

Greece is the word!

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As a teenager in the late Seventies, I saw a movie about Greece, featuring John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John. Although I cannot agree with the way in which the wholesome lass was transformed into a considerably less wholesome nymph, I was greatly impressed with the surroundings. I made a mental note that I had to visit Greece one day. Almost half a century has passed, during which my resolve was often strengthened when I heard that theme song: “Greece is the time, is the place, is the motion...”¹

More than four decades passed, in which no opportunity emerged to visit Greece. I did fly over Greece once, *en route* from Anatolia to Algeria², but never managed to set foot there. Advancing age changed all this. As the end of my running career—meager as it is—inexorably approaches, I decided that one simply has to run the original marathon route at least once in a lifetime. And if that ability is indeed slipping beyond my grasp, it was now or never.

There was also a business reason to visit Greece. I recently became aware that I could now write the exams for a European pilot licence in South Africa, and Greece came highly recommended as a venue for the required flight training. I identified Egnatia Aviation³ near Thessaloniki as the target for my business trip.

There was yet another incentive. Since before The Flu, I’ve been stuck at 98 countries visited—the second-worst place to get stuck. There are few areas with many countries close together that I haven’t seen. Once such area was the Balkans, with 10 unseen countries close together.

As if I didn’t have enough reasons, there was also my struggle with the Greek language. I’ve recently completed almost four semesters of Biblical Greek studies, giving me a limited ability to read Greek with lavish use of a dictionary. I was hoping to use the opportunity to try out my Greek in real life.

Some Internet research revealed that there is indeed a marathon on the original route, from Marathon to Athens, during mid-November. It is unimaginatively labelled the Athens Marathon⁴, but I fondly renamed it as the Marathon marathon. I started making enquiries about an opportunity to operate the world’s biggest radio contest⁵ from one of the Balkan countries, as the telephony and telegraphy versions are held about a fortnight either side of the marathon. My plans were thrown into disarray by a generous invitation from Chris Plumblee⁶, whom I had visited in Florida some years before. Chris invited me to join his team in Andorra for the telegraphy contest. The opportunity to operate from another unseen country with some serious contesters was almost too good to be true. Unfortunately, work commitments during the latter half of November made it impossible to stay in Europe for my favourite, the telegraphy contest, and I had to settle for the telephony contest two weeks before.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8gqiyyqu1GVE&pp=ygUSZ3JIYXNIIGlziHRoZSB3b3Jk>

² <https://b.org.za/stories/Vlug-Flight.pdf>

³ <https://egnatia-aviation.aero>

⁴ <https://www.athensauthenticmarathon.gr>

⁵ <https://cqww.com>

⁶ Radio callsign W4WF, previously WF3C.

My long-time radio friend Don Field⁷ had operated from Greece last year. He highly recommended the Radio Amateur Association of Western Greece⁸. They operate a multi-operator station⁹ near the west coast of Greece. They welcomed my enquiry with open arms. The show was on! I would operate the contest with them, then travel through Greece and the Balkans for a fortnight before tackling the Marathon marathon. I would then immediately return home.

When Alet heard about my plans, she would not take no for an answer—she wanted to join me. I eventually agreed, but recommended that she should arrive after the radio contest and join me for the travel portion instead. She would spend an extra day in Istanbul¹⁰, something that I would have loved to have done, but the other commitments just did not allow me the luxury.

The following months proved hectic. A combination of my two jobs, studies and flying kept me much too busy. The planning suffered, and I left with many loose ends in my itinerary. Nevertheless, I did manage to enter for the marathon, set up arrangements with Egnatia Aviation and organise my side trip to the contest station. I even managed to organise a portable radio and antenna, which I could use to operate from the Balkan countries. I also enrolled in Duolingo¹¹, doing daily Greek lessons for almost two months before departure. My previous Greek studies helped considerably, as at least I was familiar with the alphabet and the sounds, but it was hard work.

The week before departure, I spent long hours trying to meet tough deadlines and to get things into a state where I could disappear for a few weeks. It didn't work. The afternoon of my departure, I still had not managed to get the pathetic Standard Bank to take note of my foreign credit card use, and my boss came down on me like a ton of bricks for something that I had overlooked due to vagaries of our new-fangled Microsoft email system. My departure was marred by a troubled series of phone calls, which finally solved the banking problem but left my work commitments up in the air. IT support just ain't what it used to be.

I was happy to secure three seats for myself on the flight to Istanbul, allowing a fairly good night's sleep. The most noteworthy aspect of the flight, though, was the extent to which my hand baggage was disassembled in Istanbul. My Morse code paddle and a roll of insulation tape caused a paranoid frenzy. Strangely, the radio transmitter itself attracted no attention. I was relieved to make it onto the Athens flight with all my toys.

The Radio Contest

As agreed, Vasilis Kontothanasis¹² was waiting for me in the arrivals lounge on Friday. We immediately set off for the contest station. In nearby Agrinio, I had my first exposure to the Greek lifestyle over a leisurely lunch before venturing up the mountain. Strangely, it did not resemble the environs in which the movie was set; not even remotely.



One of the towers at SZ1A with the Greek and South African flags.

⁷ Radio callsign G3XTT, editor of Practical Wireless magazine.

⁸ <https://sz1a.org/en/>

⁹ Radio callsign SZ1A.

¹⁰ <https://www.turkishairlines.com/en-int/flights/stopover/>

¹¹ <https://www.duolingo.com/>

¹² Radio callsign SV1DPJ.

I was pleased—albeit slightly bemused—to see the South African flag just below the Hellenic flag on one of the towers. The crew arrived in drips and drabs, almost a dozen of them. The contest would start early on Saturday morning. The preparations did not keep us too busy for a really nice collective meal. I was disappointed to realise that four semesters of study and 60 successive days of Duolingo had resulted in virtually no comprehension. It really was still Greek to me.

