Balkan Hiking and Cultural Adventure in Serbia, Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia

September 10, 2023 – September 24, 2023 (trip#2337)

Overview

Step back in time to join us for a wonderful fifteen-day journey through the Balkan countries of Serbia, Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia. This trip provides a rich mixture of hiking and culture. Our eight days of hiking includes four days trekking in rugged mountains along the new long-distance High Scardus Trail, a cross-border route connecting Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Our luggage will be transported, requiring us to carry only daypacks. We will climb the highest peaks in Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania, and have a couple days with easier walks to scenic wonders.
The rest of the trip is filled with fascinating cultural exploration. Serbia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia are small landlocked countries that were formerly part of Yugoslavia. Until the nineties Albania was one of the most isolated countries in the world, as their dictator did not trust either the east or the west.

Our adventure begins in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia. After a guided tour of this beautiful city, we will drive to Banska Stena, considered to have the “Best View” in Serbia and then to Uvac Canyon, where there are a series of tightly packed, looping arches as the Uvac River meanders through the canyon.

We then travel to Kosovo where we will do a couple hikes and stay in the two fascinating and beautiful cities of Pristina and Prizren visiting a couple UNESCO World Heritage sites.

Our serious hiking then begins in earnest as we climb the highest peak in Kosovo, then embark on the High Scardus Trail, starting by hiking into Albania. Following four exciting days on the trail, we finish our trip with two cultural days in North Macedonia as we visit the colorful mosque in Tetovo and then get a tour of the capital city of Skopje.

We will be accompanied by an English-speaking local guide throughout the trip.
Trip Difficulty

This trip is rated strenuous. Excluding breaks, on the longer hiking days we will usually hike from five to eight hours per day, between 9 and 13 miles, with an average elevation gain of about 3500 feet. The terrain is rugged and steep in places, and requires agility. Some of the hiking will be at higher elevations where the air will be thinner. One day could be eight hours or more. We will hike at a moderate pace, which will permit time for photos and rest breaks. Participants should be in excellent shape and be able to hike for most of the day. We have 8 hiking days, including a 4-day assisted trek, where we only need to carry daypacks, as our luggage will be transported and we stay in small hotels and village guesthouses.

Itinerary Summary

Our traveling arrangements will facilitate a unique exposure to this remarkable area:

- Extensive exploration on foot to fully explore and immerse ourselves in the region’s splendor. We will be hiking 9 to 13 miles for eight days at a moderate pace. Daily elevation gains range from about 2,700’ to ~4,800’.
• Small group travel - this allows us to fully experience the landscape and its treasures, enjoy hassle-free travel arrangements, stay in small, local hotels and guesthouses and dine in intimate village restaurants.

Trip Details

Approximate route and some of the cities visited
**Itinerary**

The itinerary below describes our daily plans. Elevation gain is listed as ascent/descent in feet. All meals starting with dinner after arrival in Belgrade until the trip ends after breakfast in Skopje are included. On hiking days we will either be given a packed lunch, or you can prepare one after breakfast. We will each carry our lunch in our daypacks, and eat picnic style on the trail.

**Day 0 (Saturday September 9, 2023):**

Fly from the US.

**Day 1 (Sunday September 10, 2023):**

Arrive in Belgrade, Serbia, one of the oldest cities in Europe. We will meet in the late afternoon at the hotel and then have a welcome dinner in Skadarlija Square, a bohemian quarter in downtown Belgrade, filled with traditional restaurants, iron gaslights, art displays and street performers. We will stay at a centrally located hotel in Belgrade.

**Day 2 (Monday September 11, 2023):**

This morning we will get a guided city tour of Belgrade, the capital of Serbia. The highlight of the city is the fortress of Belgrade which was the border post between the Ottoman and the Austro Hungarian Empires. The fortress lies on the confluence of the Danube and Sava Rivers. We will tour the underground tunnels of the fortress built over many centuries (starting in the 2nd and continued up into the 18th century). We may also visit the city hall, Republic Square, Knez Mihajlova street, the Royal House museum (Konak Knjeginje Milice), and the Grand Cathedral.

After the tour we will have lunch at the oldest traditional tavern in Belgrade and then ride to Mokra Gora where we will spend the night in a hotel.
Day 3 (Tuesday September 12, 2023):

Today we will visit Mokra Gora, also known as the wet mountain due to the amount of rain it receives. It is a small but picturesque area surrounded by the Dinaric Alps in the western part of Serbia. We will transfer to Mitrovac near the Tara Natural Park and walk to Banska Stena, one of the most famous views in Serbia. Following our walk we will transfer to our hotel for the next two nights. Our accommodations will be in a little village called Drvengrad. The site was built for a 2004 film by Emir Kusturica called Life is a Miracle.

