

By Azalai to Macedonia and Turkey: June 23rd to August 4th 2012

The joy of our Azalai is that it combines the comfort of a (very) small, self-contained one-bedroom flat plus verandah with the freedom to go anywhere that a Land Rover 110 Defender can get to. Be it down by a river or lake side, far along a forest track, or up a minor road into the hills and mountains, it's never taken us very long to find somewhere peaceful and beautiful to spend a night or two. No doubt we technically trespass from time to time but very rarely get chased away: being obviously slightly eccentric but entirely harmless middle aged Brits may help. At worst once or twice it's been suggested that we might think about moving on the next day.



Comfort inside....

Thus accommodated, Malgosia and I left Oxford for the Dover to Calais ferry early one sunny June morning, with no more defined a plan than to aim generally for Hattusas, the site in central Turkey of the capital of the ancient empire of the Hittites, around 1,500BC. We'd seen a TV documentary about this place and the remains of the temples, palaces, city walls, and rock carvings of kings and gods looked so atmospheric that it seemed very well worth investigating, especially as I



....and outside

had only the haziest idea of who exactly the Hittites were anyway. However it is about 2,000 miles away from Oxford in a straight line according to Google Earth, and with only six weeks to play with, we didn't want to hang around Germany and Austria too long. Their autobahns are famously excellent to drive on as long as you don't mind pottering along at 100-110 kph in a large white van while the serious drivers zoom past at about twice that speed. Our plan to continue quickly through Slovenia, a lovely, friendly country we visited last year in the course of the Azalai's maiden voyage, was scuppered by the serendipitous discovery of the little town of Ptuj. Having rather parsimoniously agreed to avoid paying for the 15 Euro motorway vignette, we drove around some lovely hilly farmland north of Maribor and eventually found a sign for a large hotel, spa and camping complex at Ptuj, which promised a warm water massage and swimming. It's always nice to get properly cleaned up now and again, and it was becoming pretty hot in central Europe, so the temptation was irresistible. Nor was the picturesque town we discovered on the way out next morning – a medieval market centre, and jumble of old red-roofed houses, and churches dominated by a great castle high above the

town looking down on the river and distant lake. So we never got away that day either: though a second swim in the pool didn't come amiss either.

A motorway slog across the rather dull plains of northern Croatia, and down Serbia added little excitement apart from the inevitable brush with the Serbian traffic police for speeding. You are flagged down for failing to slow immediately at the start of the speed limit on a bit of the motorway approaching Belgrade, whereupon the plausibly polite policeman gives you the option of paying a reduced fine directly to him or being taken into town to find a magistrate which will take 'several hours'. Being naïve about such matters, it cost me a good few Euros; I've since learned that I should have cheerfully agreed to go with them, which they don't actually want to bother to do, at which point the 'fine' drops dramatically, or even with sufficient presence of mind can be made to disappear altogether and you are sent on your way with a general warning about the dangers of high speed driving.

Macedonia is as romantic a country as it sounds and which I'd always wanted to see. We were not to be disappointed! The most remote, culturally as well as geographically, of the former Yugoslav countries its mountains rise to over 2,500 metres and it has two of Europe's largest lakes in the southwest corner. Lake Ohrid, shared with Albania, is famous for its unique species of trout and for 'Ohrid pearls' which are made up from fish scales but are actually as beautiful and irresistible as anything an oyster manages; the remote and peaceful Lake Prespa is shared with Albania and Greece. The population around here is small and tourism is still quite rudimentary – some of the loveliest spots are totally deserted, and it was easy to find great camping places where we met no one but the occasional curious local. The highlights included finding an ancient

disused road, now a rough 4WD track through the mountains to a delightful old village called Monastir, with eagles, vultures and the amazingly colourful bee eaters accompanying us.



The old road to Monastir

Finally arriving at the next town, Prilep, we caught the annual musical festival in full swing – from cheerful bands to a trio of old women squawking painfully what must surely have been a song of tragic love, or even perhaps a funeral dirge. On another day, we followed a long, winding road into the mountains, deserted but for a few shepherds from which, misled by the map, there was no driveable way beyond to rejoin the main road. Of all the camping spots, the best was undoubtedly by the edge of Lake Prespa, along which



Camp by Lake Prespa

our Azalai was able to crawl its way right to the Albanian border – indeed we may well have been temporary illegal immigrants but there was no one there to complain! Lots of water birds to watch – elegant great egrets stalking their prey in the shallows, grebes, coots, geese and moorhens, and to our surprise pelicans which look quite imperious on the water though rather less so in heavy flight. No one disturbed us, neither the couple of fishing boats returning to the distant village in the middle of the night, nor the group of somewhat sinister men walking purposefully from Albania to Macedonia for who knows what dubious purpose.



