

A BALKAN CIRCUIT.

THREE COUNTRIES, THREE LANGUAGES, THREE ALPHABETS, THREE CURRENCIES by Francis B. Randall, October 2014

Fortunate in my travels, I had been to northern but not southern Albania, much of Greece but not its northwest, and much of Yugoslavia but not its southernmost republic, Macedonia. But an excellent English travel agency, Kirker Holidays, arranged a journey through just these three areas, so I leapt before further debility confines me to my recliner.

Twenty years ago, in 1994, my daughter Ariane and I were able to be one third of an early American group to get into then just post-Communist Albania. Things were Spartan. Stalinist hotels only sometimes had electricity and running water. Roads were decaying. The statues of the certifiably paranoid Communist dictator, Enver Hoxha (misruled 1944-85) had been pulled down, but the 70,000 pillboxes he made his peasants build, to ward off his expected attack by Americans, Yugoslavs, Russians, and Chinese in concert(l?) were still everywhere. His autarkic factories had shut. Unemployment was enormous. Tens of thousands of Albanians were fleeing to Italy or anywhere. But everyone was super- friendly to us, such rare foreign visitors- and the native Albanian dishes we were served were absolutely delicious.

Our trip was called, "High Albania; in the Footsteps of Edith Durham". She was one of the remarkable series of intrepid Victorian Englishwomen who boldly explored the wilder parts of the decaying Ottoman Empire. In spite of English warnings and Ottoman prohibitions, she left the regional capital, Scutari, one day in 1908, and trudged up into the wildest Albanian mountains with wilder bandit people, until she reached the Alpine valley of Thethi, beneath the Accursed Mountains, where she saw 3,000 armed tribesmen pledge an end to all blood feuds in honor of the then new Young Turk revolution in Istanbul.

Eighty six years later, our sturdy jeep-van left the same city, now Shkoder, beneath a sensational castle, by the largest lake in the Balkans, and chugged for hours up a not quite built road. Ariane ate our picnic lunch sitting on a pillbox. After more hours, we reached the mile-high pass, and descended the thousands of feet to Thethi, improbably without shredding our tires. An idyllic Alpine village of solidly built wooden houses, amid fruit orchards, below pastured slopes. No more warriors, but a few friendly soldiers with whom we could partly communicate in Italian and Russian. Some mountaineers now trek from Thethi over the Accursed Mountains to Montenegro, but Ariane and I have not yet met anyone else who's been to Thethi. On the way back, we took a decrepit launch down cliff-girt Lake Koman. The nineteen year old captain let twenty one year old Ariane steer for almost an hour. Albanians were then much engaged in the World Cup matches in futbol. Ariane one night joined a crowd that wildly cheered Italy's semi-final victory on TV. Some men fired their rifles backward over their shoulders. Who knows in whom the bullets landed? Alas for Albania, Brazil beat Italy in the final, in a penalty kick in overtime.

The Kirker trip would be different. Our plane landed at a small but snazzy new airport, not by a shed on a grassy field. It is now named in honor of the Albanian Mother Teresa. A German-built superhighway took us to our sumptuous hotel, where electricity, water and everything worked, but where native Albanian dishes were never served. The capital, Tirana, and the port, Durres, were bustling with traffic, commerce and construction. They illustrated Randall's Third Law of History, that the last century has seen an almost universal shift from picturesque poverty to less picturesque, concrete, crumbliness. No one was hostile, but the former exuberant friendliness had subsided. After years of crisis and years of calmer progress, Albania, though still one of Europe's poorest countries, had obviously Gotten On. (Albanians are the last remnant of the once widespread Illyrian peoples of the western Balkans, speaking a sub-branch of the Indo-European languages. After the terrible barbarian and Persian invasions of the Roman Empire in the mid 3 Century AD, nine Illyrian generals became Emperors, and saved Rome for centuries- including Claudius Gothicus, Aurelian, Diocletian, Constantine, and later Justinian. As in Roman times, they now use the Latin alphabet, modified for Albanian sounds. Their name for their country, Shqipëria, is pronounced ShchipoREEa, and means Land of the Eagles. Albanians are 67% Muslim, 20% Catholic and 10% Orthodox. They are now moderate Muslims. Albanian Muslims don't chop off the hands of thieves, encase their women in black shrouds or stone them for sexual activity, or blow up civilians, Muslim, or infidel. Their independent currency is the lek, equal to one American cent.)

