

Through the Balkans with my dearest

17th September

Our holiday started in Dubrovnik. After contemplating just how much wonder and delight my special girl brings into my life, I had decided to propose to my dearest on the first day of our holiday together in this very romantic place. Even before I had reached Dubrovnik I thought it sounded perfect. Founded by Latin refugees from the fall of Epidaurum in the 6th century CE, the city of Ragusa (as Dubrovnik was known until recently) maintained its independence for over a thousand years in a very turbulent region. They fought off original attempts by Venice to occupy the city, but mainly, Ragusa kept its independence by diplomacy. They relied on massive walls surrounding the city (built ever higher), protected with a tiny civilian militia, to protect against fortes, but most of the attempted invasions were prevented by the skilful Ragusan diplomats. In fact Ragusa was often used as the meeting place for warring regional factions to sit down and work out peace treaties. While the rest of the Dalmatian coast constantly traded hands between Austria and the Republic of Venice from the 12th to 14th centuries, Ragusa grew as a important port and trading partner. Even during the Ottoman occupation of the Balkans, tiny Ragusa was the only region to remain independent from the Turks (apart from the inhospitable Montenegrin highlands), having purchased a peace treaty at the price of 120 000 gold ducats per month. For its context, Ragusa was highly progressive, being peaceful and relatively secular. In 1808 Ragusa invited Napoleon inside, ending its independence and introducing the progressive Napoleonic Code. This is a city that I felt my dearest and I could have a real affinity with.

I arrived in Dubrovnik five hours earlier than my beloved, and the minute Dubrovnik came into view I was breathless. The city is simply stunning, a gorgeous old town, untouched by recent development, sitting on narrow ledge of land between the mountains and the Adriatic.



I ran around the city to scout out the most romantic places to propose at, planning to propose that night after my love reached town. I decided that a stroll through town would be a perfect start, then perhaps we could get some icecream and sit on the city walls overlooking the ocean. My dearest had told me that she would meet me at our apartment (a quirky six story building deep in the old city, where the owners opened the front door by using an elaborate arrangement of strings from the sixth floor), but very anxious to propose, I put the ring in my pocket and went to meet her at the bus stop. Several hours after she should have arrived, I started to worry. Running backwards and forwards from the bus stop to our apartment I was sure she had not snuck in, and calling the airport her flight had come in, only an hour late. A few more hours, and I started to panic. The airport told me she had left an hour ago in a taxi, bad advice to complement the bad advice they gave her, the reason why she had ended up stranded at the airport, needing to hitch into town. Finally, at 2am on the last check at the bus station before calling the police and embassy, I saw my love walking towards the bus stop, and all the panic swept out to be replaced with love. Needless to say, Plan A was out.

18th September

My Plan B to propose to my dearest girl was during sunrise by the bay, watching the city walls start to glow with warmth. We had planned to spend the day by taking a day tour around Montenegro, the world's newest country. We woke up early to watch the sunrise, walked outside and it started pouring down with rain. I sighed, we went back inside until it was time to leave for Montenegro, and I started considering a Plan C.

The Slavic history of Montenegro began in the 6th century, when Emperor Heraclius invited the Slavic tribes into the empire to repopulate Ilyria, in doing so pushing the local Shkipetars back to the Albanian highlands. With the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire soon after, the Serbians nations became independent. While Serbia was taken in the battle of Kosovo in 1389 by the Turks, due to the difficulties of controlling the highlands, Crnagora (Montenegro) remained effectively independent. With the independence of Serbia in 1815, Montenegro was able to develop from a highland refuge into a state, with a ruler who was both King and Bishop (until 1851, when Danilo Petrovic Njegos the second fell in love with Darinka Kuekuic, and had to formally separate Church and State in order to marry her, also secularising and reforming the legal system). This also allowed Montenegro to take control of its coast, which had constantly changed of hand between Venice and Austria. After WWII, Montenegro joined with Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Vojvodina, Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia to form Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia joined the Tripartite Alliance in 1941. Tito overthrew the Facist government in 1945, forming a communist republic allied with Stalin (but non-aligned by 1948). While most of the republics split off in 1992, due to the racial tensions caused by the "Greater Serbia" attitude after Tito, Montenegro remained joined with Serbia until the 3rd of June this year.

