



Danish Daily "Jydske Vestkysten", January 14 2001

Travel article from Tirana, Albania – part of the setting for THE WOLF IN BANJA LUKA

Tirana Transit

A narrative about a journey across the mountains from Kosovo to Tirana. About a meeting with the people under the pyramid, about huge Mercedeses, an abandoned lion and a parting on the quay of tears.

By Jens Henrik Jensen

The two little boys have wrapped themselves in a piece of plastic. They lie cuddled together a few yards up on the grassy mountain slope. With a despondent gaze, normally belonging to older people, they look down upon the road. The small herd of sheep is as indifferent to the clatter of the bus as their grave little shepherds are.

It's drizzling. Or maybe it's just constantly damp up here where the sky has descended and forced a veil of mist over the mountain ranges.

As the bus stops and slowly rolls into yet another crater in the asphalt, I get a clearer view of the boys, sitting there in their sweat pants full of holes and their well-worn rubber shoes, far from the nearest village and with no building in sight in the valley below us.

I have come to Europe's poorhouse, Albania. I came in through the back door from Kosovo, and in a few days, I will leave through the front door, via Tirana over Durrës, the gateway to the world and, in particular, the gold-tipped boot of Italy.

- Albania, why? It's a few hours since the Border Officer in Morina asked me what my business was in Albania. Kukes, the Albanian Mountain village where tens of thousands of Kosovo-Albanians sought refuge during Milosevic's attack, is already far behind us now. Out here on the miserable winding mountain stretch, there is nothing but dampness and green mountains. Why Albania? Maybe the boys under their plastic covers think the same. The fact that I did not have an entry-stamp in my passport confused him.

- Albania, why?

- Tirana transit...Tirana-Durrës-Italy, I answered curtly to keep it simple.

He rummaged through the drawers in his plain office only to find scores of paper sheets and a can of Coke.

- That'll be 30 dollars, he finally said with a resigned gesture.

- Hmm, I heard 15 dollars for a visa, I answered.

- No, no. 30 dollars...

Through the window, I could see that all the male bus passengers were now standing under a roof smoking and waiting for the tall foreign back-packer to return from the office. And I did return, after putting 30 dollars on the table, and we were able to leave the border, where the skeleton of a burned-out bus had been laid to rest on the roadside.

The bus ride had started with the same sort of carelessness as the Border Officer's decision to give me the visa. I bought the ticket from a Pavarotti look-a-like throning behind his desk in a small shed in the bus station. When I returned early the next morning, he kept his part of the deal, which was to show me the way to the bus amidst the babylonian chaos of travelers, luggage, mini vans and buses.

- Stay here, the bus will be here soon, Pavarotti told me and quickly jogged back into his shelter from the pouring rain.

A half-hour later, I still hadn't seen the Tirana bus and I'd just started getting uneasy. Suddenly, however, a guy wearing sweat pants and a leather jacket and carrying four cartons of cigarettes under his arm popped up in the crowd of people and told me in German to follow him. My Kosovo experience made me question him carefully. Skepticism is a trait which is quickly acquired in this part of the world.

- Ich bin chauffeur, ich bin bus driver, the man repeated several times before I followed him. He led me to a side street where a bus with a "Tirana" sign in the window was waiting.

The mist is floating along in huge flakes, while hour after hour pass in exactly the same way. Along serpentine roads over mountains and through valleys. There are more holes in the road than in the worst roads in South America. In fact, for long periods, there are more holes than actual road surface.

Cigarette smoke fills the bus and is mixed with the spicy smell of the characteristic meat rolls that the passengers unwrap from old newspapers and eat with large kebabs. With a smile, I'm offered a piece and a banana. Someone opens a window to let the smoke out. Someone else shuts it again – slowly the day draws to an end in the rolling bus.

No one wished to confirm that the route was safe. Many highway robbers operate in the mountains, but on this day, the only visitors are a couple of police officers, armed with battered machine guns, who suddenly stop the bus and quietly inspect us.

The bus also stopped for other reasons. The driver yells out something to the passengers and all the men jump out and line up by a stream on the roadside. Peeing is not the word, we are pissing like a bunch of soldiers. As is customary in these parts, paper, plastic bags and other pieces of garbage are thrown in the ditch.