The contest lasted 48 hours, of which I was actively operating for about 20. On Saturday morning, I took a 20 km run in the mountains. I saw only one human and only one animal—a lonely tortoise. There were not even any birds. I wondered whether the empty shotgun shells that I saw everywhere had anything to do with it. The contest was a lot of fun. I had the opportunity to try out my German and my Spanish and my French and my Japanese and my Italian and my Dutch and, to my surprise, even my Afrikaans! I learned a lot of multi-operator tricks, something that should stand me in good stead when the time comes to commission my new station. In addition, I really enjoyed the interaction with like-minded hobbyists for an entire weekend.

Unfortunately, my bliss was marred by the ongoing difficulty in getting IT support and trying to comply with my boss's request.

Athens

On Monday, Vasilis dropped me off in eastern Athens. I caught a train to downtown and spent some hours ambling around the city. We have all heard the propaganda about the great must-see hill in the middle¹³. Frankly, it is highly overrated. My house is almost 30 years old, yet not a single brick is missing. These buildings, on the other hand, are probably missing at least half their building blocks. The least they could do is a bit of maintenance! Something that really caught my eye was the Temple of Nike. Now I'm a pretty serious New Balance man, but the thought of building a temple to New Balance has not even crossed my mind. I think I speak even for the Asics and Adidas supporters of this world, as even Google hasn't heard of a temple for either of those.



One of the buildings on the hill, badly in need of some maintenance.

Northeast Greece

I found my way back to the airport around nightfall. Several hours of negotiations finally produced an affordable rental car, but there was a snag: All the rental companies were unanimous that Greek rental cars may not cross the border into neighbouring countries. There was no choice but to take a car, as Egnatia Avation was at the opposite end of the country, but I would have to come up with a creative solution for my cross-border travel plans.

Alet arrived as expected, and we immediately collected our rental Polo and headed for our nightstop. Unfortunately, my shoddy preparation reared its ugly head. Using recommendations from locals, we'd reserved an apartment in Larissa. It now turned out that Larissa was many hours away, meaning that we would only arrive around midnight. The repeated toll stops on the freeway didn't help. Alet vainly attempted to contact the owners by email. We had no other way of communicating

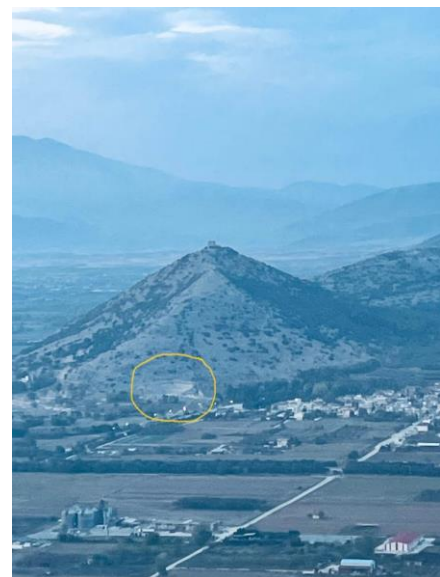
¹³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acropolis>

with them. We also had a nasty surprise, in that the cigarette lighter and the USB port in the rental car did not work. We would have a hard time keeping our tablets and phones alive during the long drives that lay ahead, and we had no other means of navigation!

We arrived after midnight, and could not get into the apartment. We had to resort to sleeping on a concrete slab in our camping gear. Come early morning, a friendly neighbour phoned the landlady on our behalf. She was unrepentant, stating that clear instructions were available on the booking site. Indeed, investigation revealed that they were there, but only for Greek speakers. At least we got to use the bathroom before continuing our trip to Thessaloniki, something that was sorely needed after lots of travel.

We arrived in the Thessaloniki area after another four hours of driving and repeatedly paying toll—dozens of times. Alet regaled me with readings from her homebrew tourist brochure, in which she had recorded interesting facts about the countries we were planning to visit. We were just in time for our appointment at Egnatia. The Head of Training was most helpful, outlining various ways in which I could complete the European licence through them. I had requested an evaluation flight, and was introduced to Yannis Karkarostamatis. Yannis is a product of the school, and I found my interaction with him entirely satisfactory. We were very much on the same wavelength and he did not find it necessary to intervene in my flying. The Diamond DA40 was my 197th aircraft model, previously unflown but well within my comfort zone.

At one point, Yannis asked me to aim at the nearest town of Lydia. I did. He mentioned that the town had been built on top of an ancient city. I enquired which city it had been. The answer left me speechless—Philippi. Alet and I had recently completed a university course on Paul's letters, but we had no idea of exactly where Philippi had been. Yannis also mentioned that the new town had been named for the first Christian in Europe, Lydia of Thyatira. We circled a bit to photograph some of the visible remnants, including the amphitheatre. During a short triangular flight, we could see Mount Athos looming in the distance. It was slightly cloudy and most of the intervening sea was obscured. The Holy Mountain made a spectacular sight, from an angle that few have seen. After the one-hour flight, we set off to Kavala to buy some food and mains chargers to work around our car's limitations. That night, further research revealed that Kavala harbour had been Paul's first stop in Europe. We had stumbled upon a Pauline adventure, completely unpremeditated.



Philippi. The halo indicates the amphitheatre.

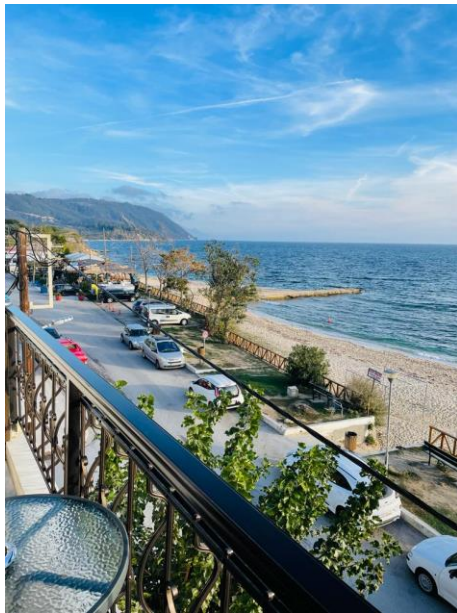
Mount Athos

Our overnight stop was in Ouranoupoli, the gateway to the enclave of Mount Athos. This peninsula is an important centre for Eastern Orthodoxy, which includes Greek, Russian and other Orthodox orders. It has been mostly independent of Greece, and anyone else, for 1200 years. It is governed by a council of abbots from the 20 monasteries. It is unique in that no females—human or animal—are allowed into its territory. Only 130 Orthodox pilgrims and 10 “others” are allowed in daily. Access is subject to a permit called the Diamonitirion, which is subject to prior application and a fee. The Faithful need the endorsement of their local clergy, while unbelievers do not. Our room in the hotel

was perfect, overlooking the sea from the third floor and within a two-minute walk of the beach. We used the early morning to catch a swim in the Aegean Sea (as one must at least once in a lifetime). I then queued for the Diamonitirion at a nearby office, along with dozens of austere-dressed pilgrims. After a hostile interrogation and payment of a fee, I was handed the precious certificate. I soon hopped on the ferry bound for Dafni.