* * * *

KRUJA. Our first Albanian hill town. Above magnificent pine forests, at some 1500-2000 feet up the steep slopes of a 3500 foot ridge, the town's fine old houses in the trees are marred by some new concrete buildings. It is crowned by a ruined castle, from Illyrian through Turkish times. It is Albania's national shrine town and tourist site, for it was the stronghold of Albania's national hero, Gyergy Kastrioti, known as Skanderbeg, 1406-68. He fought the Turks in twenty five battles, losing only two. In that castle, with only 375 defenders and 2,000 men outside to disrupt enemy supplies, Skanderbeg held off three separate Turkish armies each of over 100,000 men, in 1450, 1466 and 1467. Popes hailed him as the Paladin of Christianity. He died in 1468, his sons fought each other, so the Turks took Kruja in 1478, dug up Skanderbeg's bones to feed their soldiers to absorb his strength- and presently converted most Albanians to Islam. Albanians, Christian, Muslim or Communist, hail him as the defender of Albanian independence against foreign invasion.

Skanderbeg was obviously a grim character to tangle with, but one charming story survives. During a brief truce, Skanderbeg in battered armor and soiled leather clothes went to the silken tent of a silk-clad Turkish vizier in his jeweled turban. "Why do you fight us?" demanded the vizier. "We are a great empire. We've beaten everyone from the French to the Persians. What can your band of mountain bandits hope to gain?" "Loot," said Skanderbeg. "I'd like to become rich. What do you fight for?" The Turk drew himself up, proudly, and said, "For honor!" Skanderbeg stroked his vast beard thoughtfully, and said, "Isn't it strange? Each of us is fighting for what he couldn't

possibly gain".

The castle's walls, towers and ruins are splendidly picturesque, with immense views. The former keep was rebuilt by Enver Hoxha, to his daughter's designs in Stalinist style, as a museum to the greatness of Skanderbeg. A fifteen foot plaster statue in full armor and fuller beard glares at us in the lobby. Large Socialist Realist murals show his battles. Documents and mementoes, furniture, and weapons, sing to his glory. It is Eisenstein's and Prokofiev's film, "Aieksandr Nevskii", frozen into a museum. Down below, a "native bazaar" sells all kinds of tourist souvenirs, including that vanishing item, postcards.

* * * *

BERAT. A very different hill town, on a hill above a rushing mountain river, another splendid castle beetles over the landscape. Within its ruinous walls are many old houses, churches and mosques. Its steep alleys of sharp stones brought out the decrepitude of my feet. One former church of the Mother of God is now an icon museum to a notable 16 Century icon painter, Onofri (St. Onofrios, the ascetic Egyptian monk who dressed only in a crucially centered, five foot beard= Humphrey, as in Bogart.) To our group's disappointment, the museum was shut, because of the Muslim Feast of Id.

Berat was the only town in southern Albania that my daughter Ariane and I got to, twenty years ago, so I well remember Onofri's bright red capes and deep blue robes on his Mothers of God, his special cast of Her faces, and his intricate Feasts of the Church from an icon row, all within the Late Byzantine or Macedonian style.

On lower hills by the river rise ranks of two-storied, late Ottoman houses, whitewashed, each with two rows of black-surrounded windows. This unusual, dense effect has earned Berat local fame as "the city of a thousand windows" or, as our excellent Albanian guide, Ilia Grillo, insisted, "the city of one window above another". There we saw some small mosques and were taken for lunch to a local restaurant that served us our only authentic Albanian entree of the trip, casseroles with pieces of lamb in a kind of omelet flavored with sour cream.

Twenty years ago, Ariane and I were then taken to a disused monastery, Ardenice, just made into a rustic hotel. We spent the night under warm, sheepskin bedcovers. In the morning, a large centipede crawled out of Ariane's.

* * * *

BUTRINT. At the southern tip of present-day Albania are its most famous Classical ruins. In Roman times, Buthrotum - now Butrint - was a vital Mediterranean port where many Romans landed on their way to Greece or the East. Now it is a scatter of ruins under noble trees on a circular bump of a hill jutting from a mountainous bar into a long lagoon connected by a two mile waterway to the Ionian Sea. In that sea we could see the mountainous island of Corfu, in Greece, for there was the Corfu Channel, whose international waters Enver Hoxha strewed with mines in 1946, damaging two British naval vessels, an early Cold War clash.

