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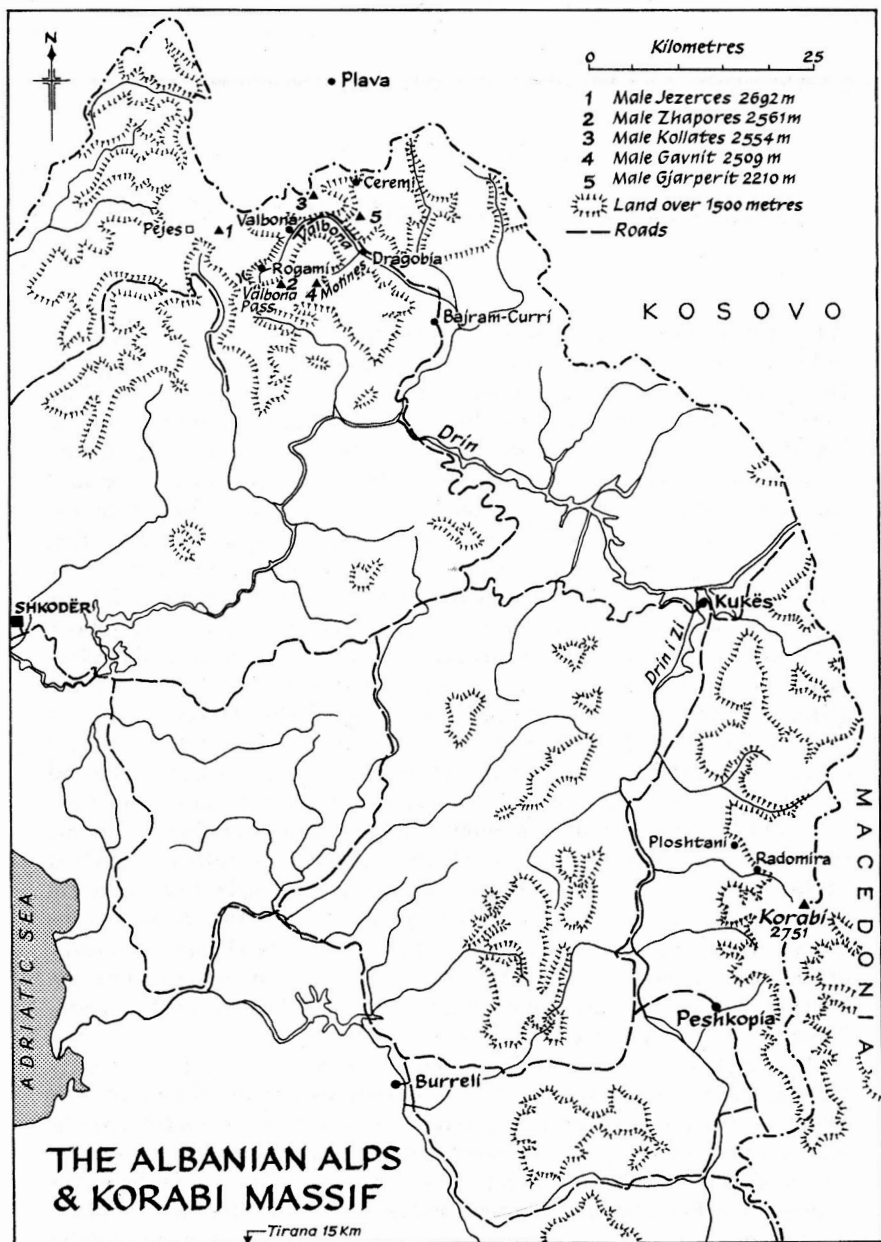
The Albanian Alps and Korabi Massif

The European Community Monitor Mission to the former Yugoslavia has its headquarters in Zagreb, Croatia. As a member of the United Kingdom Delegation to the Mission, I arrived in Zagreb for monitoring work in July 1992. This was relatively early in the existence of the Mission to the former Yugoslavia and much of the work then was centred on monitoring the fragile cease fire and attempting to disengage the two opposing sides – Croats and Serbs. Many people might conclude that what was achieved by the Mission did nothing to stop the Serb/Croat war spreading into neighbouring Bosnia Herzegovina. Perhaps that supposition is correct and history now confirms how impotent the European Community and the United Nations have been in trying to find a formula for peace and, for the latter, to impose it. However, not many people know that while hatred, slaughter and double-dealing were playing their part equally with Muslim, Croat and Serb, the European Community had despatched teams of Monitors to peripheral States to the former Yugoslavia in an attempt to prevent a spill-over of the conflict to them. Bulgaria and Hungary have minorities in Macedonia and Serbia respectively and Kosovo has a majority ethnic Albanian population.

