

The Journey

Belgrade, June 15th

The day has come. Working here in Belgrade, for one year – gosh, it went so fast – I can't believe it is finished. I have mixed feelings. It was hard and it took time to adapt – to the city, the work-place, the colleagues. But in the end I felt good, I felt at home. It is sad to leave. But on the other hand, I couldn't wait for this day. Going back to my family, my friends, above all to him. He's arriving tomorrow, with his car, another small adventure is about to start and I'm so excited. We'll travel all the way back to Italy, through Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia. It was a long time since we last did a proper trip together. Being with him, and seeing things that I've never seen before. This is my ideal life. I wish I could live this way all the time. But who has the money?! Work work work. The alarm is set at 9:00, so I'll have time to put my stuff together, say goodbye to some friends and get ready, before he arrives.

Obrenovac, April 27th

Tomorrow is the day. Or at least I hope it will be the day. It is the fifth time. That I woke up, hopeful, and walk, and walk, and then nothing. They send us back. Tomorrow I'll leave alone. It is less probable to be seen, and I can take care of myself, anyway. I met some nice people here, of course I'm sad about leaving them, but not too much. I'm less hopeful now, I kind of feel that I will not succeed this time either. It will probably be the sixth failure. But I have to leave this place. Mama is calling me and asking why I'm still here. I'm afraid, I'm tired, I adapted to this life in the end. But I don't tell her this. They didn't pay all that money for sending me to Serbia, she says. She's right. I have to go. I'll go through Bosnia. It's what I did the last time, but when I tried to cross to Croatia they caught me and sent me back to Serbia. The other three times I tried to cross to Croatia from Serbia but is impossible now. Police beat hard. Bosnia is a good choice. Ramadan starts soon, and there are many mosques there. Tomorrow, alarm set at 7:00. I pray God this the right time.

Serbia

Mokra Gora, June 19th

Last day in Serbia! In these few days we did so much, saw incredible things. I'm exhausted. We spent the first day in Belgrade, I had so many things to show him and in one day it was

impossible, but that was the plan. We then followed the beautiful Danube (Dunav, Donau, Danubio) till the Smederevo fortress, then down following the Ibar, along the valley of the Monasteries, the most fascinating of which was the Monastery of Studenica, then down till Novi Pazar, a chaotic Muslim town, whose minarets are visible from a distance, with a lively bazaar and some impressive historical sites. Then we drove towards the Tara National Park and the river Drina, and here we are tonight, in Mokra Gora, after a full-day hike in the park. Following the rivers. Rivers always fascinated me. Their stubborn proceeding, regardless of the forced deviations, of the barriers that are set up by us humans and by nature. In the end, they arrive where they are supposed to arrive, and the water is at the same time the one that left in the first place, the one that was added during the journey – by the rain, by the various tributaries – and the one that resulted from the two. Everything and nothing changed. What an experience I'm living. I'm enjoying every moment. He is the best companion. Of this journey and of this life. I fall asleep next to him, as in a shell, and I realize this is my place, wherever we are, this is the place I call home. Tomorrow we will cross the border with Bosnia, first stop will be Višegrad. I have with me *The Bridge on the Drina*, which kept me company during a harsh Serbian winter, and that now I'm going back to, this time for real.

Somewhere on the border, May 3rd

I made it, the first and easiest step. Crossing into Bosnia was easy as it was the last time. No problems. I stayed some days in a camp that some other migrants had set up on the Serbian side of the border. There are some volunteers coming every day with food. Good people. We are in the forest, far from villages, it's hard to find food otherwise. I filled in my bag in the last village I was but the space is what it is. My small backpack. Back home I used a backpack of this size to go on day-trips around the city. And now I'm crossing countries with it. I managed to fit my life in it. You don't need that much in the end. Even if a second pair of shoes would be great to have. These are all broken, they walked too many fucking kilometers, I was wearing them in the snow and then in the mud and then in the sun. A new pair of shoes would make life easier. Or maybe is better to complain about the shoes, at least I don't think about the crazy situation I'm in. They call it "the game". I've never called it that way. It is just shit. I walked so much, tried tried and tried and then they just send you back. It is like they are making fun of me. In normal life efforts are paid back. Here no one understands what effort you did and that after such an effort they could at least pretend not to see you, let you cross. I feel a bit lonely. I regret having left alone. But this is my journey, I don't want to count on people and to have to take care of people. I will just walk my way.