6.2 miles, 1000 foot ascent, 1000 foot descent
Day 4 (Wednesday September 13, 2023):

From Miltrovac we will travel to Uvac, part of a Natural Reserve. Despite its unique beauty, the park lies in the less developed south Serbia and gets few visitors. We will take a boat trip on the Uvac River, explore a cave, and then hike to a viewpoint providing a spectacular view of the meandering Uvac River and possibly see colonies of Griffon Vultures. Following a picnic lunch we will walk back to where we started our boat trip. After the hike, we will return to our hotel.

4.4 miles, 720 foot ascent, 720 foot descent
Day 5 (Thursday September 14, 2023):

Today is a cultural day. From Uvac we will ride through Sopocani Village, a 13th century monastery. We will stop in a restaurant by the Ibri River for lunch and then change to another bus to enter Kosovo. The driving will be an experience itself as cultures change as we pass from Serbia to Kosovo. From there we will head to Pristina, where we will visit Sultan Murat's Tomb, the only sultan’s grave outside of modern Turkey. We will also visit the UNESCO World Heritage site of Gracanica Monastery. We will spend tonight and tomorrow night in a hotel in Pristina.

Day 6 (Friday September 15, 2023):

After breakfast we will get a city tour of Pristina, visiting the Bill Clinton Statue, Newborn Monument, and National Library. We will continue to the old city and visit the Ethnological Museum of Pristina, which is an old Ottoman House preserved as a
museum. If there is time there is the possibility of an optional excursion a half hour out of the city to a bear sanctuary. The sanctuary is an NGO that hosts bears rescued from people who had held them in captivity.

**Day 7 (Saturday September 16, 2023):**

After breakfast we will ride for an hour to take a hike to the glacial Jazinca Lake in the Sharr Mountains. Following our hike we will transfer to our hotel in the ski resort of Prevalla.

8.7 miles, 2700 foot ascent, 2700 foot descent

**Day 8 (Sunday September 17, 2023):**

Following breakfast we will transfer less than an hour to the city of Prizren for another interesting cultural day. Prizren has significance to everyone in Kosovo and is known as the cultural capital. It was built around the Lumbardhi River and is tucked underneath the Sharr Mountains. It was a royal city for the Serbs, a national uprising city for the Albanians, and the city with the largest number of Turks in Kosovo. Many different cultures exist in the city. A Mosque, Orthodox and Roman Catholic Church are all on the same street. Despite all the ethnicities making claim to who came first, harmony seems to exist between the different groups of people. We will get a tour that includes the UNESCO heritage Site of Mother Ljevosa Church, the Sinan Pasha Mosque, and the Pristina city fortification from Roman times. We will stay at a centrally located hotel in the city.

*Sinan Pasha Mosque, Prizren*
Day 9 (Monday September 18, 2023):

After a day enriched by culture we will ride about 40 minutes to the village of Brod for the longest (but not hardest) hike of the trip. Our goal today is to climb Rudoka peak, considered by some to be the highest in Kosovo at 8720 feet. There is a debate as to whether the peak is in Kosovo or Macedonia. Regardless, it is a beautiful loop hike through the open Sharr Mountains. After the hike we will stay at a hotel in Brod.

12.5 miles, 4000 foot ascent, 4000 foot descent

Day 10 (Tuesday September 19, 2023):

Leaving Brod on foot from our hotel to hike on the High Scardus Trail toward the village of Restelica lying in the region where the borders of Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania meet. The name Scardus comes from the ancient Greek word meaning “colorful”. In autumn due to the large biodiversity the mountains are decorated with different colors giving it the name. After our hike we’re transferred to a hotel in the small town of Dragash for the night.

6 miles, 3500 foot ascent, 3000 foot descent

Day 11 (Wednesday September 20, 2023):

After breakfast we are transferred about ½ hour to Restilica to start our hike. We hike across the border to the Albanian village of Caje. This is part of the High Scardus Trail. The entire mountain is round, and has less peaky formations than other mountains in the region. There are many pastures, which are still used. While hiking we may get to meet shepherds with their sheep and huge wolf dogs (the Sharr Dog or the Illyrian Shepherd). Tonight we stay in a guesthouse in the mountains.

10.7 miles, 4200 foot ascent, 3280 foot descent

Day 12 (Thursday September 21, 2023):

From Caje, we will hike in Radomire toward the highest peak of Albania and Macedonia, Mt. Korab. Similar to yesterday, this hike will go through high grass and rounded old mountains. These may be the oldest pastures in the world. Tonight we will stay at another guest house.