I had been working for five months in the Serbian Republic of Krijena (those areas of Croatia which had a Serbian majority population who had ridden on the back of the breakup of Yugoslavia to gain, by force, political and military control of them and had pronounced the three regions independent Republics) when, in early January 1993, the Danish Presidency of the Monitor Mission despatched me to Tirana, Albania, to establish the Mission there and to start monitoring Albania's borders with Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia as soon as was possible.

My delight was undisguised. Not only was one heading for a country that had been closed to foreigners, particularly Westerners, for almost half a century but one was also going to remote mountainous frontier regions with unrestricted remit to walk, sleep, eat and drink there. In the words of the Head of the Mission: 'Our business of being seen by the border forces of those three Republics of the former Yugoslavia, at any time and any place, in our conspicuous white clothing and unarmed, would hopefully deter the spread of this evil ethnic conflict.' I could hardly believe my good fortune. Perhaps this is an over-simplification because, whatever interpretation I put on the job of an EC Monitor, our business was serious, in remote and unforgiving circumstances and often dangerous. A mountaineer's specific requirements one might say!

Albania is a small, mountainous country which lacks infrastructure and bears the marks of decay and repression imposed upon it by almost fifty



years of Communist rule. The new democratic era arrived in 1991 and with it came expectations of instant benefit and riches. These hopes dig deep in the cities and towns where they are fuelled by a dozen or so television channels beaming across the Adriatic from Italy. Yet a nine-hour drive to the top north-eastern corner of the country on tortuous roads

brings you into high green valleys where the trees have not been cut down, where grey spires of rock soar into the Balkan sky and where life for the scattered population has not changed for decades. This is the Valbona valley, the very heart of the Albanian Alps. The frontiers with Montenegro and Kosovo form the NW to NE fringe of the Alps and danger along the marked frontier is never far away. In Enver Hoxha's day, a fear of revisionist influence on the conduct of his 'pure' communism was manifest in the paranoic construction countrywide of 800,000 concrete bunkers and a regularly patrolled devegetated belt close to the actual frontier: the bunkers to keep the invading West (or East for that matter) out and the belt to keep the population in. These are the marks which disturb the eye, here and all along the rugged frontier, in what is otherwise a pristine, unvisited mountain paradise.

The Valbona valley is entered through a narrow gorge some ten kilometres from the small town of Bajram-Curri. It is cut off by deep snow for the four months of winter and it is only from late April that a vehicle can reach it. A dirt road follows the river's edge and gradually climbs through beech and pine forests to arrive at the small hamlet of Dragobia. The altitude of the hamlet is not great, a little under 600m, but its position at the confluence of the Motines and Valbona valleys is the herald of greater things to come. At the head of the Motines valley lies the bulky, grey E face of Male Gavnit, 2509m. It towers over steep snow slopes which, even at these southern European latitudes, lie thick until mid-June. On the opposite side and to the north, the ramparts of Male Gjarperit, 2210m, stand sentinel to a steep-sided valley a little further up towards Valbona village itself. An atrocious dirt road finds a twisted line to Ceremi, a scattered village which nestles under the frontier with Kosovo. Ram, the resident interpreter with the Monitor team in Bajram Curri, whom I, as the boss, had stolen for two days, was born here. A better man for my short visit in May 1993 would have been hard to find; his knowledge of English is excellent and he possesses a similar energy for the hills. My plan for the visit to the Alps was modest and centred on the desire to see these remote mountains which have, in the past 50 years, rarely had a foreign visitor, probably never felt the tramp of modern climbing boots nor heard the tinkle of the latest mountaineering ironmongery.

Valbona village is crowned by an ugly brute of a 'chalet'-style concrete building which was built for use by the Party faithful. It now sits abandoned with windows broken and, together with the numerous bunkers on the fringe of the village, is the only eyesore in the length and breadth of the Alps. In the ten kilometres from Dragobia the road climbs to 1000m and the snow-line is closer. Each corner turned reveals another colossus with great grey cliffs and gullies full of snow and ice. The pyramid summit of Male Jezerces, 2692m, the loftiest in the Albanian Alps, is visible from Valbona and on the jeep track a little way out towards Rogami the N face of Male Zhapores, 2561m, could be called the 'Eiger' of the valley. Two or three kilometres further on is the well dispersed village of Rogami with a border post forming the final metre of the jeep track. Attractive two-storied

houses with tiles of beech wood are surrounded by apple and cherry trees, in May just coming into blossom, and herds of goats and small cattle out enjoying the new growth. Higher up, the beech trees still had the mauve hue of winter and patches of snow lay up on the Valbona pass, our destination that day.