Mount Athos, visible in the distance.



View from Alet's hotel room, with Athos on the left.

We originally thought that Alet could join me on the ride down the coast and return to port, but as the summer season had ended the previous day, even the boat was out of bounds to women. She remained behind for a leisurely day in Ouranoupolis, lazing on the white beach and gazing pensively across the bright blue¹⁴ Greek waters (as one must at least once in a lifetime). And, of course, discussing Athos with other women.

I enjoyed the boat trip, as we stopped at several monasteries along the coast. I particularly enjoyed seeing Apollo's antenna, still in place on the Dochiariou monastery more than four years after his death. Apollo was the reason most radio amateurs, including myself, became so aware of Mount Athos. I made five radio contacts with him between 1994 and 2011, still my only contacts with this separate country.

Disembarking in Dafni harbour was a momentous occasion. Finally, I had set foot in 100 countries! I posted my progress on DXFC. I noticed that Dennis Green¹⁵ had recently also added Serbia, which I was planning to visit just a few days later. A quick Google search confirmed that the International Amateur Radio Union was holding a Region 1 meeting in western Serbia. An email exchange with Dennis revealed that three officials of the South African Radio League were in attendance: Dennis, Nico and Guy¹⁶. I made a mental note to try and make it to Serbia before their departure.

My original plan of walking to the central town of Karyes soon receded. Terrain was very steep and the road was too rough to drag my wheeled carry-on baggage. Accordingly, I joined the queue for a bus. The first bus was soon stuffed to capacity, but I managed to elbow my way onto the second. The driver short-changed me, making the already expensive bus trip even more so. From Karyes, I followed the directions to Koutloumousiou monastery, where Apollo's successor Iakovos is supposed to be. I was surprised to see the mountainous countryside littered with scores of houses, most with

¹⁴ Bright blue is the boy version. I think Alet used exotic girly words like "azure" and "turquoise".

¹⁵ Radio callsign ZS4BS.

¹⁶ Radio callsigns ZS4BS, ZS6QL and ZS6GUY, all members of the SARL Council.

the rustic appearance of farm life. Soon, I started encountering conflicting instructions, pointing in opposite directions and even back along the way I had just come. I only saw one human in a two-hour period. Eventually, I knocked at a house that appeared to have some life and found someone who spoke a modicum of broken English. He pointed me in a direction (opposite to what the road signs said). I arrived at Koutloumousiou after about two and a half hours on the road, thoroughly exhausted. A busload of pilgrims had arrived before me. I joined the queue. The monk who helped me had limited English: "Church at 16, eat at 17, room at 18". My questions were met with a blank stare.

The church service was a new experience. Monks chanted what sounded like memorised rhymes in semi-darkness. The walls and the ceilings were covered in iconic paintings. The air was thick with incense emanating from burners hangings from thin steel cables from the ceiling and from handheld slings. I was sternly reprimanded for crossing my legs¹⁷.

After the hour-long service, we had an hour-long meal. We all sat on wooden benches at long tables without speaking. Someone intoned a reading from a pulpit. The meal consisted of thick bean soup, white bread, olives and water. After an hour, we all got up and filed outside. There was now an opportunity to view the holy relics. The pilgrims queued to kiss framed portraits and various unspecified objects in small wooden chests.



My "guest house" near Koutloumousiou monastery.

We were conducted to our abode. To my surprise, it was an austere building well outside the monastery, partially painted yellow. I shared the room with about six pilgrims. The irony of sitting in one of the world's most sought-after countries¹⁸ with a radio and antenna, as well as a legal Greek licence, was stark. I had struck up a conversation with a monk that spoke some English, and it was soon evident that Iakovos was not resident there and had not been seen in years. Unfortunately,

Athos has demonstrated its autonomy to the world of amateur radio by refusing to allow any non-resident permission to operate from there. If only...

That evening, I finally gave up on being able to complete my work assignment. Despite my best intentions, I wasn't going to be able to pull this task off without support. The office would have to wait for my return. I wasn't going to allow this debacle to spoil my entire holiday.

We were told that there would be a church service from 03:00 to 06:00, but that attendance would be optional. I elected to sleep, only being disturbed by the departure and the arrival of the faithful. When I got up around 07:30, there was an email from Alet. There would be an early boat to Ouranoupoli, and if I could catch that boat, we could catch an afternoon bus to Sofia and save a full day. Given that the rental car situation would cost us at least two, saving a day would be a great relief. I immediately packed up and left. I boarded the first bus to Dafni. As we arrived in the harbour, a fast boat was leaving. There was another boat, but it was fully booked. I sat in the

¹⁷ Internet sources explain that crossed legs reflect an attitude that is not serious enough. However, crossed legs can also result from a two-hour walk in mountainous terrain, carrying heavy luggage.

¹⁸ <https://clublog.org/mostwanted.php>

harbour for around four hours in miserable rain. The limited covered spaces were fully crowded with sweaty pilgrims, many of whom were smoking. It was not a picnic.

We boarded the ferry on time, but this time it was full. I found a fairly comfortable seat in a corner, surrounded by what sounded like Romanian pilgrims. I briefly got up to take a picture of Apollo's antenna. When I got back, a loutish teenager had grabbed my seat, moving my baggage aside. It was clear that he was not going to budge. I sat down in a semi-open semi-space beside him. He stuck his elbow into my ribs in a clear act of defiance. One of the older pilgrims chided him, and he slightly retracted his elbow, reducing the pressure to almost bearable.