The day we were there, it rained, and it rained and it rained, reinforcing the wabi-sabi autumnal atmosphere of the season- and the ruins. The trees dripped the rain on us and the soggy woody paths. Ancient stone enclosures were filling with water. The ruin clusters were discontinuous in the forest. The largest had been the Roman baths, with a small theatre attached. Then a small Roman forum. A small Roman villa on the shore. Presently a round 6th Century Early Christian baptistery: a few broken columns around a splendid mosaic floor of seven concentric circles of birds, animals and vegetation- all back-covered in sand "to protect it from the rising waters" GRRRRRRRI And beyond, the only intact building in Butrint, the 6 Century Early Christian basilica, whose walls and aisles were standing, though its rooves had collapsed. Isolated by Enver Hoxha for decades, Butrint has reemerged on the tourist circuit as a cruise ship stop between Dubrovnik and Corfu.

* * * *

DODONA. And so, with no hassle at the frontier, into Greece. The Greeks, of course, speak a language in a different Indo-European sub-group from the Illyrians, and use a modified version of their own ancient alphabet. Disastrously, they decided to give up their own currency, the drachma, and adopted the euro. This surrendered their power to use monetary policies that might have helped their economy to Germany, which painfully deepened their recent depression. But the Greek one euro piece has on its reverse a delightful replication of the ancient Athenian drachma's archaic- and goofy- Owl of

Athene. Northwest Greece is Epeiros (=Epirus), in ancient times wild and barbaric, in modern times isolated and poor. Almost trackless through the Greek Civil War of 1944-49, there are now roads- and three years ago the Germans opened a superhighway all across Northern Greece, more than reviving the old Roman road, the Via Egnatia, which the Greeks call the Egnatia Hodos. The few bustling, crummy concrete towns seemed much like those in Albania.

So, east, over higher mountains. Our excellent English tour leader, Andrew Allen, rueful that we had missed the icons of Onofri, decided (Bless him!) to compensate us by taking us to the ruins of Dodona, the oldest Oracle of Greece.

Before 2000 BC, the pre-Greek people of the area came to reverence a great Oak tree standing alone in a high valley beneath 5,500 foot Mt. Tomaros. They came to regard it as an Oracle of the Mother Earth Goddess, whom the Greeks called Gaia. Crazy priestesses, barefoot, never wash the sacred earth off their feet, living only on the Oak's acorns, sleeping out under it through all seasons (BRRRRRRRI), listened to the rustling of the Oak's leaves and predicted the future. Sometime after 1900 BC the proto-Greeks arrived and took the Oak-Oracle over for their own Sky-Rain-War God, Zeus. Gaia became Dione, an earth-goddess consort of Zeus. Presently Zeus' (sane, shod) priests ringed the Oak's mighty trunk with a circle of bronze tripods, touching each other so that the slightest touch of any of them reverberated clingingly for some time. From the clanging, the priests predicted the future. (But what if the priestesses and priests disagreed?) Dodona was the oldest and theoretically highest Oracle of Greece- but way off there in the northwestern wilds, it was often neglected in favor of the younger

Apollo's much more accessible Oracle at Delphi- as it is by modern tourists.

Apparently, the Oak stood alone for over 1500 years. Only in the 4 Century BC did they build a tiny temple, dozens of feet from the Oak, which was later slightly enlarged three times. And then a low temenos (=sacred enclosure) wall around the whole Oak area, which was made higher, later. King Philip of Macedon built a bouleterion - a council house - some ways off and later a prytaneion - a guest house. King Pyrrhos of Epiros - of the Pyrrhic victories over Rome- built a splendid theatre into a nearby hill, the most striking ruin in the group. And later, more small temples. But never a large one to Zeus. Late in the 4 Century AD, the Christians chopped down and chopped up the then almost 3,000 year old Oak, including its roots, lest it regrow- and built an Early Christian basilica, now itself a ruin.

Difficult to reach until lately, Dodona is now only a little south of the superhighway. We paid our respects to the various ruins, and wished well to the new oak, planted after the Greek Civil War, which is flourishing, but not yet worthy of Gaia or Zeus. I gathered up some of its acorns in case I should ever want to predict the future.

Dodona is a deeply moving place.

* * * *

IOANNINA. East over the high Pindos ranges and down to the crummy · concrete city of Ioannina. It did not figure in history till the late 18 Century. An Albanian, Aliof Tepelani, whose father and two elder brothers had been burnt alive by the Turks, postponed his revenge, ingratiated himself by serving the Turks, and in 1788 was made Pasha of the Ioannina district. For the next thirty two years he gathered strength, expanded his power through what's now northern Greece and southern Albania, became increasingly independent, and built mightily. He was allied with Napoleon and after him with the British. Napoleon is said to have sent him a book, with 100 franc notes between the leaves. Pasha Ali of Ioannina is said to have written back, "I enjoyed the book. I look forward to the second volume". He entertained intrepid Western travelers, notably Lord Byron, who sang of him as a noble barbarian (but noted his revolting cruelty). At last, in 1820, the Turks sent an army large enough to drive him out of Ioannina to his death. But the next year the southern Greeks rebelled against the Turks....