There is a good path up to the pass and, once above the beech forest, the only thing that lies between you and the frontier with Kosovo, some six kilometres distant, is the grey and white bulk of Male Jezerces. The Valbona river rises from beneath the scree and cascades over a cliff to disappear once again in the stony flood plain at Rogami. The track meanders up through high pastures and up steeper shale before it emerges from beneath some cliffs onto the pass at 1965m. On this day in May, with the snows of winter still lying deep on the surrounding peaks, we really felt that we were in high country. We enjoyed a picnic lunch on the pass until an early afternoon thunderstorm rolled up from the north-east and rumbled away for the rest of the day. The storm put paid to a plan to walk round the flank of Jezerces to a summer border post at Pejes, so that the Kosovo border forces could be reminded that we EC Monitors had the ability to pop up anywhere and at any time.

We spent that night in Rogami as the guest of a farmer who barbecued a lamb for dinner. The next day we walked above Ceremi and after climbing through beech forest onto open mountain we strolled in hot sunshine, through scattered patches of snow, for five kilometres along the watershed that formed the frontier with Kosovo. For the best part of the day we walked above 2000m in the shadow of Male Kollates, 2554m, following the pyramid markers of the border. Far below in Kosovo lay the town of Plava where the Albanian population were being harassed by the Serbs. There were many people in the Valbona valley who, in generations gone by, used to walk over the high passes to visit relatives down there. Ram mentioned that he had some remote cousins there but, since the borders of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were redrawn after the First World War and had carved away about 50% of Albanian territory, those people living behind the new frontier were given another nationality overnight. He had spoken with feeling and it gave rise to sombre thoughts on the walk. The views to the south and to the Alps were made more memorable by the notion that we were the first foreigners to have been able to walk along this remote frontier of the country for nearly half a century; memorable, too, because we were accompanied by an armed escort!

More adventurous plans had been made earlier in the spring to ascend Korabi mountain, at 2751m the highest peak in the Balkans west of Bulgaria. Unfortunately they had been thwarted by the weather but not before I had gained a good feel for this isolated peak. That first attempt had convinced me that return I must, but at that time I had no idea that very different circumstances would take me to the region for a second try.

Korabi is a complicated mountain with ridges, spires, faces and a dozen or so subsidiary peaks forming a massif of about ten square kilometres. The frontier with Macedonia follows the eastern edge of the massif with

many pyramid markers cemented into the steep ridges. It is remote, although a dirt road and a three-hour uncomfortable jeep ride will take you from Peshkopia to Ploshtani and Radomira, two small villages from which one launches off on foot. Radomira is the lower of the two villages and lies at a little over 1000m. At this altitude snow lies deep in winter and to venture further towards Korabi would require skis. In early April I had encountered a group of four Italians, with their Alpine touring skis, on the steps of the hotel in Peshkopia. They were heading for Korabi and I wished it had been possible to join them. They would undoubtedly be the first men to venture on skis onto the slopes of the region's highest mountain and any mountaineer would confirm that when a 'first' eludes one it is natural to be dismayed. Perhaps my chance would come at some future date and I wished them '*bon courage et bon voyage*'. In fact the weather broke during that night and luck ran out for the Italian team.

It was at about 9 o'clock in the evening on 26 June that our liaison officer in the Ministry of Defence at Tirana came running into the Mission villa to ask for a team to be sent to Peshkopia immediately since an Albanian army officer had been shot dead and a sergeant wounded, high up on the frontier with Macedonia – and close to Korabi. There was no point in leaving before daybreak. I elected to deal with the incident myself and to start at 3am with Ludovic, a tall French signaller. We gathered up rations and sleeping-bags, because it was sure to be cold up at the foot of Korabi, and a satellite transmitter which we would use to send our report of the incident to Zagreb.

We were in Peshkopia by 6.45am. It was a Sunday so there was little traffic on the twisting road through the mountains east of Tirana and the town itself was deserted at such an hour. We breakfasted in the hotel before going over to the divisional headquarters to obtain more details of the incident and exactly where it had occurred. There we met the head of border security with whom we were now to drive to Ploshtani and further up into the mountains. I knew the lower part of the track from Ploshtani because we had tried it in the course of our first attempt on the mountain but beyond that point it had hardly been used even by four-wheeled drive vehicles.

It was gorgeous weather with good visibility and the Land Rover went up the rocky and eroded track with ease. We soon found ourselves at 2200m on open grassy slopes that seemed to stretch from horizon to horizon. The views were spoilt by the profusion of bunkers that littered the mountain-side and each had a connecting trench to the next which had left deep zig-zag scars across the hills. One such trench barred further progress with the vehicle, but I was delighted by the prospect of a long walk and decided that our escort should stay behind at the Land Rover with the French signaller who had a minor injury from swimming the previous day at a beach on the Adriatic. Taking Moisi, my interpreter, with me, we joined the director of border security for the gentle two-hour walk to the scene about seven kilometres distant.