Inside the ferry.

I spent the last part of the journey on the upper deck, watching the pilot in the wheelhouse. I was amused by the similarities to aircraft cockpits, including the bored-but-alert pose of the pilot. Alet was waiting on the pier, somewhat out of place among hundreds of men. We packed the Polo and pointed it towards Pella for the night. On the way, we passed the village of Metamorfosi. After a sideways glance at Alet, I decided to take a drive through the village. She casually mentioned that I might be a bit taller and younger and blonder, and I stayed on the bypass.

Pella

I'd been completely unaware of Pella's existence until I looked it up after passing a similarly-named town in the Northern Cape in September. It was the birthplace of Alexander the Great, and his father's capital before relocating to Philippi, which he had modestly renamed after himself. Philippi produced copious quantities of gold and silver, enabling Philip and later young Alex to build a mighty army and conquer the whole known world, effectively turning Philippi into the world's capital. After some shopping in the local supermarket, I spent the evening building an antenna off the balcony of our apartment and figuring out the new radio, which I had never used. I made some radio contacts¹⁹ and marvelled at the extent to which robots were reporting my signals all over Europe, despite the modest equipment.

First thing in the morning, we spent some time in the archeology museum and the ruins of Pella before setting off for Thessaloniki and the bus to Sofia. To me, the most striking part was a field just outside ancient Pella, where a portion of the town had been excavated and left in its unrestored state. It was almost unthinkable that a green meadow hid an ancient city. Digging down less than 2 m revealed buildings, roads and signs of a life that had completely disappeared. It's the one picture that I most regret not taking.

I had found a company in Sofia that appeared to offer rental cars that could actually cross borders. If that hope proved unfounded, we would have to resort to just travelling by bus. My dream of visiting 10 new countries would instantly evaporate. It was soon obvious that we could not find parking for more than a week in the streets of Thessaloniki. Not only would we have to pay for a rental car that was not being used, we would also have to pay a fortune for indoor parking. Sigh...

¹⁹ Radio callsign SV2/ZS6EZ.

Bulgaria



Playing radio in our room, with the antenna hanging out of the window.

The bus was fairly comfortable. I managed to catch up on some sleep. As we entered Sofia, Alet was sleeping while I tracked our progress on my tablet. It was soon obvious that we were not going to the advertised spot. I just hoped that it would still be within walking distance of our accommodation. Fortunately, it was. We walked to the austere-named Generaator hostel in light drizzle. We were on the third floor. I managed to string my antenna wire from the window, producing quite a nice signal²⁰. Despite several sessions of radio contacts, we managed to get a good night's sleep. This radio thing really is magic—a radio smaller than brick-sized and spool of wire, and the world is your oyster!

I had had no response from the car rental company. Eventually, we managed to get in touch with them in the morning. They did not have a small car, but a slightly more upmarket car (an Opel Corsa) could be had at a considerably more upmarket price. We walked about an hour in light rain to get to their address. There was no sign of an office. The owner was irritated and indicated that we had to walk to another address, which appeared nowhere on their Website and which was much closer to our accommodation. It was going to be another hour's walk, so I dug in my heels. One of the employees came to our rescue, offering to collect us. Sure enough, after another 20-minute wait, he arrived and whisked us off to the real office. The paperwork was signed, and we hit the road.

We visited two churches in Sofia: one from 340 AD²¹ and another more recent and more impressive building. We were now on our way to Romania. We had previously identified some national parks in southwest Romania that offered camping facilities. We headed in that general direction. Directions from Waze took us through meandering little mountain roads and tiny hamlets. It was picturesque, but we were making painfully slow progress. We stopped for grocery shopping. In the parking lot, I punched some questions into Google. The answers were a nasty surprise. Oryahovo, the ferry we were headed to, was closed. We could find no reason for the closure, but we would suddenly have to make another plan. That plan came in the form of the new bridge near Vidin. It would constitute a detour, but at least we could get across into Romania.



Inside the Rotunda, the church from AD 340.

Romania

There was a 6 km queue of trucks at the border post. Fortunately, we only spent an hour getting through the queue. There were some pointed questions about our passports, as no-one had apparently ever seen a South African passport and there was some skepticism about the validity of our Greek Schengen visas for admission into Romania. We eventually drove through and started looking for our accommodation in darkness. There was another 6 km queue of trucks on the other

²⁰ Radio callsign LZ/ZS6EZ.

²¹ I just happened to notice, a week after my return, that the Rotunda is quoted in a textbook as a prime example of church construction directly after Constantine's decree that allowed churches to own property.

side, but no second lane for cars. Cars kept overtaking trucks across the solid white line, and we were in constant danger of a head-on collision.



Swimming the Blue Danube.

We were on the outskirts of Pristol, a tiny village just off the Danube river. I built an antenna over a tile-roofed enclosure in the garden and made some radio contacts²². In the morning, I took a 90-minute run, while Alet explored the village on foot. There was no easy way to get to the Danube river, but I enjoyed exploring the countryside. In light of the season, our hosts were a little apprehensive about our expressed desire to swim in the Danube (as one

must at least once in a lifetime). Nevertheless, they led us to a small lock. Even the local fishermen seemed

incredulous as we took a short swim. There was nothing blue about the Danube, but when we emerged from the water and looked at our legs, we understood.

Serbia

The border crossing into Serbia proved more adventurous than I would have preferred. The tiny border post was almost deserted when we got there. Half a dozen bored uniformed officials descended onto our car. They questioned everything. We made their day when they came across a small container with my supplements for the upcoming Marathon marathon. They exchanged furtive glances and nattered in what I presumed to be Romanian. The syllables “co” and “caine” were the only distinctly discernable part. I patiently explained that these were my magnesium, Vitamin B and Vitamin C supplements, as we were on our way to a marathon. They were not convinced. Further searches produced Alet’s breath mints and her mukhwas²³ from a recent Indian trip, just reinforcing their fears. After what felt like the longest time, a policeman jumped out of a police car, thrusting a nasty-looking plastic utensil toward me. I had to keep this probe in my mouth “for five to eight minutes”. I did, to the point where it invoked my gag reflex. Still, it was not deemed satisfactory. I had to do it again. After more than a quarter of an hour, they grabbed the probe and inserted it into a machine in the back seat of the police car. It growled and purred ominously for another quarter of an hour before registering a negative result. I think I was the only one who was not surprised (although I would be lying if I didn’t admit to a measure of relief). The uniformed crowd seemed disappointed, but politely sent us on our way. The Serbian side was just a formality. Within minutes, we were on the road.