We pass a few villages with scrap and car wrecks lying along the river, accompanied by lone burnt-out factory buildings and rusty chimneys before the landscape finally opens up. The ride is just less than 200 kilometers, and after almost ten hours, I am dropped off in central Tirana on a quiet Sunday morning.

The Imam wakes me at the break of dawn; his droning voice comes thundering from loudspeakers in a nearby minaret. Tirana wakes up to a hectic Monday and I to a fleeting acquaintance with life as it unfolds along the pulsating main street, the Bulevardi Dëshmorët e Kombit.

The center of the city is Skënderbeg Square, around which the busy traffic flows back to the boulevard. On the front of the National History Museum, I see the only thing I immediately recognize: an enormous mosaic of the nation's proud sons and daughters armed and led by a

peasant girl in a country dress with her gun above her head, and a tall peasant lad carrying the blood-red flag with the black eagle. Sprightly, they all march towards a new week without noticing the changing times.

One thing takes me by surprise - the swarm of big Mercedeses driving around Europe's poorest capital. I notice that the big cars often carry a horseshoe on the hood. If you want to avoid dents around here, you need luck.

A statue covered in plastic and surrounded by scaffolding stands out. Skënderbeg, the national hero, is in need of restoration, but the work has come to a stop in the little park where the fountains lack water. The good Skënderbeg led the resistance against the Turks in the 15th century, and he was undefeated in all of his 25 battles. If only you could say the same thing about my local football team, Esbjerg.

I spend all morning looking for a place with an Internet connection. The Net – new friend and messenger for the traveler – providing girlfriend, family and friends with a tongue, and supplying the journalist with indispensable news, as well as results of football matches he can't watch.

My search leads me through side streets where decay and poverty reach out determinedly just a few yards from the boulevard, which is struggling to keep up its appearance and to maintain the illusion of a capital.

The Albanians are friendly people, but their ability to understand me is limited. Still, I manage to find what I'm looking for. In the basement under the Enver Hoxha Museum, there is an Internet café. A misplaced pyramid of marble that the dictator, in all modesty, had built to preserve his own memory. Today, it looks shabby and is covered with graffiti. It symbolizes a people's scorn and serves as an epitaph for the despot, who once lived in luxury with his conspirators in the restricted area of the city.

Initially, I get lost in the catacombs and find myself in a flooded bathroom. Finally, I reach a dark café with western heavy metal music blasting through the speakers. It is impossible for the guests of the café to talk to each other.

Walking through the room in my dirty hiking boots, wearing a safari shirt and a tan, I'm as misplaced as the pyramid above me.

Closely packed, the other Internet users sit there dressed in black suits and black leather. The women with heavily painted makeup, alarming lipstick and wearing sunglasses in the dark room aiming for that final touch of decadence.

In a room next to the low-flying jet set, I find a row of computers – most of them out of order. I wait and wait with a sneaking suspicion that my precious transmission is stuck in a telephone wire somewhere at the bottom of the Adriatic Sea. However, after having my patience tested to the limit, I am finally able to access my hotmail and I learn that everything is fine – at least outside the Tirana area.

The roar sounds surreal. Maybe it's because I've just seen an old man walk along peacefully in the park with two cows. Yet, the roar that I hear on this Tuesday afternoon can't possibly come from a cow.

I sit on a block of concrete by the artificial lake that Hoxha had made for the recreation of the people. Behind me is the park and in front of me the lakeside is strewn with plastic garbage and cow shit. The water is muddy brown and a few yards out an old rowboat full of water is floating. I hear the roar again, and I remember my travel guide mentioning something about a zoo somewhere in Tirana. Now, visiting a zoo in a struggling country is rarely a great experience, but it has started to rain a little, so why not... On a Tuesday in Tirana...

I prepare myself for the worst as I walk over the dam in the fine rain. On my right, there is a desolate building that an optimistic entrepreneur once erected. The most dominating feature of the building is a huge sign saying "Melrose". By the lake, a couple of fishermen stand motionless, and a big rat scurries up from the dam and finds a hole somewhere in the pavement.

Once again, I hear the roar, but I can't find anything resembling a zoo.

I stop by an open shed made of sheet metal. An old man is sitting there. He gets mad because I can't understand his answer when I ask about the zoo. Nonetheless he takes a few dollar bills from my hand as he points straight ahead.

