Journey to the Blue Eye of the Accursed Mountains

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Albania has many cities, most of which are very old and very beautiful. Only one sits at the foot of the Accursed Mountains. Built on the shore of Shkodra Lake, near the border of what is now called Montenegro, this city is called Shkodër, and has been occupied since before the birth of Christ. It is perpetually renewed, perched halfway between the flow of water people inland and the slide of mountain people down to the plains below. This city has seen the rise and fall of empires, seen ideologies and rulers disappear without a trace. These days it is a living contradiction; a Muslim city filled with bars, a once communist city now home to Burger King. To visit Shkodër now is to find a city filled with cracked streets and kind people, cheap beer and cheaper rakija, and a horde of tourists seeking the one road North. This road leads to the so-called "Albanian Alps", an adopted name. The other name for these mountains is much older, coming from those who have always lived amongst these valleys and peaks. In Serbian these mountains are called the 'Prokletije'. In Albanian they are known as the 'Bjeshkët e Nemuna'. Both names mean the same thing: the Accursed Mountains. This is the story of how you get to Shkodër, how you find someone to take you North, up the winding mountain passes and deep into the snowswept karsts, until at last you reach Theth, and the Blue Eye.

First step is getting to Albania. This can be done by plane, boat or car. Flying is easiest, but crossing east from Europe by boat is a worthwhile journey, one that leaves you standing in the great port city of Vlorë. Here you can walk the promenade at night, surrounded by life, and hear Italian waves crashing against Balkan shores. The main airport in Albania is in Tirana, the capital in

the south. The descent into Albania from above is otherworldly, dropping down over crack top mountains, lone half built huts overlooking the great metropolis below, half medieval town and half blur of skyscraper crane steel and construction. The landscape repeats itself in green riverbeds and fields, landscape ridged as far as the eye can see, all stretching down to lapping Adriatic shores and white soft sands. When the plane comes to its bumbling stop on the tarmac, step onto the ground and breathe in. You will feel an immediate and powerful warmth, no matter the season or weather. Tirana Airport is huge, bright, clean, a declaration of forward intent. Step outside the terminal and this declaration starts to fade. There is no public transport here, not in the way you know it. No metro connects the airport and the city, no direct train or scheduled bus. There are two options, taxi or van. The taximen are friendly, smoking together and letting the sun pass overhead. They will haggle with you, but it is not them you need. To get to your destination you must clutch your talisman, a blurry photo of a stranger's phone, with a vague idea of some combination of name and driver. Luckily for you this driver will identify himself: at the back wall of the squealing tarmac, nestled into a row of mismatched and rusting white vans, a man sits smoking. He has a sign with huge red letters leaning against his knee: Shkodër. He is very friendly, and when you ask what time the bus leaves all he will do is laugh. You must simply sling your bag into the van and wait. Take a wander over to the nearby vending machine. It is stocked entirely with cigarette packets, a quarter of the price that you are used to. Why not indulge?

After some amount of time the man will nod and tell you it is time to go. This is the first step on the long journey north. To your left will pass more grass fields, a man on a stool hand milking a cow, rusted old tractors reflecting the slow-setting sun. To your right will pass immense black G-Wagons, half-built concrete hotels, abandoned roadside cafes. The driver will ask if you mind him smoking while he drives. Say you don't. He is the only one

who will ask. You will arrive in Shkodër in the last of the daylight, the streets warm and alive with people, the white stone of the huge mosque softly glowing as night falls. You will be offered rakija. It is locally made alcohol, of indeterminate origin and strength, stored in a petrol can and dispensed into plastic bottles. Say yes. It will be delicious. You will forget your own name, along with those of everyone else.

To get from the city into the Accursed Mountains is easy enough. There is a bus every morning, although as you will have learned by now both of these terms are relative. If you stand by the roadside at eight in the morning, shivering with the cold of a rakija hangover, eventually an insane orange vehicle will appear, packed to the brim with a mix of locals and tourists all clinging to whatever upholstery they can. Pay the driver cash, and don't worry about the destination. You are going all the way, to the very end of the road. The crazed rocking of the vehicle on the half-paved roads, the stink of cigarette smoke and the local music blaring from a speaker wedged into the door will lull you into a half-sleep. This semi-doze is necessary for survival as you leave the plains, climbing hairpin by hairpin out of the valley and into the high clean air of the peaks. The roads up here are narrow, half made of gravel and ice water with immense drops to farmland below. At around nine the driver will pull over to a cafe. Dismount blearily, and find inside the owner and your driver having a breakfast drink. You may choose to join them or not. If not, you can watch the impressive variety of animals penned inside another man's truck lumber heavily around each other, steaming and groaning in the chill morning frost. The road peaks once, briefly, suddenly arriving at the only flat bit of mountain top, giving view of blue-black slopes and white caps fading into the far distance. The van will turn nose downward and dive into the valley, driver singing merrily away.

Your accommodation will appear improbably, a few chalets

perched halfway up a sheer drop, both resembling and populated by goats. This is Theth. The breakfast is good, the rooms are pleasant, and when the sun drops behind the shoulder of the valley the peaks opposite glow briefly orangegold, grey desolate stone becoming molten for a few seconds. To get to the Blue Eye will be a little more complex than the journey so far. In brief: stand in the little car park anxiously checking Google Maps to see if you can make the hike. Rediscover, again, that Google Maps does not work here. Look so confused that the ever-present Dutch couple take pity on you and offer you a lift (the Dutch shall inherit the earth, in all of their campervan and bicycle glory). En route navigate an honest-to-god landslide blocking the road (the Dutch just drive over it), battling nausea from this near-death experience until you reach the base of a river, nestled between immense gloom of mountaintops, with the clearest water you have ever seen, a blue-green glass flowing from Eye to sea. Begin to understand what you are seeking. Cross rickety fairytale wood bridges, held together with wire and hope, then follow your intrepid leaders up the thin trail. Try to forget the pictures they showed you of their children as they leap from rock to rock. Follow for two hours up and over, white gravel slipping into vast chasms below, until at last you turn a final corner and see it; the Blue Eye of the Accursed Mountains. Formed, eons old, by meltwater pounding down the karsts and gouging a hole deeper and deeper into the rock below, here the bluegreen water deepens to an almost cruel blue, painfully cold even in mid-May heat. The freefall water thundering into the pool throws up spray, glinting in weak sunlight, booming through the valley. The rock here is carved with the scars of centuries, limestone corroded away by icecold water and carried a hundred miles to the warm sea below. Reflect on your journey to this point, leaving the heaving city in the south to follow the long road north, to Shkodër, then further, up, up, out of civilisation, navigating people and place to at last plunge your aching feet into water recycled a thousand thousand times, water older than humanity,

water older than you can imagine. Stand refreshed at the heart of the Accursed Mountains, and know their name. When you finally make it home, Google this place. TripAdvisor calls the journey "great for ages 5-75".