The road featured several little commemorative stone plaques in every kilometre. It was uncomfortable to realise that the road was so lethal. We drove toward Vitinovac, where Hrane Misolevic was awaiting us. Hrane is a long-time radio acquaintance. He has possibly the most intimidating CV I have seen, with two doctorates and a long list of credentials. He also has a legendary reputation in amateur radio²⁴. Hrane drove us to a local



Hrane's radio station--much more fun than a piece of wire from a balcony!

²² Radio callsign YO/ZS6EZ.

²³ Small multi-coloured aromatic coated grain pellets used as breath fresheners.

²⁴ Radio callsign YT1AD.

hotel where real Serbian food was to be had. Alet and I enjoyed the variety of local dishes. Alet took plenty of photographs, which were immediately distributed world-wide to an unspecified audience through some unspecified social media gadget²⁵. I asked Hrane whether he knew of a local airfield where I might be able to fly. This request is normally met with disbelief by local hosts, but Hrane was different. He told us about a flying club not 30 km from there, where he had kept his own Cessna 182 until it was sold about a year ago. He made some phone calls, and arrangements were put in place to fly the following morning.

Hrane expressed some skepticism around the feasibility of our 10-country itinerary. We obviously shared this apprehension, having lost two full days due to the rental car debacle. For starters, there were not enough nights left to spend a night in every country. Hrane made some pointed recommendations which might save us a considerable amount of time by avoiding travel through the capitals.

I borrowed Hrane's considerable radio station for half an hour. It was a pleasure not to have to stand on chairs and use brooms to stick pieces of wire into trees, only to have lots of difficulty to attract anyone's attention. This time, there was a pileup of European and North American signals, and I had a chat with two long-time radio buddies²⁶, one in Georgia and the other in California. I had not spoken to them in decades.

The next morning, Hrane drove us to Trsenik airfield. The instructor, Dusan Todorovic, was waiting for us. After inspecting the Piper Warrior II from the 1970s, we jumped on board and flew toward Hrane's house. I circled his house while Alet took some pictures of the antenna towers. Dusan and I did not communicate well. Several aspects of the operation did not seem to me to agree with Mr Piper's instructions. Maybe something was lost in the translation. Mr Todorovic did magnanimously concede that with some recurrent training I would be able to fly the Warrior safely again, one day. Hrane stopped at a wine farm to collect some local wines. I was amazed to note that a wine farm can be operated without pretentious Cape Dutch mansions. A distinguished guest was waiting there. Dave Sumner²⁷ is a long-time Council member of the International Amateur Radio Union. He had just completed the IARU Region 1 General Conference in nearby Zlatibor and was joining us for lunch with his wife Linda.



Hrane and Dave doggedly touring the station.

Hrane gave the women a guided tour of the nearby shrine he had built for his parents. We had another delightful Serbian meal in a local restaurant before hitting the road. This time, Dave and Linda were being transported to Belgrade for their flight home while we were headed west toward the border.

²⁵ Apparently, a flurry of Serbian cooking immediately ensued on at least three continents.

²⁶ Radio callsigns NQ4I and AA6AA.

²⁷ Radio callsign K1ZZ.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

On Hrane's recommendation, we stopped in Visegrad. No-one has ever heard of Visegrad, except maybe for some of the 5000 inhabitants. However, it did offer a strategic location, right next to the Serbian border, reducing the amount of driving on the serpentine mountain roads. The terrain is stunningly beautiful. Nevertheless, we were happy to settle down, after taking a walking trip to the famous bridge across the Drina (as one must at least once in a lifetime). I'm told that Ivo Andrich's book about that bridge earned him a Nobel prize for literature in 1961. Apparently, it is the go-to source for understanding the Balkan conflicts. I built an antenna and we got some sleep.



Visegrad, with the famous bridge on the right.

Early in the morning I made some radio contacts²⁸ before heading off toward Montenegro. Again, we passed through stunning scenery, although I personally would gladly have traded some stunning scenery for some stunning progress. Between hairpin bends and slow drivers in campers from Belgium, the average speed remained around the 50 km/h mark. At one point, our navigation software deposited us on a small mountain road, too steep for the amount of traction the tyres offered. Driving up that mountain took a lot of fancy footwork. I was greatly relieved when we rejoined the main road.

Montenegro



Herceg Novi against the gorgeous backdrop of the Adriatic. Lord Byron waxed lyrical about the beauty of this coastline.

We arrived in Herceg Novi, Montenegro around lunchtime. We met Ranko Boca²⁹ and Dragan Djordjevic³⁰ for lunch in the yacht harbour. After lunch, they led us to their world-famous factory³¹, where accessories for competitive amateur radio are built. They showed me some of their new products, but I was warned that disclosing details would cost my life. Ranko graciously allowed me to use his radio station³². Again, it was much more fun than spending hours stringing wire and then calling plaintively.

The two days we had lost due to the rental car and the Sofia bus meant that we would not be spending a night in Montenegro, so we soon hit the road towards Albania. On the way, we took a swim in the Adriatic (as one must at least once in a lifetime). The beach was deserted. Several passers-by looked

²⁸ Radio callsign E7/ZS6EZ.

²⁹ Radio callsign 4O3A.

³⁰ Radio callsign 4O4A.

³¹ <https://4o3a.com/>

³² Callsign 4O/ZS6EZ.

at us strangely. Clearly, this was officially the winter season. The Kamenari ferry offered a nice diversion—nice not only for the scenery but also for the fact that it actually saved us time.

