There are lots of new hotels, but seemingly few guests.

In the Albanian capital of Tirana, we came to understand why the country was so overbuilt. There are half a dozen giant skyscrapers currently under construction for no apparent reason. There's already plenty of available office space. Further investigation reveals that money laundering is huge in Albania and maybe North Macedonia as well. Shell companies are building skyscrapers to hide illegal profits. The only real question is "What will happen to the skyscrapers in the coming years when they can't be rented or sold?" If Albania ever hopes to join the European Union, they're going to have to convince the other countries that they're making a serious effort to crack down on money laundering.



What would Alexander the Great think of the current situation? The visit was interesting, but I will probably put Albania on the been-there-done-that list.

It was relatively easy to cross the border into North Macedonia and the former Yugoslavia. Lake Ohrid has scenery that rivals or exceeds Lake Tahoe. But it's surrounded by hotels and resorts that are nearly empty. This is probably attributable to a combination of reluctance to travel during the pandemic, the fact that Asians and Russians are hardly traveling at all, and money laundering.



There are a handful of Yugos still on the road here; the car that was known in the Americas for cheap but poor reliability and safety back in the 1980s. Today, electric scooters are being used for transportation almost everywhere in the city. Riders think nothing of zooming through crowded pedestrian streets at 20 miles an hour. I didn't witness any injuries, but there were a lot of close calls.

The Macedonian capital of Skopje seems to have gone a little overboard with all of the monuments. I did not know that mother Teresa was Macedonian, and there is a small museum there in her honor. The group along with the guide and driver crammed onto a pontoon boat for a trip up a river through a beautiful gorge for a short hike into some caves.



This is me with Martina - my North Macedonian tour guide. She was very polite, but does not appear to be the least bit interested in becoming a contestant in the Future Mrs. Odendahl Pageant.

Ten of the group members flew home from Macedonia, but five of us continued on into Serbia where we met a new guide and driver after we crossed the border.

In Nis we visited several war monuments, an archaeological museum and a former concentration camp. The Serbian Holocaust death count included about 8,000 Jews from the Balkan countries.



This picture was taken during a tour of the countryside near Belgrade. We had the opportunity to visit the studio of a few folk artists. This lady was already married and therefore not eligible to become a pageant contestant. We asked the guide about taking a side trip into Kosovo. That would be the last remaining country in Europe that I have yet to visit. Unfortunately, Serbia does not recognize the independence of Kosovo and the border is closed to non-citizens. In order for us to go to Kosovo we would have to enter through either North Macedonia or Montenegro. Maybe some future trip?

After a few days in Belgrade it was time to head home. The day before our departure we were each tested for COVID. If I had been infected with COVID, I would have had to leave the group, quarantine at my own expense (I never buy travel insurance), and then find my own way home. I felt fine, but still crossed my fingers and hoped I didn't get a false positive. The dark cloud was lifted when the entire group tested negative, and we were all permitted to fly home.



I'm not sure what I expected to find coming to the Balkans other than checking a few more countries off the list. The people were generally quite nice. The prices are low. I'm writing this at a sidewalk cafe with a large beer that cost about a dollar and a quarter including tax and tip. OAT is a well-run company. However, I found the pace of this group tour to be painfully slow. Future plans are for trips with younger people that include more energetic activities. Stay tuned for more updates at:

<http://odendahls.com/>