Bosnia

Mostar, June 24th

We are now in Mostar, after visiting Višegrad and Sarajevo. It was a small taste of Bosnia of course, I would like to extend it but there's so much to see in front of us. We have to go on. Unexpectedly, we had some issues when we crossed the border between Serbia and Bosnia. I have a passport but he hasn't, just his national ID, and for some reasons it meant problems for the border officer. It took quite long for him to figure out what to do and so we had to wait almost two hours. A bit annoying of course. We had the check-in at the hotel in Višegrad early because the plan was to leave the baggage and then visit the city, but in the end we arrived in the afternoon, and after leaving the baggage and eating lunch we had just the evening to walk around the city. That is not big but still, one wants at least to see the bridge in the day-light! Luckily we had some time the next day, before leaving for Sarajevo. Driving from Višegrad to Sarajevo was amazing, first the gorge of the river Drina, then beautiful countryside, forests, small villages. We met Sarajevo first from above, descending in the valley from the plateau that surrounds the city. An outstanding city. Both from afar, and from deep inside its streets and alleys. I would like to come back, maybe live here for a period. In the central area, so many refugees. They seem mostly Asians, mostly young man. In Belgrade there were many of them as well. This is what they call "the Balkan route", and these are the people walking it. Maybe some of them dream to settle in Italy. Well, I hope they will succeed. I wonder where these people live, how they get food, how they move around. This encounter, while we were having fun exploring a new city, made me feel a bit of uneasiness. We live such different lives. But I don't see anything that I could do about it, probably if they were in my place they would enjoy their life as much as I do. But still, this uneasiness lasted for quite a lot. It is in part still there.

Bihac, June 14th

Bosnia is a hard place where to live, for us. After crossing I arrived in Sarajevo and stayed there for more than a month. There were so many of us. I met people that I knew from before, a guy that took the boat with me from Turkey to Greece. He had his brother with him, but he is not of this world anymore. I met also people that I knew from Serbia. I felt less lonely after arriving in Sarajevo. Even if I say that I prefer to stay on my own, well it is bullshit, it's good to have around people that care about each other. This helped a lot in Sarajevo. I stayed for

25 days in a tent in a park in the city. With many other people in their tents, the camp was pretty big. Volunteers came with food every day. That was the only different moment of the day. For the rest, I felt so bored. The days were endless, nothing to do, I felt useless, I felt not a person anymore. When Ramadan started I started to fast. Volunteers were coming in the evening with the food, the evenings and nights were the only moments that I was feeling well. But during the day I was feeling useless again. I tried to make the days shorter sleeping till late, but the sun always woke me up, and the tent became quickly too hot to stay in. Because I was feeling that way I didn't have the force to go on. I was also scared I have to say. Trying to cross into Croatia can mean the end of the dream, another failure. Back to Serbia. Staying in Sarajevo makes the dream last a bit longer. After the 25 days, they brought me to a center that they had just opened. Apparently there are really a lot of us, they didn't expect so many people, and they had no space where to put us. In the center I started feeling better and I decided to go on. I traveled till here, Bihac. I've been here for two days. I'm leaving tomorrow. This place is hell, some people are here since months, I don't know how they do it, I can't stay here any longer. Yesterday mama called me, I didn't tell her about tomorrow. I will tell her that I'm in Croatia only when I'll be in Croatia. If I will be there. I pray to God.

Croatia

On a beach, between Šibenik and Split, 28th June

Croatia is what I needed. The sea. Oh, I missed it so much. We arrived in Croatia three days ago, no problems at the border this time. We first stayed in Split, visited the city, then decided to stay a few days at the sea, so here we are. The weather is wonderful, the water limpid, lukewarm, we found a hidden beach, not crowded at all, and stayed here the whole day yesterday and today. It is so refreshing. If it was for me, we would stay here until the end of the summer. This is like a balsam for our relationship. To dedicate time to each other, all the time that is needed, to talk, to look at each other, to be silent together. We have all the time that we want for ourselves. We grow more and more close to each other. After so many years, it seems impossible to be still able to get closer and closer, every single day. Being in a long distance relationship, as we are for most of the time, is not always easy, but it makes the time spent together much more valuable. Tomorrow we'll move to Zadar, and from there, to the Plitvice Lakes, in the interior of the country. I saw such beautiful pictures of that place, I've been dreaming about going there for years, and now the time has finally come. This journey is

a continuous discovery of incredible places. I wonder why such few people travel in the Balkans. These countries are so rich of historical sites, natural beauties. Recent history also permeates the places. In Mostar, so many houses covered with bullet holes. It seems that the troops have just left. As soon as you step out of the area of the Old Bridge you can almost smell the war. My idea about this trip was that of recovering from a year of intense work, refreshing my mind, enjoying some lightness. But you cannot cross the Balkans unmoved by what happened here just twenty years ago, and by what still happens today. I keep thinking of those young guys in Sarajevo. Their dreams at the mercy of merciless border guards. It is an unjust world. I can't stay with these thoughts. I'll go back to the sea and try to wipe them out.

