

Bosnia 03

We left Rosyth on 5th November 2003 aboard the Superfast Ferry Bound for Zeebrugge in Belgium. Our Task was to deliver an Ambulance and assorted Medical equipment used in the rehabilitation of children with limb defects. The centre for this work being The Institute of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation in Banja Luka. We also intended to drop off some Carpet Weaving material to a centre in Sarajevo. The Team was made up of Chad Hudson, Director of The Emergency Services Promotions Department which sponsor I.F.R.A. Myself, Andy Beveridge Fife Fire and Rescue Service and I.F.R.A. and Sanel a Bosnian, returning home and acting as Interpreter for us on the journey.

The Ferry crossing was uneventful and on arrival in Belgium we made good progress through to Holland. We got a bit lost around Valkenburg but eventually were back on track and making our way down through Germany to the Austrian Border. The intention was to camp but due to the freezing conditions we decided to find cheap accommodation. Our first night was spent near to Hockenheim.

The next day we continued on our way down through Germany and into Austria. It was dark when we got to Austria and we missed out on the spectacular scenery that that we were amongst, although the mountainous terrain was just visible against the dusk sky. We stayed that night in Graz, which is where we were to depart from on our homeward Flight.

The next day we crossed the Austrian border into the unknown. Soon we reached the Border with Slovenia. The crossing was smooth and for my mind things seemed to be going well. (I was about to receive a wake up call). We reached the Border with Croatia where we had been told papers were in place to allow us to cross through Croatia to the Bosnian Border. They were not there. The office dealing with our Spedition was closed as it was Saturday and we were effectively stuck in no mans land. The Croatian authorities were very hostile in attitude and I felt physically sick as there seemed to be no way out of the predicament we were in. Sanel pleaded with the Spedition clerk to allow us to buy a Guarantee, which we eventually negotiated down to 300 euros. The border guards were still not happy to let us through as they were picking fault with the load and the vehicle as well as being very intimidatory towards Sanel.

On to the Bosnian Border crossing which had now changed from Bihac to Gradizca. On arrival at the border we started to notice the burned out shells of houses and bullet riddled walls. The Border Guards were just as friendly here and intimidation seemed a way of life to them. We obtained insurance for the Ambulance and were sent to a customs pound where I became aware that the Border Guards had kept my Passport.. The Spedition clerk in Bosnia basically told us that there was no way the red tape mess that we had been landed with could be sorted out and we were at the point of admitting defeat. But we were able then to head for Kluj and wait out the four days till we could return to Graz for our flights home.

We were staying with a family in Kluj. Pajo, Emira and Keno were brilliant. I think they sensed our despair and made life as tolerable as possible. Pajo arranged for us to go fishing and meet some of the locals who were all brilliant. In spite of the obvious poverty life in Bosnia is much like anywhere else. The Bosnians are very proud of their Country and quite rightly so. It is a beautiful mountainous region and and if marketed in the correct manner would become a Mecca for tourism.

On the Monday we received a surprise phone call to say that the red tape had been sorted out and that we could collect the Ambulance and deliver it to Dr Miroslav Zotovic in Banja Luka. We headed back up to Gradizca and collected the Ambulance. After a tense time we finally met up with Dr Zotovic who guided us to the Hospital. He gave us a tour. The conditions were very basic. The kids were all happy and their Mums were with them and it was obvious there was no shortage of Love for them Parents and Staff. Chad seemed to be quite badly affected by what he saw. I just felt as though we were intruding. Mission partially complete we headed back to Kluj via a street corner cabbage stall where Pajo bought Eight sacks with ten cabbages in each. All the food in Bosnian households is home made and the cabbage was to be pickled. (Glad I wasn't having to chop them).

We visited the Local Fire Station, which was an eye opener. The first line appliance is two years younger than me. Not giving my age away but it was 41. They are grateful for the help they receive via I.F.R.A. but desperately require more. They are particularly short of extrication equipment for use at R.T.A.s

We bade our farewells on the Tuesday morning and headed for Zagreb driven by Pajos son in law Semir. I had been communicating with Pajo the whole time in German and translating for Chad. It was exhausting at times and the opportunity to speak English to Sanel and Semir and have them translate was a relief. We arrived in Zagreb to find the trains on strike so had to make hurried arrangements to get the Bus to Graz. We set off early the next morning on the coach for Graz. I by this time was physically and mentally drained. Our trials were not over yet though. We were stopped and given special treatment yet again by the over zealous Border Guards at the Croatian and Slovenian Borders. On reaching Austria it was like being let out of jail. We spent a comfortable night in Graz the first of the trip before heading home via Stanstead. A worthwhile experience but I personally felt quite traumatised for a few days after returning home.