Albania

This day was a momentous one from a travel point of view. Montenegro was country number 105 in which I had set foot; Albania was number 106. Thus far, the leading South African was at 105³³. Finally, after four years, I was back in the lead.

The drive through Albania was again a mixture of euphoria and ordeal. We were undoubtedly passing through breathtaking scenery in the Accursed Mountains, but darkness, horrible roads and light rain combined to make it less than pleasant. The driving required all my concentration. The roads were slippery, bumpy and filled with interminable hairpin bends—quite a combination!



Our hotel in Albania. We stayed in the upper left corner.

We were grateful to arrive at our hotel just before midnight. We had a room in the top corner, ideal for building antennas. My antenna worked better than from any other location, and I managed to make some spectacular contacts³⁴. This radio thing really is magic. I was quite overwhelmed by the thought of operating from Albania. In my youth, the country was one of the most isolationist on earth, and it was unavailable on amateur radio for many years. It was by far the most-wanted country on earth until the big multi-national operation in 1991³⁵. And here I was operating from Albania with generic paperwork accessible to any radio amateur from a variety of countries³⁶.

I endured considerable criticism for driving to the eastern border of Albania. There was a body of opinion that choosing an overnight stop further west would have been wiser. And we would have seen the most beautiful mountains on earth by day. And we would not have been so tired. And Tirana would have been a great place to see. However, there was some method in my madness: The next day was going to be busy. We drove through more beautiful mountains (although apparently not as beautiful as the ones we had missed due to darkness and fatigue) before arriving in Skopje in the late afternoon.

³³ <https://zs6ez.org.za/lists/dxfc-zs.htm>

³⁴ Radio callsign ZA/ZS6EZ.

³⁵ Radio callsign ZA1A.

³⁶ The CEPT agreement includes most of Europe, as well as South Africa, the USA and a few other countries.

North Macedonia



Our dystopic abode.

We first went to Stenkovec airfield, where there were two flying schools. I was most interested in the smaller of the two, where some interesting little aeroplanes were to be had. Nevenka was very helpful and set up an appointment with Ivan for the morning. We set off in dense traffic to find our accommodation in Skopje. Unfortunately, it was easier said than done. We found the right street, but the building number did not make sense. Some WhatsApp conversations in broken English later, the landlord arrived and led us into what we had presumed to be a bomb crater or a prop from a Mad Max movie. Despite the entry through a derelict staircase, the apartment was adequate but spartan. I struggled to find parking nearby.

Finally, we set off to find Vlado Shutevski³⁷, who had magnanimously offered to host me for some radio activity³⁸. We walked a few blocks in light rain. Vlado and his wife were in the apartment. Unfortunately, communication was difficult, as she spoke no English and we spoke no Macedonian. Vlado led us to his rooftop radio room, where I tried to make some contacts amid loud conversation between Vlado and Alet. Among others, I managed to make a contact with Vlado Karamitrov³⁹ in North Carolina, who had introduced me to the local Vlado and helped with the arrangements.



Vlado and his foreign visitor in his rooftop station.

After a good night's sleep, we set off to see yet another Ottoman bridge before heading out to the airport for our 09:00 appointment. I was looking forward to flying the Pipistrel Alpha Trainer, but had low expectations of the instructor. Instructors at sport pilot schools do not always see the big picture. However, I was bowled over. Ivan Nikolovski is a consummate professional, with experience in a variety of business jets and in Boeing 737s. I was not the only one who greatly enjoyed it. Ivan expressed his satisfaction with being able to relax completely and fly as passenger for the first time in over 1000 hours. He sat and made videos for the entire flight. I felt a little better after my previous experience, especially since I had never flown the Pipistrel. The Pipistrel turned out to be an absolute delight, and my 198th unique aircraft model. That 200 mark is getting tantalisingly close! On landing, another surprise awaited us: Ivan offered Alet a ride. They were airborne for much longer than I had been, and it was free of charge. Life is not fair!



Chris and Ivan getting the Pipistrel ready.

³⁷ <https://www.grz.com/db/z31tu>

³⁸ (sic).

³⁹ N3CZ, formerly ZS6MG.

Kosovo

The next project was to stop in Kosovo for lunch. Unfortunately, we would not have a lot of time. We drove to the nearest border post, less than 20 km away, and left the rental car there. After clearing immigration, we walked to the nearest town, Elez Han, and sat down in a restaurant that came highly recommended. Alet was the only woman there. She got several sideways glances. Our service was super slow. Several tables that were occupied after us were served before us. After some grocery shopping, we walked back to the border post and found our rental car. We drove through beautiful scenery, although obviously not as beautiful as the scenery we had missed in Albania, not by a long shot. The GPS navigation again took us on a wild goose chase off the highway. It was time consuming, but also interesting to pass through numerous small villages, many from a different era.

Back in Bulgaria

Back in Sofia, our next task was to get bus tickets. We had not been able to book a ticket to Thessaloniki, as the bus company's Website kept rejecting our credit cards. We went to the bus station to investigate options. Most of the offices were closed. There was a competing company with a slightly less desirable option, so we decided to arrive early the next day and to use that option if we could not get the preferred option. Back at the car, our wheel had been clamped. Fortunately, the offending officials had not left. I was able to get the wheel unclamped for a € 17 fine, payable in euros with change in funny money. My plea that I could not have been expected to understand a sign 70 m away in Bulgarian fell on deaf ears. Clearly, tourists are not welcome in Sofia.

We now had to hand back the rental car. After dropping our bags at the accommodation and some dubious instructions from Waze, we found a garage to refuel and then the office. The youngster manning the office was very talkative and very interested in our South African origins. We walked back to the hotel, did some shopping and settled in. It wasn't necessary to build an antenna, as we had operated from this particular room before (as one must *only* once in a lifetime).

We were at the bus station around 07:00. Our preferred option's office was still closed, so we bought the other option's tickets and got on the bus. The trip was slow, with several in-between stops. The countryside was beautiful, but obviously not as beautiful as the countryside we'd missed in Albania. Our preferred bus snuck past at the border post. Our delay was probably largely due to the presence of two South African passports, which caused great consternation with the officials.