Our first part of the tour to Montenegro drove south from Dubrovnik along the Dalmation Coast. It was really obvious why the coast had such a different history from the mountains, the thin strip of shore has tiny cities sitting on excellent ports facing the Adriatic, while the mountains go straight up,

preventing any easy access inland. We visited the city of Kotor, which had been constantly taken by Venice and Austria. The city sits on what is called a fjord, but is actually a series of three bays, giving it an excellent harbour. The occupying forces built a wall around the city that extends to the top of the first hill, to protect from invasion from the highlands (knowing that it was impossible to push inland from the port, and being focussed on the seafaring trade anyway). In the bay is a church called The Lady of the Rock, on an island formed by dropping stones in that spot every 22nd of July. The old town (Stari Grad) was small and pretty (especially the Orthodox St Nicolas's), similar to Dubrovnik except the new areas surrounding the town had been rebuilt in modern styles after the earthquake, so it didn't have the same atmosphere. Since it wasn't quite as romantic as Dubrovnik (and because unlike Ragusa, Montenegro stayed independent through war) I decided to wait until we were back before proposing.



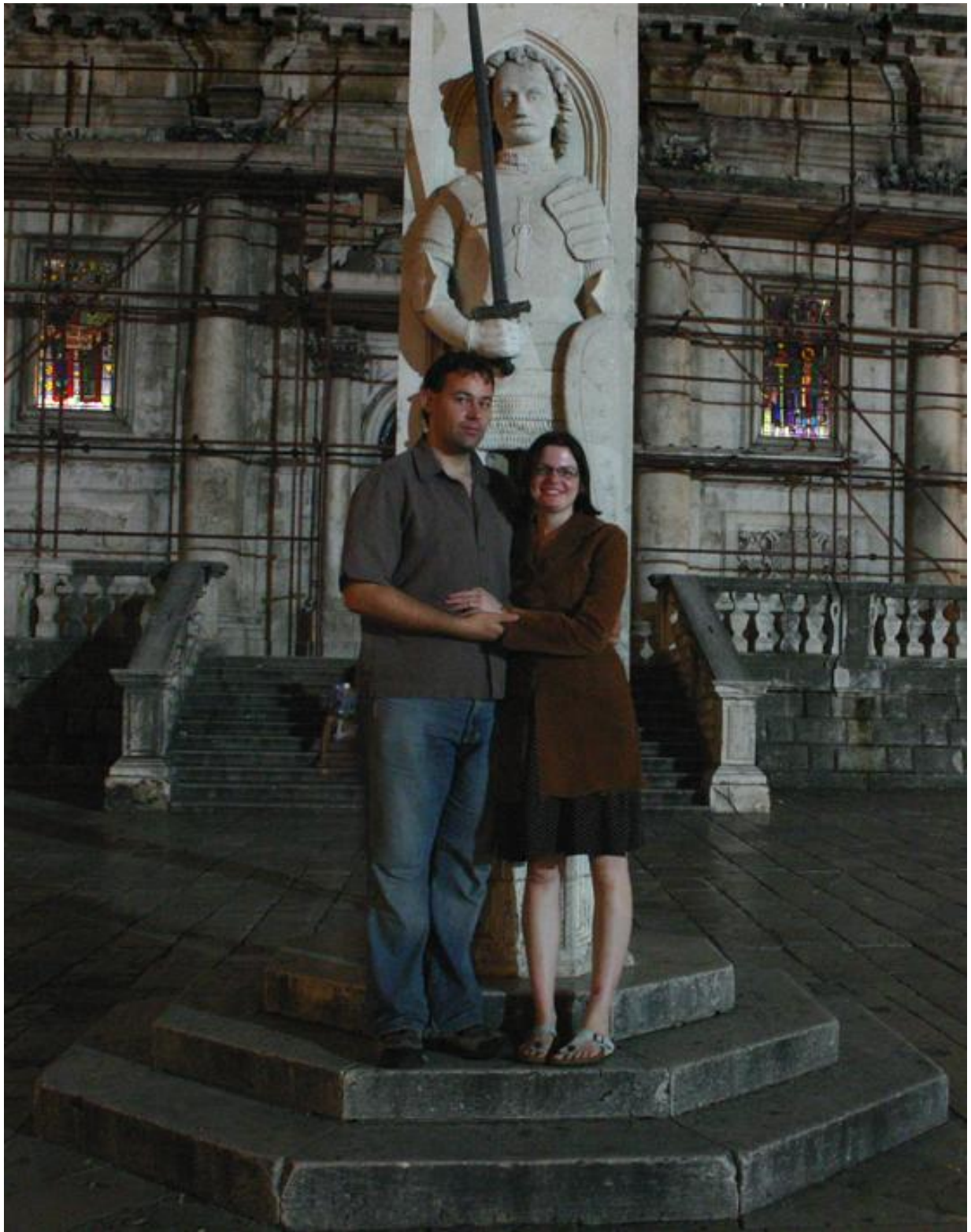
We drove up into the mountains, requiring many switch-backs on the narrow roads, to reach the Slavic highlands. The area was beautiful and green, with low bushes and rocky outcrops rather than farmland. We stopped to try honey wine, Montenegro beer and cheese sandwiches, then we drove to Centinje. In Centinje we looked Nicolas I's house (built in 1871), converted into a museum showing the last royal family's clothes, bedrooms, dinner sets, and dead polar bears. From Centinje we drove to Budva, with another charming Stari Grad, and Bar, a tourist town for Serbs, with a long beach and a commercial 1000 year-old walled city.