10.1 miles, 2700 foot ascent, 3600 foot descent
Day 13 (Friday September 22, 2023):

Today is our most difficult hike, as we climb Macedonia’s highest peak, which is on the Albanian border with Macedonia. The only other peak in Europe sharing a border is Mount Blanc which lies between France and Italy. After a spectacular climb of Mt Korab, we will take a bus to Tetovo, the largest Muslim City in Macedonia, where we stay in a hotel.

10.6 miles, 4800 foot ascent, 4800 foot descent
Day 14 (Saturday September 23, 2023):

After a late breakfast, we will visit the city of Tetovo and its colorful mosque. Tetovo is built in the foothills of the Sharr Mountains. Following our tour we will transfer to Skopje for a tour of North Macedonia’s capital. We will visit the Turkish quarter and the imposing Kale Fortress. This up-and-coming city is a mix of many cultures, particularly Muslim and Orthodox Christian. It has been a center of commerce for several millennia. We will stay in a centrally located hotel in the city.
Day 15 (Sunday September 24, 2023):

Our trip ends at the hotel after breakfast. We will make our way on our own to the Skopje Airport and home, or possibly other destinations if you wish to extend your trip...
### Hiking Summary (Time is hiking time only, excluding all breaks)

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<th>Day</th>
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<th>Miles</th>
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<th>Descent</th>
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### PARTICIPANT PROFILE AND EXPECTATIONS

You should have a keen interest in cultural explorations and enjoy moderate - strenuous hiking. On an average day we will walk for 5-8 hours and cover 9-13 miles. Daily elevation gain ranges from 2,700’ – to 4,800’. You need to be prepared to commit yourself to keeping in shape between the time you sign up for this trip to the time you depart on it.

You should recognize that you may find yourself in closer quarters or be less comfortable than you are used to at home. You should make it a priority to help others on the trip and contribute to their having a great time. If you do that, you will have a great time.

This trip has day hikes geared towards the experienced hiker and outdoor traveler. We have 6 long hiking days with significant elevation gains. You should have at least intermediate to advanced hiking skills and be able to hike at least 10 miles every day, with significant elevation gains, while carrying everything you need as well as enough equipment to keep you safe in the event of bad weather or injury.
ACCOMMODATIONS

We will spend 12 nights in 2 and 3 star hotels (two persons/room with private baths), and 2 nights in guest houses. The hotels will provide twin-bedded (i.e. two separate mattresses) rooms. In Europe, twin beds are sometimes immediately side-by-side in a single bed-frame, while in the US twin beds are in separate bed-frames and are separated by a few inches.

The guest houses will be simple, very basic, and rustic, but comfortable. Showering and bathroom facilities may be shared among several rooms, and often four people sleep in one room. It would be useful to bring a small camp towel. Unless there is a problem, electricity should be available 24/7, but some guesthouses may not have wifi or cell service. Meals are served in cozy dining areas. Each has its own charm, and unique character and should provide close cultural exchange opportunities with locals and other hikers.
AIRLINES AND TRAVEL
Plan to arrive in Belgrade on the afternoon of September 10 (depart from the US on September 9). Additional details about arrival and meeting times will be supplied later. The trip leader will assist you with information on flights from Boston, NYC, and other points. The trip ends in Skopje after breakfast on September 24. Of course, you may arrive early or extend your trip. Do not make any non-refundable travel plans until told to do so by the leader.

At this time, we estimate that the price for a flight from the east coast to Belgrade, Serbia then returning from Skopje, North Macedonia will be ~ $1200.

WEATHER
Weather is likely to be comfortable in the cities and towns, with a high of 80 degrees F at that time of year. In the higher elevations it is likely to be 50-60. There is always a
possibility of precipitation, particularly in the mountains where thunderstorms are not uncommon.

**AMC MISSION**

AMC Adventure Travel trips are run in a manner supportive of and consistent with the conservation, recreational and educational principles and mission of the club. The leaders will encourage participant conduct consistent with Leave No Trace environmental and conservation principles and local regulations.

**PHOTOGRAPHY**

For those interested, this excursion can involve more than a splendid hiking trip. Dan is a semi-professional photographer whose photographs have been exhibited and published in many places. Among other honors, he won the AMC photo contest three times. There is absolutely no requirement that you be interested in photography, or even bring a camera, and this is not a class or workshop. First, and foremost, it is a hiking trip in a beautiful region. However, if you are a seasoned photographer or a budding novice, or just curious, Dan will share his perspective on any of your photographic interests. When convenient we will try to be out in the early morning and early evening light to take advantage of the best times for photography. Our hikes will also be paced to allow for photo stops.