II Thessalonians

Back in Thessaloniki, we walked to the parking garage. The woman at the counter clearly expressed her contempt of customers, charging us monumental fees and bossing all the queueing customers around as to where and how we were allowed to stand. We had to pay another astronomical fee before being able to get our car. The car appeared from the depths of a dungeon and was unceremoniously parked in the middle of the traffic. We hurriedly loaded our luggage to the sound of several hooters and swearing drivers behind us. We set off towards our next stop. We'd been to Thessaloniki and Philippi, so we next had to visit Corinth (as one must at least once in a lifetime).

Corinth

We decided not to route via Athens, but instead to cruise down the west coast. At the cost of a slightly longer drive, we would see some new and considerably more scenic terrain. In addition, maybe we wouldn't have to stop for tolls every five minutes. We soon passed Veroia, a quaint village on a hillside. Alet was quite taken, snapping numerous photographs in passing. Some pointed

questions to Google revealed that this village was in fact the ancient Berea, where Paul had gone after being kicked out of Thessalonika. The unplanned Pauline adventure continued! We traversed the scenic west coast of Greece, passed Agrinio where I had done the radio contest, crossed the Rion-Anthirion bridge and skirted the north coast of the Peloponnese before arriving in ancient Corinth around 21:00. There was nothing ancient about the surroundings; just a tourist trap in the closed season. We found our accommodation, but could not contact the landlord despite repeated attempts. A notice at the bottom end of the property told us to look at a specific restaurant. That restaurant was firmly closed. The one next door was not. With considerable arm-waving, we eventually communicated our dilemma to the owner, who made a phone call. The landlord arrived by scooter and unlocked. We spent a restful night and had a nice rooftop breakfast. At its conclusion, we asked the landlord where the ancient city was. He pointed. About 200 m away, we could see the ancient stone pillars behind the trees.

We ambled up the hill and spent about an hour walking through the museum and the ruins (as one



Ancient Corinth.

must at least once in a lifetime). My tummy was not well, detracting somewhat from the blissful feeling of yet another Pauline adventure. In the museum, we were almost forcibly ejected when Alet posted me next to a pair of statues for scale. Despite the complete absence of signs, apparently these particular statues were a top secret recent find and photographing them was a capital offence.

Before heading for Athens, we visited the eastern end of the Corinthian Canal, including the sunken bridge. Instead of being raised when a ship passes, this bridge is lowered into the water. We crossed the bridge both ways (as one must at least once in a lifetime). We then set off for a quick swim in the Saronic Gulf (as one must once in a lifetime) before heading to Athens.

The Expo

We found parking close to the entrance and joined a queue of several hundred metres to the Expo. My heart sank. I was already badly prepared for the Marathon marathon; I certainly didn't want to spend many hours on my feet on the previous day! Fortunately, the queue moved quickly. In addition to the normal numbers and T-shirt, I was pleasantly surprised to receive an Athens Metro ticket, valid for four days. I just wished that I would have more time to use it! I also bought some things at the Expo, violating one of the basic rules of marathons. The previous night in Corinth, I discovered that my lunch box with all my supplements and my South African flag patches had disappeared. I had left it in the rental car in Thessaloniki. Suddenly the pressure with which we were bundled out of there into dense traffic made sense. They obviously did not want us to scrutinise the contents of the car too closely! At least I found a suitable belt and some gels that I was dearly hoping would not upset my tummy even more.



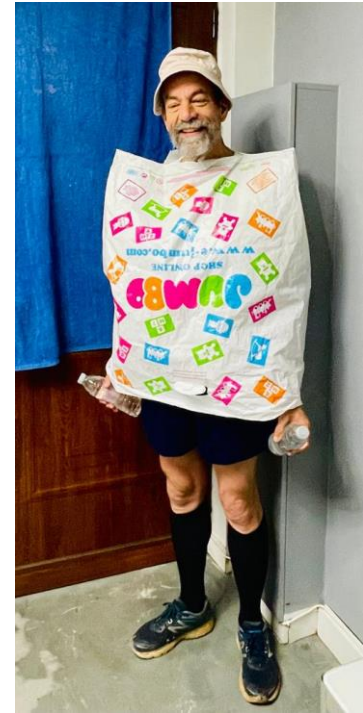
The Queue of Death at the Expo.

We wove through the traffic to get to our accommodation. We were lucky to find parking within walking distance. There was one problem: The place stank to high heaven. Despite the assurances on the advertising of it being “smoke-free” and “allergy-free”, there had definitely been a smoker before us, and it did not appear as if any of the towels and bedding had even been washed. We hung the offending bedding on the balcony and pressed our own camping gear into service, but we both found it difficult and unpleasant to breathe. After enjoying a pasta dish that Alet had somehow knocked together, I went to bed early.

The Marathon marathon⁴⁰

I was badly prepared for this marathon. Apart from not having had capacity to train intensively in the past few months, I’d had only two runs in Europe in the past fortnight. I consoled myself with the idea that dragging heavy luggage up mountains must count for something. I just had to take it really easy to maximise my chance of survival.

I got up at 05:00, feeling anything but well-rested. The stench of tobacco smoke still filled the air. I had half a dozen eggs and applied sunblock and copious amounts of lubrication. One item slipped: I forgot to take my magnesium tablets. Given the ordeal I’d experienced in the Romanian border post, the irony is hard to miss. I set off through the seedy part of town around 05:30. I took a Metro train to the next stop, joined a long queue for a long line of buses and walking several city blocks before boarding. I dozed off in the darkness, despite the uncomfortable seat and the loud Greek neighbour. I walked about a km to our starting gate, wrapped in a brightly-coloured Jumbo shopping bag. My outfit generated considerable mirth. I found a spot against an embankment and lay back with my hat over my eyes to relax for almost two hours. I couldn’t doze off due to the noise.



My home-made disposable jacket.