Back in Dubrovnik, I had decided on a Plan D for proposal. We would go to a nice romantic restaurant, then after dinner I would take my special girl up to the stairs that look down on the city from the Franciscan Monastery. As we walked through the town my love started to tell me about Orlando's Column, in the centre of the town square. Orlando's column was built in 1419 to celebrate the defeat of the first serious Venetian attempt to end the independence Ragusa in 972. The column celebrates the greatest knight of the Middle Ages, who had become a symbol for nobility and independence. Plus it is functional too, with the distance from Orlando's the fingertips to his elbow (of the right arm) being the standard unit of measure, the Ragusan *ell*.

In Ragusa, the column became the symbol of liberty, and from 1419 flew the independence flag of Saint Blaise (in 1990 it flew a white flag saying "Libertas" in the same spirit). My dearest was telling me how the column was the centre of the city, with all proclamations of importance being made from its steps. On an impulse I improvised on Plan D and suggested that my love stand on the steps of Orlando's column. I then told her how much she had changed my life, how she brings me more joy and delight than I could ever imagine, how much I admired and respected her, how I loved her completely and utterly for the wonderful person she is, and I asked her to marry me. My dearest girl, beautiful in every possible way, blinked in surprise and said "yes, of course". We then had to sit down to calm her shaky legs, and she told me how happy she was to be engaged to me, how she had secretly hoped I would propose but hadn't expected it, and how she was almost as impressed that I had thought to bring along a ring size-converter as she was with the engaged ring itself.

After talking together on the steps of Orlando's column for fifteen minutes, we slowly walked hand in hand to an Italian restaurant, where we talked together over a bottle of wine until they closed. A perfect end to a perfect day, and a perfect start to a perfect life together.





19th September

Our first day together while engaged to be married. We spent the day indulging in the pleasure of our together, exploring the beautiful city that we had made our own. We wandered up and down the main street, a broad pedestrian avenue, the only street in the city that wasn't a narrow alley. It had originally been a channel which divided two small villages, which was filled in with dirt and converted to a major road when the villages merged to become Ragusa. The main road later served to link up the port entrance to the main (and for a long time, only) exit to the surrounding region (Pile Gate), so many important buildings were built around it, such as a Franciscan Monastery, Onofrio Fountain (built in 1438) and Sponza Palace.