Pasha Ali of Ioannina's grandest construction was his Castro, his citadel-town. It is a rough square with rounded corners, about 1200 feet to a side, built northeast on marshy ground out into the mountain Lake Pambotis. It is surrounded by a surviving complete circuit of walls, of crude stonework compared to ancient ashlar. Most of it still inhabited old houses, but the north corner and the east corner, both jutting out into the lake, preserve his own mosques and the ruins of his palaces. The ruins of his harem-palace- a sad sight. But the harem mosque is intact, and just outside it is Pasha Ali's open air tomb. Another intact building now houses a museum of Orthodox icon of the Ioannina district, probably not to Pasha Ali's taste. A smaller building houses a Treasury- of local silver work and jewelry, probably more to Pasha Ali's taste. So passes the glory of the world- but Lord Byron was there, in Pasha Ali's glory days, and his own.

* * * *

METEORA. (Accent of the second syllable.) The only site on our journey well known to those on the tourist circuit, and to those who might read this. On about two square miles in northern Thessaly, millions of years ago, an enormous plug of friable rhyolite conglomerate reared up into the sky. These have eroded into thousands of round edged pinnacles, some stubby short, some pencil thin, some small mountains over 100 feet across, up to 700 feet above the valleys roundabout. Not like the spiky orange sandstone pinnacles of our Bryce Canyon National Park in Utah, but like the blunter, dark, rhyolite pinnacles of our Chiricahua National Monument in Arizona. The rocks alone would make them a national monument in America. But from the 14 Century, Alpinist monks, to get away from the world, clambered up some of the pinnacles and established small monasteries- twenty four, eventually, now tops became primary in fostering Meteora.

Famously, the only non-Alpinist ways to reach the monasteries used to be by baskets hauled up on long ropes by creaking windlasses in the buildings on high. The young Lord Curzon visited Meteora in the 1880s, and asked an abbot, "How often do you change the ropes?" Puzzled, the abbot replied, "Why, when the ropes break, of course". Think a moment of the implications of that one! Endless, heroic flights of steps have been carved into the soft rock in the last century to reach the monasteries way up there. But tourists still snap photos of the garbage cans of refuse still being let down by windlass and rope, especially from the Vaarlam Monastery, to hauling points below. A popular postcard shows a monk crouching in a loose rope-net bundle halfway up (or down).

Inside, the monasteries are not so ancient or so notable for frescoes and icons as those of Mount Athos, But they share the intense, dark, crowded, claustrophobic, religious aspect and atmosphere of small Orthodox churches everywhere. James Bond and his Russian rival Oscar Homolka tussled over the decoding machine Lector in the pinnacle-top court before the Grand Meteora Monastery. In 1995 I was fortunate (and still agile) enough to go with a group that was shown through four monasteries. Most groups, including ours, must be content with two. If I had to pick just one, it would be the Roussanou Nunnery, not on the tallest pinnacle, but tiny and most improbably clinging to an utterly sheer one, against a great void. There is nothing quite like Meteora anywhere, in nature or religion. As Sophocles didn't quite write,

Many the wonders of earth

But none is more wondrous than Meteora.

* * * *

BITOLA. Three hours driving through rather empty parts of Thessaly and Greek Macedonia, mostly oak-forested hills, brought us to the border of Greece and- well, there's no agreement- The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greeks insist; plain Macedonia, its citizens assert; Slavic Macedonia, travel agents say, to identify it. Both it and present Greek Macedonia were the heartland of Philip of Macedon's warlike kingdom, before his son Alexander extended it to India. In the early Middle Ages, Southern Slavic tribes, speaking still another sub-group of the Indo-European languages, swept down from the north. The group that became Serbs and Croats settled in most of

the West Balkans. The group that became Bulgarians and Slavic Macedonians settled in Bulgaria through the Macedonia into central Greece. In the late 19 Century, as the Ottoman Empire crumbled, Western travelers discovered that Macedonia, which the Ottomans still held weakly but atrociously, was inhabited by at least sixteen nationalities all mixed together, making future just boundaries impossible. Not just known peoples, Serbs and Bulgarians, Greeks and Turks, Albanians, and Jews, but unknown groups such as the Vlachs and the Pomoks, who needed to be identified then as now. A French wag chef invented a new salad of sixteen kinds of fruits and vegetables chopped up on lettuce and called it "la macedoine".