**TRIP COST**

The trip price is $3600 for AMC members and $3700 for non-members. To join the AMC (2022 pricing $50 individual, $75 family) click [here](#).

The trip price will cover the following items:

- Lodging
- All meals and transportation after arrival at our hotel in Belgrade through breakfast on the final morning in Skopje
- Entrance fees to all sites
- Gratuities to the drivers and guides
- Emergency medical and evacuation insurance coverage

Trip cost does NOT include:

- Airfare and airport transfers on arrival and departure
- Snacks
- Beverages (e.g. coffee/tea, mineral water, soda, alcohol, etc.)
• Insurance for travel delay, interruption, or cancellation, evacuation, or for baggage loss.
• All other personal expenses

AMC’s standard [Adventure Travel terms and conditions](#) apply.

REGISTRATION and CANCELLATION
To apply, you must complete and submit the application, confidential medical form, and acknowledgement and assumption of risk and release form which can be found online here: [Balkans Application](#).

Mail the registration deposit of $1,000 to:

Dan Stone
54 Albemarle Avenue
Lexington, MA 02420

You will not actually be accepted, and your check will not be deposited until the leaders have determined by telephone conversation with you that you and the trip are a good match. The balance is due by March 1, 2023. Deposit checks from waitlisted applicants will not be cashed until they confirm continued interest in joining the trip. All payments should be by check and payable to the [Appalachian Mountain Club](#).

The AMC Adventure Travel cancellation policy is based on the premise that your cancellation may not raise the cost to other participants or to the leaders. Once you are notified that the trip will run as scheduled, the minimum cancellation fee is $200. If actual costs (expenses already incurred on your behalf and any unavoidable future expenses that will be incurred as a result of your registration and cancellation) are higher, they will be assessed instead. Should the leaders be able to replace you with another acceptable participant, you may be charged a reduced penalty. This will generally not be determined until after the trip. Failure to make trip payment(s) in a timely manner will be considered a cancellation.

For other details on the cancellation policy see section 1 of the [Adventure Travel terms and conditions](#).

This trip is likely to fill quickly. If you are interested, you should apply as soon as possible. When registration is complete, we will send all participants the names, addresses, and phone numbers of all those going on the trip. In the unlikely event that the trip is canceled because not enough acceptable participants apply, everything you have paid will be refunded in full.
QUESTIONS and REQUESTING APPLICATION MATERIALS

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Dan or Michael. Dan can be reached at 617 750-0511 before 9PM Eastern Time or at danstone987@gmail.com. Michael can be reached at wainer18@hotmail.com or 781-438-5680.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Serbia profile
Kosovo profile
Albania profile
North Macedonia profile
Macedonia name dispute
The High Scardus Trail
Film: Life is a Miracle

Unless otherwise indicated, all photos are courtesy of Balkan Natural Adventure.
TRIP LEADERS

Dan Stone is a three-season leader with the Hiking/Backpacking Committee of the AMC Boston Chapter. He has led or co-led AMC adventure travel trips to the Grand Tetons, Yosemite, Albania, Colorado and the Alsace in France. He has completed the 48 NH 4,000 footers in winter, New England's 100 highest peaks and hiked the Appalachian Trail mostly as a series of day hikes. He has traveled extensively, having visited 49 states and over 60 countries. With a few exceptions, he has designed all his travel adventures himself, as well as coordinating many trips with friends to tackle the AT. Dan is an avid photographer, has had hiking photos published in calendars and books, and has won first place in the AMC photo contest three times. Dan designed and led a series of AMC hiking weekends that incorporate photography. He enjoys sharing his photos and knowledge of photography with others.

Michael Wainer is a new Adventure Travel Associate leader who recently co-led a hike in Kings Canyon/Sequoia National Parks. Michael has been leading hikes and weekend trips with the AMC Boston Chapter Family Outings Group since 2016 and hikes at AMC August Camp. He has been a participant on six different AT trips: The Jungfrau in Switzerland, The Beara Peninsula in Ireland, The AV1 in the Italian Dolomites, Nepal and part of the Peaks of the Balkan trail in Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo. Michael has completed the NH 48 4K and recently completed his second round. He has SOLO Advanced Wilderness First Aid and CPR certifications. In 2015 he was diagnosed with celiac disease, which requires a gluten-free diet. He has learned to travel around the world (some remote and strenuous trips) while managing his diet restrictions. He is sensitive to diet issues and enjoys helping others travel without having to worry about whether they can be safe and comfortable on a trip.