We soon gained the line of a ridge which took us parallel to and above the high valley up which we had been when we had turned back in bad weather

a few weeks before. It was interesting to be able to peer down into that valley now and see how far we had been able to advance up it. Beyond and high above our level on the ridge sat the bulk of Korabi mountain, now almost bare of snow except for pockets in the couloirs and gullies. It was known that the two Albanian army men had ascended the valley on their horses before gaining the ridge that we were walking along and they would have shared this view although probably not with the same enthusiasm. Although I had a poignant but important job to do this day, it did not stop me from admiring the scene and making mental notes of a route up the mountain.

When the investigation of the incident was over there was just time to make a fast ascent of Korabi. We returned to Ploshtani where, under a threatening sky, we prepared for a night under the stars beside the parked Land Rover on some flat ground close to the border post. While Moisi collected firewood, security from the post was arranged for the night. I cooked supper for the four of us and, after I had announced that we would be starting at 04.30, we crawled into sleeping-bags.

At 01.30 the first peal of thunder shook us and it was not long before the first spatters of rain fell. Reaction to this was a dive for the Land Rover by my three friends, while I decided to strike for cover and crawled underneath the vehicle to stretch out between the axles. This would be preferable to a contorted position inside, as I knew that real rest in such circumstances was difficult. The rain increased and soon run-off from the upper surface of the Land Rover was beginning to flood the ground surrounding my sleeping-bag. It was time to quit the spacious bedspace even though the penalty would be cramped discomfort for the rest of the night. But a major imponderable lay ahead. 'Did the sentry whose beat was around the vehicle know that I was underneath?', I asked myself repeatedly. As the flood water penetrated my sleeping-bag, I stopped worrying about the sentry and his probable adverse reaction on seeing me emerging from under the vehicle. My first priority was to get out. I began to ease sideways from under the bulging axle differentials to below the front offside door where I knew Ludovic, the Frenchman, was sitting. I had reached the point of sitting half out and half under and was knocking on the door window when the first challenge from the sentry rent the air. I knocked harder on the window, appreciating that I now had a serious situation on my hands. There was no sign of any response inside and I realised that perhaps the sound of heavy rain was drowning the rappings. I knocked even more urgently. At the same time the sentry delivered a second verbal challenge, louder than the first. There was still no flicker of movement from inside the Land Rover and I could see my life in peril. I struck even harder as I heard the sentry cock his Kaleshnikov. And then he shouted his challenge again. I trusted in my Monitor's white T-shirt which must have been visible to him in the dark and shouted '*Ingleesi*' several times. The sentry dropped down onto one knee. I shouted '*Ingleesi*' again and thumped on the window. The light in the rover went on and a door opened. It was Moisi. He said to the sentry in Albanian: 'It's OK he is one of us.'

I clambered out of the wet bag and into the back seat. The memory of the cold tacky flesh of the dead Major had gone through my mind and I wondered whether I would see the flash from the muzzle three metres away or whether it would be so quick that there would be no time for even a thought. During the remainder of the night, that close encounter with terminal danger kept my mind overactive and obstructed the rest needed before the attempt on Korabi. With the storm continuing, the decision was made at 05.30 to abandon the attempt. I wondered if there existed a spell on me and this mountain. Any further try would have to wait until my return to Albania as a tourist.

I recall Ram, my interpreter in the Albanian Alps, telling me that in the summer of '92 he had accompanied a Belgian alpinist into the Valbona valley. Shortly afterwards the Belgian had sent him a copy of an article he had written for a mountaineering journal. In it he had richly applauded his 'discovery'. Thus it may only be a matter of time before thousands find their way to what can only be described as the last virgin mountain playground left in Western Europe. I have no doubt that readers of this article will show respect for these wild and beautiful places so that others who come later can also enjoy them. But I do have an underlying fear that soon the Valbona valley, and Korabi too, will be subject to the development so evident in the European Alps, the odours of unburied rubbish and the unwelcome changes that will be inevitable to the lives of the agrarian folk who live there. In spite of this sentiment, my visits to the Albanian Alps and Korabi have convinced me that a return, one day, must form part of more adventurous plans than I was able to achieve as a European Community Monitor.

Epilogue

On relinquishing the appointment as head of the EC Monitor Mission to Albania in July 1993, I made several courtesy calls on government ministers and the President of Albania. To them I proposed that two national parks with supporting legislation be established specifically to preserve the natural beauty of the alps of the Valbona valley and the Korabi massif. Perhaps the legislation is already being prepared. I hope so.

MAPS

1:50,000 scale maps of Albania are exceedingly difficult to obtain. Great suspicion exists, still, over enquiries from a foreigner for detailed maps. This is not surprising considering the isolation that has been imposed on the country by 50 years of repressive communism. I have one set each of the Albanian Alps and the Korabi Massif and would be only too happy for them to be copied by AC members contemplating a visit to the country.*

* *I have copies of these maps and members are welcome to borrow them. Ed.*