A broken path of sidewalk leads me up to a building about the size of an average Danish family house. The Tirana Zoo holds 11 animals: a baboon, a tiger, a lion and a lioness, a wolf, two foxes of some kind, a hen - as well as one cage with two little bears and another cage with a small wolf. That's all there is to see before the guest is back at the beginning in front of the tiger cage.

This mighty cat is walking restlessly from end to end, behind white-painted bars covered with strong chicken wire with holes here and there. The cage measures about eight square meters. The walls and the floor are made of white tile. The animal is simply caged in a bathroom. No room for running, no soil, no grass and no branches to scratch.

The roar returns again. It comes from the lion in the neighboring cage. This cage, which is not much bigger than the tiger cage, also houses the lioness. Next to them, the wolf is running around his bathroom in a state of confusion. I wouldn't say that the animals look starved – it's more the lousy cages, paws and claws on slippery tiles, that bother me.

I walk another round and find three boys feeding the bears with leaves. At least a good deed – with a smile, I take their picture.

The lion roars again – sounding perhaps even more hollow than before. The same boys I just met are now throwing chestnuts at the king of animals, who leaps angrily towards the bars. They are playing a little game where the last one to move away from the bars after the lion has been hit is the winner. I give them a warning stare and they stop the game. Then I leave this zoo of horrors, gathering from another lion roar that the game is on again.

I saw no guard in the zoo, no one to look after the animals – just a house with eight bathrooms.

Walking out of there, I remember the huge media story as I left Denmark: so-called animal friends were letting minks out of their cages into nature where they were certain to die. There will always be people committed enough to fight for what they believe in. Homeless cats and mice used for experiments will always have friends.

As the rain intensifies, I hear the roar of the lion one last time. Now I know where it comes from. It is the roar of an abandoned lion in Tirana.

A railway station that looks more like a garbage dump completes the other end of the boulevard. This is where my last day in transit in Tirana ends. My ticket ensures my admittance to the other side of the fence. The state railway has dumped old equipment on the switching tracks where dogs are sniffing around.

A crowd is gathering on the platform. A scruffy looking officer is chasing some kid and finally grabs hold of him. He knocks the poor kid to the ground before he gets up again and runs off. Unaffected, the passengers return to their waiting positions and the officer walks away with his partner and a smile on his face.

Such use of force is accepted in this part of the world. What I've just witnessed is quite shocking for a Dane, but it just might be one of the reasons why young refugees from these parts have a hard time respecting the less authoritative officials in Denmark. A dog is sniffing around my backpack. The passengers start moving, forcing me to move too and stop jumping to conclusions. I get on the old iron horse of a train that is going to take me to Dürres and the sea.

Floodlights cast dramatic shadows on this area of the harbor where chaos has arrived with the darkness.

The ferry from Ancona is being unloaded and then loaded again before it is time for the Bari ferry Palladios m/s and me. Officers and soldiers direct cars and trucks. Now and then, large Mercedes' drive by the barrier unimpeded as if they have some code in the window. There must be a logical explanation for all these Mercedeses and I guess I already know it. Still, I ask a young father standing next to me:

- Many Mercedeses in Albania...

- Yes, many! Corruption, you know...

And that's how it works. Ordinary corruption, ordinary Mafia and ordinary fraud. A guy in Italy reports his car stolen, gets the insurance money and sells the car at a very fair price to the Albanians. And corruption? It's doing just fine in a country with foreign capital knocking on the door eager to get in without paying the entrance fee.

The people in the long line in front of the iron fence start shuffling their feet. Relatives are hugging and some start crying. The younger generation is set to leave.

A few hours later in the Bari line, the scene is repeated amidst shadows and engine noise. Behind me, a mother, a father and their two teenage girls are hugging an older man and his wife. Here, however, it is the grandparents who are set to leave. The girls are devastated as they choke on their words, their eyes filling with tears. The crying migrates to the grown-ups. Granddad, a gray gentleman wearing black, has long kept his cool. Now, his eyes grow misty too and I start looking at my boots.

The good ship Palladio starts maneuvering through the dark port and we pass the red and green light.

The sail on the black sea is about to begin. Behind me, the floodlights on the quay of tears are shut down and above me, the stars light up the sky – *Albania exit*.