

BOSNIA AND THE SHADOW OF WAR

Six months after the war and Bosnia's left with hundreds of unexploded landmines, a closed embassy and soldiers graves filling a space further than the eye can see. Not a place you want to stranded hungry and out of petrol. Helen Croydon ignored the guidebooks and took a journey through...

The backpacker guidebook doesn't pay much attention to Bosnia. '*BOSNIA-HERCEGOVINA: The information about this country has been omitted since the country is in such a state of turmoil it's likely to change*' In another it warned not to set foot off the pavement under any circumstances and a mention of the numbers of landmine casualties.

Like a true backpacker, such warnings did nothing other than encourage me to visit. My travel companions made a few vain pleas for me to abandon the idea but then decided to abandon me instead, in favour of a fast train to Budapest. Luckily I found a friendly Australian chap, Chris, to accompany me on the quest for adventure into Bosnia.

'Of course a bank will be open.' We agreed as we set off without trace of, or even knowledge of the Bosnian currency. At the border of Croatia and Bosnia we soon learned deutschmarks are the talking currency. The officials demanded 50 of them for an alleged hire car insurance and proceeded to tell us in a few broken up sentences that there was a man across the road who would change money on 'the dark market'. The customs official took away my passport and gave me 'ten minuta,' to strike a deal with the man on 'the dark market'. I showed him my only US \$10 note and a little Croatian Kuna but he said it wasn't enough. Rummaging around I found some Spanish pesetas,



Italian lire, a £5 note and I think there was even some Japanese yen, which he definitely didn't want. He pulled a doubtful face; I poised, willing him to magically change this bunch of notes into deutschmarks. 'I speak boss.' With that he turned with all my money in his hands and walked down a narrow deserted street with me in tow.

We turned down one street and then another and finally reached a market. I had no passport, my cash was in a stranger's hands and by now I was way past my 'ten minuta' curfew granted by the custom official. We found the boss in a deserted outbuilding, an obvious cigar fan. "Peseta, lira, Stirling. Dobro! Dobro!" ('Dobro' I had learnt just the day before means 'good' in most Serbo-Croatian tongues) so I was quite relieved to hear that. Finally they handed me 50 deutschmarks. 'Hvala!' I cried (thank you) and

without waiting one more 'minuta' I ran back through the market to the border official.

We didn't really have a plan to go anywhere once in the country so figured Sarajevo seemed as good an idea as any. The first sign we came across was written with incomprehensible Cyrillic lettering and neither of us had been bright enough to bring a map. Not that that was a problem as there only seemed to be one road running the length of the country.

The 'dark market' incident at the border had left Chris and me with 30 Croatian Kuna between us (about £3). We had a big bottle of water, a packet of dried apricots and what we thought was half a tank of petrol. But as we neared the first town of Touzla the petrol gage was nearing the half-way point and the needle started to descend towards 'E' for 'Empty' at twice the speed, which we concluded must show we have a cylindrical petrol tank hence the unwarned decline. So we got out at Touzla in search of the comforting Visa symbol. People sat in smoky cafes drinking mud-like coffee. Yet there was no buzz of conversation, no smiles. There was no music, and no whoops from children playing from the bombed buildings. The shutters on the windows were set fast.

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I got out my faithful switch card in a cafe but they were clearly befuddled. I mimicked gestures resembling an ATM machine with the appropriate 'beeps' and accompanying hand gestures. They hadn't a clue.

Oh well if the people of Touzla had no idea what an ATM was surely the capital city of Sarajevo would. We had just enough fuel to just get us to Sarajevo but no more than fuel vapours to get back.

The single main road winding the length of the country is shared by horse drawn hay carriers and

hapless car racers alike. We overtook a horse and cart where sat an elderly man, a boy with his legs straddled behind him and a young girl beside him sideways, her legs forced into her chin by the narrow width of the cart. Her right hand rested affectionately on the boy's head in front and in her left she drew a cigarette to her lips. She looked about 12.

Just before the city is a mass grave for all the soldiers killed in the war. Neat rows of uniform white tomb stones filled an area greater than the eye could see. You could see how the grave yard had outgrown the original clearing for the graves. The stones crept onto the sloping banks surrounding the clearing and then over the next slope until the stones were so far away that all we could see was a haze of white.



When the shadow of the city loomed on us our optimism shrank. No one had heard of Visa. Chris pulled up the car, no money; no map, no cute roadside cafes and no petrol. Just a load of shrapnel-marked buildings. There's no train station or bus station in Sarajevo. There are no familiar golden arches where you can use the toilet for free. No embassy.

We were down to half a litre of water between us and the dried apricots were gone.

Two male youths approached us. One of them pointed at our Croatian number plate and said something which sounded like 'Croatia'. Chris immediately informed him we were English but I was unsure he understood. Chris asked him if he could change Croatian Kuna. But the boy seemed to be more concerned about his original question concerning Croatia, as he repeated it several times.



