

## The joys of travel; the legacies of war

“The Athens of Croatia; the Pearl of the Adriatic”. That is how tourist brochures describe Dubrovnik. Seventy years ago, Rebecca West inexplicably wrote that she did not like Dubrovnik. “It reminds me of the worst of England.” Her husband, Henry Andrews, expressed the view of far more visitors when he said that Dubrovnik was “perhaps the most exquisite town I have ever seen.” He was right. She was wrong.

Dubrovnik was an important port during the Middle Ages, but the old city, including a thirteenth century cathedral built by Richard the Lion Heart on his way back from the Third Crusade, suffered from fires and earthquakes. It was finally destroyed by an earthquake in 1667, when the sea was tilted back from the harbour four times, each time leaving it bone dry, and each time rushing back in a tsunami which pounded vessels to pieces against the docks and cliffs. The city was rebuilt, in a style which, despite its geographical location, was more Italian than Balkan, more Central European than Eastern. Despite all the vicissitudes since, little has changed. Seventeenth century town houses line the Stradun, the main street of burnished, marble-like stone. Monasteries in the Venetian Gothic style boast cloisters with orange trees and chapels with Titians. Churches show off reliquaries of saints – the head of St Luke encased in silver, the arms, legs, skulls and even rib cages of lesser saints, also sheathed in precious metals. There are lofty churches in the Austrian baroque style. The Jesuit church is a copy of the church of the Gesu in Rome and the steps below a replica of Rome’s Spanish steps. Fine palaces were designed by Italian architects. A large circular water fountain, built by the Neapolitan Onofrio de la Cava, supplied drinking water. Dubrovnik’s walls and towers, which were strengthened in 1539, when its citizens feared attacks by Adriatic pirates and the advance of the Ottoman army, provide fine views of the city, its hundreds of tiled roofs and the sea which surrounds it on three sides.

Modern day Dubrovnik has all the attractions tourists require. It combines history, culture, architecture, pavement cafes, good restaurants, a clear blue sea and nearby beaches. The annual Summer Festival has live plays and concerts. Huge cruise ships disgorge thousands of tourists. Air conditioned coaches ferry in day trippers from the beach hotels. During the day, the Stradun can feel like a tourist theme park, as hordes meander in groups behind their guides. Commentaries on Onofrio’s fountain are interrupted by cries of “Please stand to one side, there is another tour party coming through.”

But away from the tourist masses, the narrow stepped and pebbled alleys with their pot plants and trees are almost empty. Washing hangs between houses. Small gardens and buildings of a more rustic stone give the lanes adjoining the ramparts an almost rural feel. By evening, most tourists have left the old city and we enjoyed peaceful dinners of fresh local fish and surprisingly good Croatian wines in outdoor restaurants as swifts flew above.

Few tourists think about the war which followed the break up of the former Yugoslavia, when Serbian and Montenegrin forces besieged Dubrovnik. Between

December 1991 and May 1992, the city was cut off. Shells rained down. Dubrovnik was without water, electricity or food. There are now few outward signs of the siege. There are subtle variations in the colour of stone, where damaged buildings have been restored. But the most obvious legacy is the colour of the roofs. Almost all were severely damaged by shelling. The old, worn, weathered, subdued colours have been replaced by uniform, new, brash, unweathered red tiles.

The true horror of the siege is revealed in the unlikeliest of settings - the Italianate Sponza Palace, a typical example of fine Renaissance arches and Gothic windows. On the ground floor, there is a room dedicated to the Defenders of Dubrovnik. Its walls are lined with photos of more than 200 men killed during the siege. They are formal portraits, in black and white, of young men staring at the camera. Opposite them a screen provides a slide show of Dubrovnik burning, sunken boats in the harbour, debris in the streets, vandalised hotels and, above all, the suffering of its inhabitants.