A forest, July 2nd

I'm in Croatia, I'm in Europe. I still cannot believe it. I made it. Probably the hardest part, at least this is what people say, but seems true to me. I didn't make it the first time. When I tried the first time we met the police. It was horrible. I still cry for that. They beat us, stole our money and phones. Then they wanted to bring us with them. We were 20 people. Some of us escaped, I was one of them. I don't know what they did with the others, probably sent back, to Serbia or to Bulgaria, who knows. We could run only back to Bosnia, but at least we were safe. In Bihac there are thousands of people, they couldn't find us, so we were safe. I still cry if I think of that day. I didn't have my phone anymore, I didn't have my numbers, I didn't have my pictures, my music, I didn't have a map anymore. All that made me survive the long days and go on was lost. I cried for the blows and for my phone. Some years ago I wouldn't tell anybody if I cried, not even to my diary, I didn't even have a diary. But now I don't care anymore. If I'll make it I will know that I'm strong even if I cry. They all cry. I hear them sobbing at night, in their tents. I tried again a couple of days later, as soon as I felt in strength. I left with three friends that I met in Bihac. They are still with me. They want to go to Italy like me. We made it. I don't know how but we crossed, no one saw us, I thank God, for letting us pass. Since then we walked through the forest. We passed close to what must be a really popular place, some lakes, they say they are beautiful, people come from all over the world to see them. Well, not a place for us. I always enjoyed to visit places, take pictures. But we would look so out of place. We talked about that one evening and then started acting like tourists with imaginary cameras. We laughed so much. It was a fun night, we almost didn't sleep at all, just talked and laughed. It feels good to be still considered a person.

Slovenia

Ljubljana, July 1st

We arrived in this lovely city yesterday. I feel like we are definitively out of the Balkans now. No more ćevapčići and burek kiosks on the side of the road, no more signs in Cyrillic (from Croatia, to be precise), more and more tourists. We are in Europe, with a taste of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the buildings and in the general tidiness. Feels like home. But we still have 3 days, it's not over yet. We'll stay in the city one more day, and then we'll visit some caves on our way to Italy. The Plitvice Lakes were stunning, but extremely crowded. It was impossible even to walk, we were all blocked, in an endless row of people taking thousands of photos, basically seeing the lakes through the viewfinders of their cameras. I didn't enjoy it as much as other places that we have seen, less particular but more livable. But as usual, the annoyances will soon be forgotten and only the positive side will be registered in the memory.

Another forest, July 15th

Entering Slovenia was difficult. To reach the border we walked a lot, then we took a bus, even if it is risky. We were exhausted. When we arrived next to the border we found out that they built fences all along it, we had to walk for kilometers along it, mostly at night-time, to find a hole in the fence. We were so hungry and tired. In Bihac a guy told us that he would have guided us for some money. We said no, because we didn't have money and because you can never trust these people. But maybe it would have been easier. Anyhow now we're in Slovenia. Slovenia. You never hear about this place. But you need to cross it to arrive in Italy. Hopefully, this will be the last night in the wood. Tomorrow we'll take a bus and then walk to a point where should be safe to cross. At this point, I'm not afraid and I'm not hopeful and I don't feel anything anymore. I just go on. Is like if my body goes on by its own. I realized that I have no idea what I will do when I'll be in Italy. I've never thought about that. I've always thought about the family back home, and I always tried not to think of the present. But trying not to think I was always thinking in the end. When I was thinking of the future it was like a cloud. A positive cloud, but I couldn't distinguish anything. Sometimes I dream of my family and of going back. It was shit, back home, but at least I know what it is. I know nothing of what will be my life in Italy. I'm scared. But I try not to think. Now the only possible thing to do is to go on. I thank God there are the guys with me. They have become brothers. We said we will help each other in Italy. We are all scared, even if we don't say that.