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We showed him a credit card and did the ATM gesture again. I rubbed my thumb and fingers together, mimicking ‘money’. ‘Change? We Kuna, you deutschmark.’ ‘You deutschmark, give us. Us Kuna, give you.’

We were not making progress. ‘No Sarajevo. Konjic, Konjic.’ He pointed somewhere and walked towards the cafe to his friends. They stared at us in our caps, backpacker sandals and bum-bags strapped around our waists and laughed.

The second youth said ‘Money, Konjic.’ And with that climbed into the car. Chris and I turned to each other in utter horror. They told us to drive on and kept pointing ahead. ‘Konjic, Konjic.’ I prayed ‘Konjic had a friendlier meaning than ‘We’re going to kill you.’ We drove through the city, the impact of their tall dark ruins was lost on us, our minds were filled with the realisation that there were two Bosnian strangers in the back of the car.

I was thirsty. My stomach had stopped rumbling and settled into a dull ache never again would I eat dried apricots. No money, no supplies, no language, no map, and no idea where we being told to drive. And obviously no sense to have come here in the first place.

Chris was sat very upright at the wheel his eyes popping out of his face in fear as he stared ahead at the windy road heading further and further south when we wanted to be heading north back to Croatia. I tried to take in the exact route so I could redirect us on our journeyback...if we journeyed back!

We had turned off the main road and were now on an almost completely unsurfaced track probably riddled with landmines. Any sign we did pass was in the all too familiar Cyrillic alphabet

I decided to give the situation some womanly cheerfulness. I turned to them in the back seat, ‘Me, Helen, you?’ He didn’t understand. ‘Him. Chris, Hello Chris. Me Helen.’ I pretended to shake hands with Chris and they soon realised my intention. They laughed gruffly but smirked at each other. Was that a sly smirk or simply one of shy embarrassment? ‘Eddie,’ one of them said at last, ‘Ardis’ came the other answer and they offered their hands.

‘You learn English at school,’ I asked desperately wanting to break the unbearable silence. Ardis looked like he was going to laugh. ‘No go school. pow pow.’ He made all the motions of using a rifle. I looked away and my white expression of fear broke out into a shameful red.

'You too.' I pointed to Eddie. He nodded gravely, avoiding my gaze. He pulled up the leg of his trousers and revealed an enormous scar that ran from his ankle to below his knee. 'Pow pow' he repeated and returned the leg of his trousers to normal.

We were now on a dirt track weaving through houses in the mountains. I could virtually read the words of the backpacker guidebook telling us to avoid dirt tracks where there could be landmines but I'd used up all my energy for fear. I could do nothing but sit back and be driven to wherever our Bosnian hijackers decided to direct us.

'Croatia, this road goes to Split.' My heart sank, they presumed we were travelling to Split, a town in Croatia which is the opposite end of Bosnia to Vukovar where we'd come from. 'We, Mostar, swimming.' I knew that Mostar was as far south of Sarajevo as Touzla was North - 120km. They thought Mostar was on our route to Split. And I had to get a midnight train to Zagreb to meet my friends in Budapest tomorrow.

'We, no fuel, petrol, gas, oil, none.'

'Fuel OK. This way Split, Croatia, yeah.'

'We NO Split, We, us, Sarajevo, Touzla, Croatia.' I pointed to the direction from where we had come.

'Split, here.' He pointed to the road ahead.

'No Spl....!'



Then before my objections could get too panicked we came across a petrol station. 'This Konjic.' And suddenly it all became clear; Konjic didn't mean 'We are going to kill you.' It was the name of a village where there was a petrol station which the two guys obviously knew the owners and they filled our car for free.

'We swimming.' They both looked lustfully at the river running alongside the road and told us to carry on driving.

'It no problem.' They continued looking out of their window at the river beside the road. We turned into an area where hundreds of youths were swimming in the river. Eddie and Ardis were obviously popular as they ran up to greet them. They proudly pointed to their new English friends and started talking excitedly in their language and making the 'pow pow' gesture and pointing to Eddie's scar on his leg and laughing. They pointed to the river and gestured for us to swim. I said. 'No, now Sarajevo.'

They smiled mischievously; they had got a free 70 km ride from us, had misled us so graciously. We took their photos, no longer afraid to show our cameras to them. Eddie handed us his address. 'We friend. Next Sarajevo. You sleep Sarajevo.' The last thing we saw before we turned away was Ardis's scared leg follow his body into the green smelly river indistinguishable from the swarms of other youths.

So we left with a full petrol tank, new friends and a very long journey home through the night. We arrived back to the safety of Vukovar at last, Chris returned to his hotel, I picked up my backpack from the hotel and went to the train station. I had missed my midnight train to Budapest. I waited at the station for another 12 hours before the next train. I expected to meet my travel companions tucked up in a safe Hungarian backpacker hostel but I actually found them as haggard, hungry and unrested as me. When I wasn't on my intended train they predicted I'd been blown up in a Bosnian landmine and had gone to the British embassy. So I still had a long way to go before any chance of sleep.