Even more disturbing is the War Photo Museum, located in an alley not far from the Stradun. It is currently showing, *Blood and Honey*, photographs taken by Ron Haviv during the latest Balkan War. They are powerful and distressing. A cow with a swollen udder in a damaged house in Vukovar. Bosnian women collecting water among burnt-out cars in Sarajevo. A Kosovan woman making butter in the midst of a wrecked farm. Serbian paramilitaries burning a Croatian flag. Emaciated Bosnians in a prison camp. The blood of an elderly Serb in the snow. A drunken Serbian paramilitary in front of an apartment block decimated by shelling. And, worst of all, Serbian paramilitaries kicking the bodies of dead Bosnians.

The day trippers from the cruise ships don't generally make it to the War Photo Museum. Cruising is the ultimate in safe tourism - where the raised gang planks and sea shut out the outside world each night, where the cabin, the bed, the food and the air conditioning are the same, whichever foreign clime has been subjected to a brief day time guided tour or coach trip. For those holidaying on the cruise ships, there is the safe and easy option of a day trip to Mostar and its iconic bridge.

We too visited Mostar, but opted for a rented Renault Clio rather than a Volvo tour bus. We drove inland, and a few kilometres into the hills, came to the border with Bosnia-Herzegovina. Frontier guards in a pale yellow porta-cabin with heaters checked our passports and waved us on, past a couple of ruined houses. We drove through empty countryside, past dead snakes and tortoises, before coming to a large sign welcoming us to Srpska Republic - a Serbian enclave in Bosnia-Herzegovina. We passed through Trebinje, a small town of lime trees and 1960s flats.

Round a bend a solitary Bosnian policeman waved down cars and checked identity documents. We were passing out of the Srpska Republic and back into Bosnia-Herzegovina proper.

After another twenty kilometres, we turned off the Mostar road and followed a sign to Zavala Monastery. A single track road crossed the valley and then

followed the route of an old railway line. We passed a Tito era monument, erected only twenty years ago, to commemorate partisans killed between 1941 and 1944. Not far beyond, in the middle of nowhere, half a dozen Bosnian policemen hung around a police car and mini bus. The countryside looked peaceful, but there are still ethnic tensions beneath the surface.

Zavala used to be a farming village of a dozen solid stone houses. Now all except two are ruined, with no roofs or windows. This was a Serbian village, burnt out during the last Balkan War. The monastery is Serbian Orthodox, with a single nave church nestling into the rock face. One wall is the cliff face. The church has a limestone paving roof, but that too was destroyed in the 1992 to 1995 war. Its beautiful frescoes dating back to 1619 have been restored with Swedish aid. Behind the curtain of the narthex, there are fabulous paintings of bishops, crosses and monstrances, but the monastery's collection of art works was destroyed during the Second World War. There is a small cellar with icons for sale. Two Orthodox priests in black robes, black kamilavkas (stove pipe shaped hats) and long beards watched over the monastery. This was a Serbian outpost in a Bosnian area.

The aftermath of the war became even more obvious as we drove on up the valley. We passed more and more uninhabited, destroyed houses. Jan Morris memorably wrote of "detached houses, well separated, each one of which had lately been individually and deliberately destroyed. [They gave] an impression of particular and personal hatred. It seemed such a spiteful sort of destruction. Bosnia had been ravaged, it appeared, not by ignorant conscript armies clashing, but by groups of citizens expressing their true emotions – a display of viciousness ..... undertaken genuinely from the human heart. And what did that say ... about the human heart?"

As we approached the small town of Stolac, we saw red signs warning of land mines on both sides of the road. This was an area which was overwhelmingly Muslim before the break-up of Yugoslavia. In 1991, 62% of Stolac's population was Muslim and 12% Croat, but the area was claimed by the Serbs. In 1992, after bitter fighting, the small Serb population was driven out. The Croats then turned on the Muslims. According to the indictment lodged in the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, the HVO (the Croatian Defence Council) tried to "croatise" the institutions and population in Stolac. Hospital patients were moved out and the building used as a short-term detention facility for Muslim men. They were severely mistreated, kicked and beaten with batons, clubs, rifle butts and chairs. Many Muslim detainees died or were seriously injured. In July 1993, the HVO "carried out a massive, orchestrated campaign to expel, cleanse and forcibly transfer Bosnian Muslims. ... [They] systematically removed Bosnian Muslim women, children and elderly from their homes." The mosques and old town centre were destroyed.