Sponza Palace was originally built as a Custom's House (a very important public building for a city so riveted to the maritime trade), but has now been converted to a memorial to the defenders of Dubrovnik. As a part of Croatian Yugoslavia, the fascists had led a holocaust of Serbs, Jews and Roma until Tito overthrew them and instated the communist state. The communist Yugoslavia lasted until Croatia left in 1991, due to Slobodan Milosevic's ideas of "Greater Serbia", resulting in an anti-Serb feeling in the new Croatian state. This led to massive discrimination of ethnic Serbs (who wanted autonomy rather than be a minority among Croats), and the infighting gave Serbia and Montenegro an excuse to attack Croatia, where they focussed their aggression on the Dalmatian spit, laying siege to Dubrovnik in October of 1991. The siege lasted for a year, and many of the southern towns were occupied by the Serbs, but Dubrovnik did not fall due to the defences on the surrounding hills (including some built by Napoleon). The city was badly damaged though, and 100 military and 200 civilians died in the siege. The Sponza Palace has a small memorial now with photos of all those who died, and photos of Dubrovnik during the siege.

We also visited St Blaise's Church, built in 1715 to replace the earlier church destroyed by the devastating 1667 earthquake (so severe that it killed 4000 people, out of the population of 6000). St Blaise became the patron saint after he allegedly came to the Rector in a dream to warn of Venetian attack. Inside the church we looked through the treasury, while macabrely enough consisted of mostly gold and jewel encrusted reliquaries for his skull, arms and legs. We also took a walk around the city walls. The walls are enormous, encircling the entire old city, 2km in length and 25 metres high. They were built between the 12th and 14th centuries, with an additional lower outer wall built once canons became common in war, to provide the extra protection of curved walls. From on top of the city walls you can see how perfect the city is, every building historic, the city packed full and clinging to the edges of the cliffs. The defences include two round towers and fourteen square towers. We started at the north-east and walked around widdershins. Each corner we turned gave us a new view, over the city and over the Adriatic. Looking down the tall steep walls you can hardly see where they turn into stone cliffs before plunging into the sea. We walked around to Fort St John, the defences protecting the port. The massive fortress included a heavy steel chain that was drawn across the port every night, to prevent enemies sailing inside. Opposite Fort St John is the old quarantine house, which was built after plague killed 2000 in the city, to isolate foreign sailors before letting them into the city. Oddly enough, inside Fort St John is now an aquarium, where all the labels for the various fish (plus octopus and one sea turtle) include fishing advice. Keeping the theme, next door to the aquarium was a seafood restaurant.



In the evening we walked around the city with a local guide to point out the defensive features. She told us about the two stand-alone forts protecting the city. Fort Lovrjecnac protected Pile Gate, and was built when Ragusa found out that Venice intended to build a fort there. Ragusa quickly erected the fortress, so when Venice turned up with ships filled with building materials they just turned home. The fortress protects the Bay of Colours (so called because the Guild of Dyers used to be based there), and is 12m thick of the seaward side, but only 60cm thick of the Ragusa side, so that if it was ever taken Ragusa would be able to retake it easily. Fort Revely is the other stand-alone fort, and protects the port. It was converted into the treasury after the earthquake destroyed the city. The path to Fort Revely winds past the Dominican Monastery (which was built as an earlier defense). Of interest, the gaps between the base of the banisters on the path into the Monastery were later sealed with mortar, so as to protect the modesty of ladies going to mass from men so uncouth as to gaze upon their ankles. After our inspection of the cities defenses we had dinner in the old arsenal, which was once a dry dock for building and repairing ships.