Statue of Alexander the Great

By a narrow decision, the committee of two agreed to visit Skopje, the capital city of Macedonia, and as always ended up very glad to have done so even though it meant staying in a hotel for a couple of nights. (Yet another advantage of at least our single cab Azalai over its more commodious motorhome competitors is that it is manoeverable enough to negotiate the narrow roads that dominate the middle of the most interesting towns and cities,

and small enough to park in even the most modest of hotel car parks.). Skopje, as much of this part of the world, has a complex religious history. Thus on the same afternoon we started with visits to the orthodox Church of the Holy Salvation (Sveti Spas) and saw some marvellous carved wooden iconostasis: during the Ottoman reign, Christian churches had to be lower than mosques, a restriction ingeniously overcome here by starting the building well below ground level. Next was the Mustafa Pasha Mosque, into which we were invited to enter and quietly watch the proceedings, a first for both of us. The central square of Skopje is dominated by a monumental statue of Alexander the Great on his horse. This is rather to the annoyance of Greece who feel he is their hero (and they are also perpetually aggrieved by the very name Macedonia, which they feel properly should apply only to their northern province of that name – hence the formal name of the country is the undistinguished FYROM, standing for Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).

But after ten days in this delightful country we had to press on, rushing across northern Greece in philistine mode, spending an hour and a half and 30 Euros on our visas at the Turkish border, a night in a stubble field surrounded by fields of sunflowers, and down the Geliboli Peninsular for the ferry over the Dardenelles. The town of Eceabat on the northern shore has been much smartened up since our last visit eleven years ago and now includes a dramatic celebration of the bloody Gallipoli campaign of World War 1. A heroic statue portrays soldiers, one carrying a wounded comrade, and a weeping woman. Alongside is a diorama of the whole battlefield with full-sized Turkish soldiers and their guns and trenches plus a number of spookily life-like casualties lying around.



Gallipoli War memorial, Eceabit

One's imagination races as the little ferry boat crosses the Dardanelles to Asia; from the ancient Hellenes of nearby Troy to the ill-fated Anzac forces of the last century, this spot has figured large in history.

And so to a sweep through a number of archaeological sites we'd not seen on our previous pilgrimage to Turkey. Assos is where the Aristotle lived for a while after quitting Athens and here he studied the marine life and wrote his great *History of animals*. The little coastal town is reached by a glorious, narrow road to a point high above the sea, over-looking the island of Lesbos, and where nestles a large necropolis with many of the heavy stone sarcophagi intact. Bergama is the modern name for Pergamon, famous in the 3rd century BC for its 200,000 books and for the invention of the bound book made of pages of parchment rather than the papyrus scroll (apparently the Egyptians were jealous of the Pergamon Library so banned the export to them of papyrus).

Aphrodisias is rightly one of Turkey's most impressive sites and has an excellent

museum attached with lots of Roman statues carved from local marble.



The tetrapylon, Aphrodisias

The route to Hattusas lies through the Turkish lake district, which is remarkably quiet compared to most of Europe's lake districts. A couple of hundred kilometres further northwest lies Lake Tuz, a huge hypersaline expanse with crowds of people paddling and wallowing in the heavy salt water, and stallholders selling cures for more or less any ailment and cosmetics for any purpose concocted from the deposits,

And finally, after three weeks on the road, we reached our destination of Hattusas. It is indeed as atmospheric as we'd hoped, from the dramatic lion gateway leading in, right up to the outline of royal citadel of Buyukkale high above the city.



The Lion gate Way, Hattusas

All I had really known of the Hittites was that they carved relief figures of their gods

and kings on stone walls. What we found was that these carving do indeed exist, but they are in couple of narrow, deep natural



Hittite relief carvings

ravines in the nearby rocks and are best viewed in the late afternoon sun which highlights them: beautifully executed but quite ghostly.

Turning round at the farthest point to head homewards is often an anticlimax, but when there are still 2000 miles and nine countries to cover, well, there's still much to be seen! Ankara has a dull reputation but is actually a nice, relaxed city for a couple of days' worth of civilised hotel and restaurant life. The natural history



Bee eater hovering at its nest hole

highlight of Bulgaria was coming across a sandy bank by a remote minor road with the superbly coloured bee eaters' nesting holes and the parents busy to-ing and fro-ing to feed the occupants. Being in the

Azalai, we just stopped, watched, photographed, and naturally stayed the night right alongside them!

Our plan had been to cross Bulgaria diagonally from bottom right to top left and take the Danube ferry at Vidin, but we were warned by some expat Brits of the scam operated by the local mafia there: apparently they charge about 7 Euros for the ferry, but once on board, another 70 Euros to let you off on the other side). So we chose not to risk it, and used the bridge at Ruse instead. Another piece of advice: avoid the Bucharest ring road which looks great on the map but actually consists of a single-carriageway traffic jam going on for miles.

For the rest, the journey home was fun but uneventful. Having arrived a little too late



The quayside at Gravelines

for a ferry from Calais, we experienced the total versatility of the Azalai by simply parking on the quayside at the little Channel seaside resort of Gravelines, dressing up and dining at an excellent sea food restaurant nearby, and afterwards peacefully sleeping right there, disturbed by no more than the occasional sounds of jolly passers by. Nobody seemed to mind in the least.....

Tom and Malgosia Kemp