Now Stolac is peaceful. The mosques have been restored, with Ottoman style, pencil shaped minarets. There are still wrecked, roofless houses, and many buildings are pock marked, but there are men and women sitting in bars. In Rebecca West's day Bosnian Muslims wore veils and fezes which marked them out as "participants in the former grandeur of the Ottoman Empire", but now there are not even any head scarves. It is impossible for an outsider to tell whether

someone is a Serb, a Croat or a Bosnian Muslim. The only person in Stolac who was readily identifiable by her appearance was a Roma woman, with a long skirt and scarf.

Just outside Stolac, there is a strange medieval Christian necropolis, with large solid stone tombs. They have no writing, but carved crosses, grapes and deer. A couple of kilometres further on, we came across an old Muslim graveyard with tall thin tombs, topped with stone turbans.

We drove down, out of the hills, into the wide Neretva valley with its warehouses and plastic green-houses, testament to the relative prosperity of the Tito years. In Mostar, we parked on the Christian west bank and walked past unremarkable modern buildings towards the old bridge, the *stare most*, which gave the town its name. It is a slender pointed arch between two towers, constructed by Sinan, the Ottoman architect who built many of Istanbul's most beautiful mosques. Rebecca West described it as "one of the most beautiful bridges in the world." It was destroyed on 9th November 1993 by HVO forces, but has been rebuilt with money from UNESCO.

At first glance, Mostar is another tourist theme park. The alleys on both sides of the bridge are full of day trippers who have come from the coast by coach. There are tacky souvenir shops selling ugly trinkets of wood, leather and pottery. There are restaurants everywhere. But a few hundred metres away, on the Muslim east bank, the town is poor. Most buildings are heavily pock marked. There are dozens of bullet holes in every wall. There are many ruined, roofless buildings. On the main street, a tall tree grows out of the first floor of a three storey 19th century building. A modern reinforced concrete structure has large holes blasted out of walls, exposing twisted metal rods. There are signs in English and Serbo-Croat stating the obvious, that it is dangerous to enter or park near these ruins. Here, the devastation is worse than many areas of West Beirut. The mosques, which were destroyed or damaged during the war, have been restored, but the Muslim east bank is dominated by a huge cross built on a hill to the west, and the disproportionately tall tower of the new Croat Catholic cathedral.

As we crossed back over the bridge, we saw a photo propped up against a wall. It was black and white, poor quality, blown up too much, but showed the devastation of Mostar at the end of the siege and the temporary plank bridge which replaced the *stare most*. Next to it and a piece of twisted metal, someone had written in English "No photo, photo 2 euro, don't forget." We saw no other recognition of the destruction or homage to those who perished.

We drove back towards Croatia, along the main road, stopping at Positelj, an idyllic walled village with a fort and mosque. Stone paths and steps climb up the hillside, through a village of pretty stone houses and gardens. In the sunshine, we felt as if we were back in safe tourist mode, but even here there is a legacy of war. By the late seventeenth century, Positelj was the front line between the Catholic Venetian Republic and the Muslim Ottoman Empire. During the Tito years, Positelj was an artists' colony, but the mosque and many houses were badly damaged during war. They have since been restored.

On the beautiful Croatian coast, we paused at Ston, a small town with oyster beds and several kilometres of medieval fortifications switch-backing along wooded ridges. These are the longest defensive walls in Europe, second only in the world to the Great Wall of China. As the sun was setting, Dubrovnicans were still finishing their Sunday lunch, but we were left with a number of unanswerable questions. Dubrovnik is little more than two hours by plane from London. The former Yugoslavia bordered the EU. So, why was the EU so ineffectual in preventing the massacres and ethnic cleansing which took place? Why do supposedly civilised people behave so brutally towards each other? To echo Jan Morris, what does all this say about the human heart? And why, fifteen years on, is there money to rebuild a bridge, cathedrals and mosques, but not to remove land mines or rebuild homes?

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