20th-23rd September

Our last morning in Dubrovnik and my love and I both woke up very ill. My dearest was able to go on a tour around the town, learning about the old buildings, while I stayed in bed. On our way to the airport my love showed me the sign carved into a building near us on Zlatariceva by a cranky priest who lived inside “If you play with a ball here you will die”. We then flew to Athens, were badly ripped off by a taxi driver, and holed up in our hotel. The next morning we were both feeling well enough to take an easy walk through the city.

The city itself was spectacularly ugly, decaying concrete blocks thrown up without any taste, but rising above the concrete was the towering Acropolis. Wandering towards it we entered the archaeological dig at its foot, wandered through semi-restored Greek theatres and temples (including the Theatre of Dionysos, built in the 6th century BCE, and the location where Greek tragedies and comedies first developed), before we started the climb up to the Acropolis. The Acropolis has been used since Neolithic times, first as a fortress, then later as a holy site once temples had been built on top. It was destroyed by the Persians in 480 BCE, and rebuilt by Pericles. The new entrance was guarded by Beule Gate (built in the 3rd Century) to protect the Panathenaic Way (which begins in the city below at Keramikos, and ended at the Erechtheion on top of the Acropolis).

The most obvious building on the Acropolis is the Parthenon, the largest Doric temple, built over an earlier temple in 438 BCE. The Parthenon originally contained a statue of Athena and the city treasury, but was later converted to a Church, and when the Ottomans took over, a Mosque. It was badly damaged in 1687 when the Venetians attacked the Turks in Athens, causing the gunpowder stored inside to explode, and some of the finest statues were taken by Lord Elgin during the British occupation. The best original statues were all in the Acropolis museum next to the Parthenon, which was delightful to wander through. While the Parthenon is the largest, the most holy temple on the top was the Erechtheion. This temple marked the end of the Panathenaic Procession, and the site where Poseidon and Athena fought for the city, Poseidon striking the ground to produce a fountain, Athena trumping him by producing the first olive tree. The temple was built in 420 BCE, and the most striking feature is the six maidens (Caryatids, modelled on women from Karyai) that support the portico in place of columns.



A final view from the top showed us that the part of Athens we had walked through in the morning was representative, and the city was strikingly ugly as far as it stretches, barring a very few parks with ancient Greek temples, and the odd Greek Orthodox church sticking out of the concrete. At the base of the Acropolis we walked through the ancient Agora, which was once the centre of civic life, where Socrates taught and Greek democracy flourished. The Agora was built in the 6th century BCE, but has been rebuilt many times, after being destroyed by the Persians in 480 BCE and the Goths in 267 CE, with the new centre later moving to the Roman Agora. The only building really intact in the Agora is the Temple of Hephaestus, built to the God of Metallurgy in 449 BCE. It is a beautiful Doric temple, with the classical column formation, and survived only because it was converted into a Church (travelling through Egypt, the Middle East and now Greece I wonder if the early Christians actually built anything themselves, or just converted every nice building they saw). After the Temple of Hephaestus we visited Keramikos, the classical necropolis, in almost complete ruins, except for a number of remarkably preserved statues.

We finished our day with my dearest taking me out to dinner at one of the few vegetarian restaurants in Athens in the Plaka neighbourhood, before walking home together past the Roman Agora and Hadrian's Library. The following day our illnesses made a come back, so we spent the day in bed and my love set a new personal record in the minimum number of hours awake. By the next morning we had recovered enough to visit the Temple of Olympian Zeus, with the few stunning columns that remain, and to walk around the stunning Archaeological Museum, before flying out to Corfu for our conference.

24th-27th September

I hadn't realized before that Corfu was actually the center of Phaeacian culture mentioned in the Odyssey, and a major Greek power from 700 BCE to 400 BCE. After this it declined in importance, and willingly joined the Roman Empire to protect itself from raids in 229 BCE. It stayed in the Byzantine Empire through the breakup, with the aid of the Venetians, until 1207 CE, after which it was directly controlled by the Venetians. Control by Venice blocked give major Turkish attempts to overtake Corfu, making it the only part of Greece not conquered by the Ottomans (which accounts for why it became the centre for cultural revival). The Venetians controlled Corfu until they submitted to Napoleon in 1797, then in 1814 the British wrestled it from the French and controlled it until it was granted to Greece in 1864.