At the 09:00 start, I got up, finished my last drinks, used the urinal and re-attached my race number. We gradually walked around the Marathon stadium to the start line. I noticed two runners from my running partner Hanri’s club⁴¹ in the bunch. Nickey had completed the Istanbul marathon the previous weekend, but it obviously didn’t constitute enough punishment for her. We only started after 09:30. I saw several runners with South African branding. I took it very easy, not wanting to take any risks after being advised that the insurance would not cover me if anything happened to me during this “extreme” activity. It didn’t feel extreme. At this pace, I could probably continue almost forever. There was a lot of banter on the road, including with a British couple dressed as a Greek warrior, complete with sword, shield and helmet and in a very comely long white dress, but with green hair and snakeskin patterns painted on her face. Or at least, I assume they were painted.

There were several wheelchairs in the race. Most of them seemed to have handicapped adults on board, being pushed by one or two runners. However, three wheelchairs were being pushed by large groups of Greek runners in red T-shirts. They got more and more loutish as the race continued, eventually blocking the entire road and forcing the rest of us to pass them on the sidewalk. Their abuse included lavish English expletives in a heavy Greek accent. Nice idea, bad execution!

⁴⁰ This portion of the story is told on my running Webpage, with more details that runners might enjoy. <https://b.org.za/stories/races.htm#202311athens>

⁴¹ Phobians.

The race is fairly flat for the first 17 km or so. It then climbs gradually to the 31 km mark, with a maximum elevation of about 240 m. The last 10 km to the finish is mostly downhill, finishing at an elevation of about 80 m. 42 km is a very, very long way, but I managed to maintain my pace, remaining about three minutes ahead of my planning.

Marathon running is not just fun and games. In the last 10 km, I became very aware of dozens of runners falling by the wayside. Some were being treated by emergency medics, while others were being carted off in ambulances.

The race finishes inside the Panathanaic Stadium. This stadium was built by the Greeks around 330 BC and rebuilt by the Romans to basically its current configuration in 144 AD. It became the venue for the first modern Olympics in 1896. Race instructions were emphatic that runners had to run the last 170 m inside the stadium. Accordingly, I took a lavish walk break just before entering the stadium and ran up the straight almost like a real runner. Halfway up the home straight, I reminded myself of the momentous occasion. I started looking around, taking in the marble seats and the splendour of this historic arena. I'd almost missed it.

It was my slowest marathon ever, but about three minutes faster than my planned pace, so I suppose I should be happy. I was a little tearful after the finish. Considering the prognosis when I severed my leg a decade ago, I'm profoundly grateful that I have been able to run a marathon almost on memory. Perhaps, after all, the painful rehabilitation has been worth it.



Finishing in The Stadium.

Alet was in the crowd beside the medal table. I exited the stadium and met her at the agreed bus stop. The long walk to the Metro station was painful, to say the least. Surprisingly for a Sunday, we caught a very busy train back to our seedy abode. Some passengers smelled to high heaven and proudly wore medals around their necks. We enjoyed the leftover pasta before tucking in for an early night.

Although locals insist that this marathon is exceedingly difficult, it did not strike me as any harder than our typical local marathons. Pretoria is indeed a hilly place. At least Athens has real air to breathe, with its sea-level elevation.

Athens to Marathon and beyond

After a reasonably restful night in our camping gear, we packed the rental car and headed for downtown. Alet had walked there the previous day, but I insisted that it was going to be by car this time. We found parking not too far from the Parthenon and walked to the Areopagus. Alet had had trouble finding it the previous day while I was running. We walked up the hill, standing where Paul had stood and trying to read



A tired old guy with a fancy medal.

the inscription of his sermon on a large stone tablet. Many of the tourists wore the Marathon commemorative T-shirts and even some medals.

We now headed off to Marathon. Our first stop was the Marathon's marathon museum. It was closed, as it always is on Mondays. I would have thought that they could make an exception, given that thousands of marathon runners were in town. We then retraced the route of the Marathon marathon, following the blue line that had been painted on the road. To my amazement, I noticed the sea off to my left. It was news to me. Clearly, I had been very focused on the job on hand the previous day! Around the 32 km mark, as we were entering Athens proper, we ran out of time. We headed off to the airport and handed back the rental car.

In the departure lounge, we bumped into several South Africans that were walking funny. Many of them were wearing medals around their necks. Our flight was delayed by over an hour, turning an adequate transfer into a very hectic one. In Istanbul, we were rounded up by an official who would lead us to our flight. We bypassed security and all the other formalities, jogging across the large airport and straight to the gate. With a mixture of wheezing couch potatoes and real marathon runners who had just completed a marathon, I wasn't sure who was suffering most. We were the last to board. I wondered whether our baggage would make it.

The flight was full, so we had an uncomfortable night. My neighbour had occupied our seats before we boarded and had to hurriedly vacate them to make room for us. He regarded the armrest as only a vague guide on where his flabby arms could hang. He made no secret that my presence was seen as an unwelcome intrusion.

On disembarking, we struck up a conversation with a musclebound woman carrying a large cheque for \$ 500 won in a bodybuilding competition. I briefly wondered what Numbers 1 and 2 looked like. She was escorted by a very proud man. As feared, in Johannesburg our checkin luggage was nowhere to be found. I lodged a claim with Menzies, with the assurance that they would deliver "real soon".

I made my way back to the office and settled down into the old routine. It was a looong day.

Wrapping up

This trip proved delightful. It was a wonderful opportunity to face some challenges and explore some new terrain. It was my first opportunity to see some new countries since The Flu. I finally saw Greece, although it was very different to what I expected. I was able to fly in three European countries, convincingly ticking off my last continent as a pilot. I tremendously enjoyed the radio contest. I was astonished by what I learned in the Balkans. I was disappointed by my total lack of success in learning Greek. I was able to run the original Marathon to Athens route (although not in the traditional way). I managed to regain the top slot in the Southern Hemisphere on DXFC with 108 countries visited. I even managed to add eight new countries that I've operated my radio from.

As is always the case, the weeks since our return have been hectic. It feels like I'll never catch up with the work and the studies and just the routine chores. Even my baggage took more than a week to catch up with me. Still, I occasionally take a break to stare vacantly out of the window, wearing an inane smirk. It's been a great ride!

Thanks to Alet for some of the pictures and for being a great travel companion. Mostly.