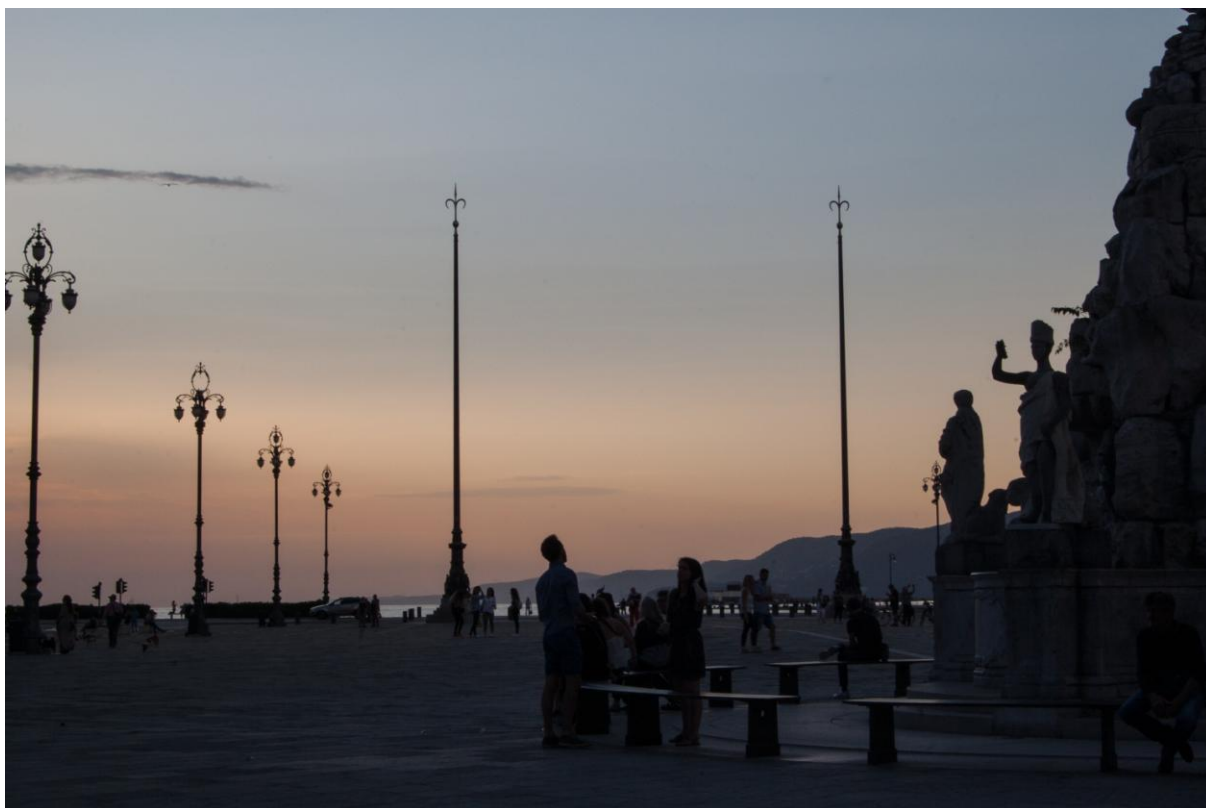
Italy

Trieste, July 3rd

Here we are, Italy. I'm back. I'm so happy. My people, my food, my language. I loved our journey but as they say, even the best things need to come to an end at a certain point in order to appreciate them. This trip has come to an end. I'm content if I look back at it, and I'm content if I look forward, at what will come next. Right now we're having lunch in a restaurant by the sea. It is weird and somehow makes me emotional to speak Italian again, after such a long time. To understand and be understood without any effort. Trieste is so beautiful. I've never been here before. We'll stay here one night, and tomorrow after another 3 hours drive we'll be at home. My mum has reunited the family and organized a lunch to celebrate my return. We'll have to rush to be there on time! The sun is setting, right in the sea. It leaves behind stunning traces of color in the sky. Tonight I love him more than ever. This is the perfect ending of a beautiful journey. I'm grateful.

Trieste, July 19th

We arrived in Trieste two days ago. It is surreal to be here. I don't even know what to write because I don't know what I think and what I feel. I'm happy. But I'm also confused. When I thought about this moment I thought it would have been like the end. That I would have jumped and hugged my friends and fallen exhausted but happy on the ground. But it is not the end. It is just the beginning. The guys are in the center where some nice people told us that we can stay. I'm sitting on the dock, the view is beautiful, the sun is setting and the sky is all painted, it seems an explosion, as if someone had stepped on a paint tube that then exploded spreading paint all around. This view makes me poetic. When one doesn't know what to think, nature is a safe place where to rest the mind. The sky. Not the sea. It still scares me. I'm gonna go back to the center soon, but first I'll try to call mama. It's been quite a while, she must be worried. Maybe she will not believe where I am. She will then understand and tell me that I'm brave and that I'm strong. How I miss her caresses. She's so far away. I can do nothing to reach her. Maybe I'll call her tomorrow, I don't want that she hears me crying.



TRIESTE, PIAZZA UNITÀ D'ITALIA