Our conference centre was at Dasia, on the beach looking out to Albania. The first day was filled with stem cell research and naps, with a late dinner in a local tavern, with disgusting quantities of food, and an embarrassing display of tourist-orientated "local" dancing. On our second day they rewarded our patience with B cell development by taking us on a tour of Corfu. We saw Roman ruins and Greek beaches, made slightly surreal by the ever present eucalyptus trees. We saw the British High Commission Gardens, and Pontikonissi (little Mouse Island) and Vlachernes Monastery. Afterwards we went through Corfu Town.



The history of Corfu explains the Venetian style of the old town residential buildings in the town, and the twin fortress which dominates the skyline (with the old bastion build by the Byzantine and Venetians, and the new Fortress built by the Venetians and reinforced by the British, to block Ottoman invasions). Also of interest was the Town Hall, built in 1661 as an Officers club for the Venetian fleet, before being converted to a theatre (explaining the unusual faces decorating it) and now the Town Hall. The town itself has unusually dense housing, with buildings five or six stories high, and packed so close together that small squares were dotted throughout the city to give people a ventilated space to sit in during summer. The reason why the city is so dense is that the British prohibited the building of houses outside the city walls, and also mandated against the building of houses within a cannon shot distance from the fortress (resulting in what is now the largest town square in Europe, constituting a third of the total area of Corfu Town). My love and I enjoyed the chance to sit together in the square and watch the children play, before going out to the conference dinner at the Fortress.



The most peculiar part about Corfu Town was St Spyridon's church. Plain on the outside, it is lavish inside, with a magnificently decorated roof and oil burners. Most strikingly, St Spyridon himself is there, the Bishop who took part in the First Ecumenical Synod of Nicaea in 325 CE. Or more precisely it may be St Spyridon, since after his death he was buried in Constantinople for a hundred years, before flowering on his grave and a nice perfume was taken as proof of his sainthood and he

was dug up and kept in Constantinople until the Fourth Crusade. After the city was put to the sword by the crusading Christians, a monk arrived in Corfu carting a body on a donkey, and sold it to a rich family as the rescued corpse of St Spyridon. They built the church for their purchase, after which he became the patron saint for an island he had never visited.

The odd thing is the supernatural powers a supposedly monotheistic religion grants the embalmed saint. People come to the Church and pray to him for hours, and the priests open his silver casket for people to kiss him on his red shoes and through the glass to kiss his petrified face. Some days they don't open the casket, where it is firmly believed that he keeps it shut to allow him to walk around town performing miracles, to the extent that each year the city buys him new red shoes to replace those worn out by walking (cutting up the old ones into scraps for the believers). Four times a year they cart him around the city, once for his feast day (12th September), once in thanks for a miracle he performed (when dead) of relieving Corfu from famine in 1533 (the Good Saturday Procession), the Palm Sunday Procession for deliverance from plague in 1629 and 1673 (deliverance being the island had a few people survive), and the Procession of the 11th of August (for the alleged deliverance from Turkish invasion). Very strange behaviour, it is hard to comprehend people doing this not out of tradition, but because they actually *believe* a dead saint wakes up and walks around in his new red shoes performing miracles.

Our third conference day was early T cell development, with interesting talks on microRNAs, alpha chain rearrangement and notch/wnt pathways. After two big nights the conference dinner was smaller and shorter, quite enjoyable to chat with people around a table. My dearest was horrified to learn of our Finnish dinner companion having his infant son in the sauna (only once he was old enough to sweat, of course) and letting him role around in the snow afterwards. The final conference day was the best, with excellent talks on regulatory T cells, IL17 and cytokine locus association. After the talks my brave fiancée and I went swimming in the cold ocean during the rain and hail with the two Sasha's, then enjoyed the final conference dinner, before finally retiring to our flooded room.

