



Ottoman Beachcomber

Travels in the Balkans
and Turkey, 1983

By
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I. Descent

Beograd.

Snow capped peaks jut above the clouds.

The plane descends to [Beograd](#). Though my body thinks it is still in New York, my mind is swirling between no expectations and no limits. I pass through customs without even stopping to remove my pack. The controlled atmosphere ends.

Now the peaks are hidden and I'm in a muggy lowland. I stand on the platform outside the airport awhile, sweating in the unexpected heat, and the excitement. Buses come and go. I finally choose the bus I think is correct. It briefly passes through new sprouting farmland and fields of spring wildflowers, white and pink and winter-brown, and then into the city outskirts and its poured concrete apartment buildings, one after another. The bus I'm on turns out to be, in fact, the correct one, and as it passes the central bus station, I clamber out with my pack and shoulderbag, lost and rather blithe.

It is the morning of Good Friday and all of Beograd is on the move. Or perhaps it is like any Friday and all of Beograd is on the move. There are 30 ticket windows, each for a different area of the country, and every one is mobbed.

[Yugoslavia](#) has six distinct language groups within its borders, variously using Latin, [Cyrillic](#), and Greek alphabets. I scan the signs above each arching little ticket window, seeking my destination. Perhaps four of them include names vaguely similar to the place I

want to go. There is only one solution.

I humbly walk into the tourist information office next to the bus station. The questions I have for the young man inside are all answerable. I find out the bus, the ticket window, the times of departure and arrival. It seems too easy. I'll test him. I'll go, and try to buy my ticket.



He is a man to be trusted. Burying my ticket in a deep pocket, I batter my way through the crowds to the platform where my bus is due in fifteen minutes. I am looking forward to the bus ride and escape from this mad hubbub. I expect to arrive in a quaint village by sunset, where I can watch Easter being celebrated with prayers, processions, and traditions that want no explanations. I expect to wind along a road unknown to tourists, where the folk-soul of Yugoslavia has not been ruined by scrutiny.

While an hour passes I watch Turks, Serbs, Gypsies, orange-haired punks, fat women in black dresses and black babushkas, and stone-faced men wearing patched, limp, sport coats, as they bump and barge their way to their ever-departing buses.

During a second hour I discover no one speaks English or German here, though I was assured in the US that language would be no problem. I begin learning relevant Serbian phrases, like "What time is it?", "Where is the bus station?", "How many dinars?", and "Where is my bus?". About every five minutes I practice this last phrase on someone. They look at me. They look at my ticket. They look up at the platform number. They look at their watch. Then they motion with the flat of their hands, pushing down on the air -- sit, sit. People are watching me and talking. Fortunately their buses keep coming and I am reprieved from their stares for a few minutes, until another group gathers and notices the never-leaving foreigner. I feel like I have become a symbol of the new internationalism.

During a third hour my sleep deprivation of the prior two nights begins to bleed through my fine glazed surface of optimism. Perhaps I have chosen a bus to Nowhere, and everyone is afraid to tell me. It is clear that something is wrong, but I cannot discover what it is. It is clear that my beautiful exploration through the folk-soul of Yugoslavia will take place wholly at night and I will arrive quite late in a place unprepared for foreigners. Finally, someone tells me in sign language that I am waiting for my bus at the wrong platform. It is very curious that he is the only person in the world with this opinion. He

must be some kind of free thinker, so I try his advice. I am on a bus ten minutes later.

No. I am not taking the tourist route. The tourist route is an awful road that stretches from Italy and Austria in the north, to Greece in the south. It is a road strewn with wrecked cars, buses, and trucks; blemished with inhospitable rest stops; inundated with travellers who generally are going as fast as they can, to get somewhere other than Yugoslavia. In the past, I too, was always rushing through Yugoslavia to get somewhere else, and so I too, had learned to hate that road.

I had heard a few whispers that things are different once off that main road: that it is exotic, beautiful, friendly, inexpensive.



So I am not taking the tourist route this time.



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Stephen Berer.