28th-29th September

In the morning we caught the ferry across the Corfu straight to Saranda in Albania. We had been expecting a small fishing village, but Saranda was actually much larger. It is built in a horseshoe around the bay, with brightly painted modern buildings and a long boulevard along the shore creating a charming environment. We checked into our very nice hotel and had pizza on one of the many cafes on the shore, then explored the town together. On the spur of the moment (much to my dearest's chagrin) we hopped in a taxi and drove to Butrint through the countryside, down windy narrow roads.

Butrint is to the south of Saranda, nearly on the border of Greece. It juts out on a peninsular with only a narrow connection to the land, making it an ideal site to fortify. The original settlement is 3000 years old, but most of the buildings we saw were Roman era, since major extensions were made after joining the Roman Empire in 228 BCE. The ruins were in excellent condition, we could see the Roman bathhouse, the theatre, a nymphaeum, old palaces and temples. It was delightful to

slowly wander around the city hand in hand, seeing these ancient ruins covered in water from the recent storms. The wildlife was beautiful too (the area is a national park) with hummingbird moths, bright green grasshoppers and black birds with a splash of brilliant blue. Slightly younger was the large baptistery (built after Butrint became a bishopric in the 6th century CE, with beautiful arches and hidden under our feet complex mosaics. The walls surrounding the city were impressive, strengthened by Emperor Justinian, with highly fortified gates and a castle on the hill top. There was once an aqueduct stretching across the water to a stream in the mountains, but in 550 CE the city was sacked by the Goths, and never fully recovered, dwindling in population and infrastructure in the Middle Ages, until it become completely unoccupied shortly after Venice built a fortress there.



We had dinner at a romantic Italian restaurant by the shore, and an early night's sleep. The next morning we caught a taxi out to the Blue Eye. The Blue Eye is an outlet for underground rivers running from the mountains in inland Albania. The water coming out is so clean and pure, that the stream is nearly colourless except at the outlet where the hole is so deep it takes on a brilliant blue. It is hard to measure how deep it is because the volume of water gushing out is so great that stone thrown in get push back up, but divers have managed to get down to 45 metres. We stood in the freezing cold water of the stream, and wandered through the green forest together, before returning to Saranda. On the way we saw many of the tens of thousands of circular concrete pillboxes built by Enver Hoxha after the communists finally achieved independence for Albania after WWII, after centuries of Ottoman rule. Possibly not complete paranoia, considering the constant occupation Albania has had in its history (and the current occupation of Kosovo). Our final stop was at an old Ottoman castle overlooking Saranda, a beautiful site over the Albanian country side, before we returned by ferry to Corfu.



30th September

Not unlike every other day my delightful fiancée and I spent together, we spent our last day in Corfu (this time Benitses) by relaxing. My beautiful love took me diving on the west coast, the first time we had dived together, where we saw beautiful fish, including many rainbow wrasse. We had a day full of naps and walks, spending it in shared togetherness.

1st-2nd October

The last day of our perfect holiday together was in Vienna. We flew from Corfu to Vienna via Athens, where they managed to lose our posters (luckily after the conference and not before). Catching the bus from the airport through the city we could see what a beautiful and charming city it was, with the streets lined with elegant old buildings. Since the population was at its peak in 1918, in the final years of the capital of the Austro-Hungary Empire, and dwindled in the following years due to the loss of the Empire, the annexation by the Germans, the deportation of the Viennese Jews and the massive damage from Allied bombing (the population today is still only 1.6 million), there are few modern buildings. When we found our apartment it was in a six story building, with an ancient cage-lift built in the centre, and the room was a subdivision of an old apartment, shared with half a dozen other tourists. We quickly caught a tram into town to explore the old town.

Our tram stopped at Parliament House, and beautiful old building built in 1874 using the inspiration

of the ancient Greek acropolis to emphasize the origin of democracy in Greece. The building front looked just like the Parthenon, complete with columns supporting a triangular front piece, and out the front was the Fountain of Pallas Athena. In the fountain Athena holds Nike in her hand, and to her right sits a woman holding law tablets, and to her left a woman holding the sword of justice.



Walking down the road every building was a historical monument, the Town Hall (1883), University (1873) and National Theatre (1874). We continued our political theme by passing a political rally, which turned out to be the celebrations of the centre-left Social Democrats, who in that day's election won government by a slender margin.

We meandered through the city, hand in hand, peering down alleys with beautiful old buildings and expensive European brand-name stores, to reach the centre of the town, St Stephen's Cathedral. The Cathedral is breathtaking, an enormous gothic edifice with a dazzling tower, and an oddly modern looking tiled roof, the pattern of which makes it shimmer and shift in your gaze. The Cathedral was started in 1156 and built over a period of 400 years. Inside it is magnificent and ornate, with marble sculptures and elegant arches supporting the roof. It was lucky to survive WWII intact, as the commandant in charge ordered the troops to "fire a hundred shells and leave it in just debris and ashes", but the Captain ignored the order.



In the square around the Cathedral are cafés and ice-cream stores, and on the corner of one building is *Stock im Eisen*. *Stock im Eisen* is an old tree trunk bound with a lock and solid with nails hammered into it, now encased in glass on a marble pedestal. The tale behind the tree is of a young locksmith called Martin who made a pact with the devil to learn all the secrets of his trade. He became the perfect locksmith, making a lock for an old tree that only he could open, until he broke his side of the deal and was carried away. Due to the story, all locksmiths in the city hammered a nail into the trunk for luck. Also in the square is Hass House, one of the few modern buildings, built to replace a destroyed warehouse, which reflects the image of the Cathedral around the square. From the Cathedral we walked down *Graben*, once the moat delineating the periphery of the city, now the most expensive boulevard in Vienna, filled with exclusive shops. On the streets is the Plague Column, built in thanks for the end of the 1679 plague (what sheer fear people must have felt from their God to provoke a mindset that builds statues of thanks when a few are still alive at the end of a plague), St Joseph's Fountain, and the Fountain of St Leopold.

We visited St Peter's Church, founded in 792 by Charlemagne. So peculiar inside to see preserved corpses dressed up and propped so as to lounging back in their glass boxes, facing those who worship them as Saints. Near St Peter's is *Am Hof* square, with the Church of the Nine Choirs of Angels (built in 1386, and the location of the declaration of the end of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806) and St Mary's column (where angels slaughter the basilisk, lion, dragon and serpent, to combat plague, war, famine and heresy). We meandered past the Church of the Friars Minor on our way to St Michael's Square.



The Square is beautiful, the massive entrance to the Hofburg. The first building is lined with magnificent statues, where Greek heroes fight a hydra, leviathan, Pluto and a griffon. The main domes, with its stunning patina, leads to a courtyard with a monument to Emperor Francisco I. Past the palace buildings we reached the Natural History Museum and the Art History Building, two symmetrical buildings facing each other across a park, built in 1872, with a monument to the Empress Maria Theresa (in which she values her doctors, academics and artists, as well as her generals). The Natural History Museum had an iron elephant statue out the front, with a sign telling us either to feel free to climb on it, or to absolutely not climb on it. Since every child that walked past went up (in one case against their will), and the statue was surrounded by a rubber mat, my dearest also climbed up on the elephant.

After our site-seeing we wandered back to Parliament House, passing the People's Theatre on the way (built in 1889, with the mandate to have a large capacity of cheap tickets to allow commoners to enjoy the pastime of nobles). We ate pizza and gnocchi, then walked back into our romantic city cloaked in night, anticipating a horse-drawn carriage ride through the city. When that was unrealistic we enjoyed instead After Eight ice-cream in *Graben*, and found our way home on our second attempt.



My final morning we spent quietly together, until my beloved and I had to part. My beautiful fiancée stayed for a few extra days in Vienna, while I flew out on a tiny plane, with only fifteen passengers and a hostess who dropped a bottle of water on the passenger next to me and couldn't stop giggling.