In the first Balkan War in 1912, against Turkey, Greece seized ("liberated") southern Macedonia, and has held it ever since, ethnically cleansing it of many non-Greeks and high-pressure Hellenizing the rest. Bulgaria seized ("liberated") northern Macedonia, insisting that its Slavic majority spoke a dialect of Bulgarian. In the Second Balkan War in 1913, against Bulgaria ("There'll be war in the Balkans in the spring! Tra la!"), Serbia seized ("liberated") northern Macedonia, insisting that its Slavic majority spoke a dialect of Serbian. And so on through two World Wars and Royal and Communist Yugoslavia. When Yugoslavia split up in 1991, its federated unit called Macedonia established its Independence. The Serbs were annoyed, but didn't invade, as they invaded Croatia and Bosnia. The Bulgarians have snooted it ever since, still insisting that they speak a dialect of Bulgarian. (What IS the difference between a dialect and a language? Michael Collins, the great Irish terrorist who more than any man made Ireland independent, once said, "A language is what is spoken by a people with a state and an ARMY".)

But the Greeks were furious. How dare those "Slavic scorpions" steal our immemorial name of Macedonia? Masses of posters and placards screamed, "Macedon is ONLY Greek". And how dare they steal Philip of Macedon's rayed sunburst emblem for their filthy flag? Greece vetoed Macedonia's entry into the UN, and closed the border, so that Macedonia's vital export, spring vegetables could no longer reach their West European markets through the Greek port of Salonika. The Greeks had some fear that their incompletely Hellenized Slavs in Greek Macedonia might want to join their northern brothers. They had a completely paranoid fear that tiny Macedonia would invade Greece. When I was in Greek Macedonia in 1995, the roads north were clogged with Greek tanks going up to repel an imagined invasion by the Slavic Scorpions.

Things have calmed down a lot in the last twenty years. Both we and Macedonian spring vegetables could get across the border. Macedonians in fact speak an-ex-Bulgarian language with much Serbian in it, using the Serbian variant of the Cyrillic alphabet. Their currency, like that of Yugoslavia, is the dinar, worth about two American cents.

Soon we were in Bitola, in Ottoman times the regional capital, called Manastir. Macedonia was the poorest part of the former Yugoslavia, but the bustling crowds on the main, pedestrian, crummy - concrete street of Bitola were like those of Albania and Greece. One of the mosques is one of only two in the Balkans to be lined inside with

Turkish Iznik tiles- but it was shut. There was an important Jewish community in Manastir - until the Nazis in 1943. The Ottoman military academy where Mustafa Kemal studied to be an army officer still stands. At the edge of the city are the ruins of Philip of Macedon's foundation of Herakleia Lynkestis. A fine display of ruined nothings. The mosaic floor of the larger of the two Early Christian basilicas includes a splendidly fierce Early Christian dog. Our lunch was our only example of authentic and delicious South Slavic food-a variant of moussaka- or had the Slavic scorpions stolen that from the Greeks,too?

* * * *

OHRID. Where the three countries meet are the Prespa Lakes, about twenty miles long, 2,800 feet up in the mountains. They have no outlet, but their waters leak through the porous limestone ridge northwest into the more famous Lake Ohrid, mostly Macedonian, partly Albanian, nineteen miles long (N-S) by eight across, 2300 feet up in its ring of mountains. On its eastern shore is the historic hill town - city of Ohrid (Okhrid in South Slavic languages). The hill is capped by another splendid Illyrian through Turkish castle, which preserves an impressive west gate between round barbicans. Tsar Samuel, one of the great Bulgarian empire builders, made Ohrid his capital at the end of the 10 Century AD. But in the early 11Century, the able and atrocious Byzantine Emperor, Basil Bulgaroctemos (the Bulgar Slayer), crushed Samuel, killed 100,000 Bulgarian troops, and blinded another 50,000 and sent them staggering home in the dark. So he boasted; so we probably have to believe him.

And so, from 1037 on, Byzantine Greeks, again in Ohrid, rebuilt and frescoed its Cathedral of Agia Sofia (the Holy Wisdom).-- I am or was an historian of Russia and Eastern Europe. This has given me a profound sympathy for the tragedies of the Eastern Orthodox Christian Churches and peoples- the elder brother of Christianity-- who have dwindled irreversibly over the last millennium, while their younger Christian brothers in the West have grown aggressively, and have transformed Christianity, themselves and then the entire world. Orthodox religion and arts must be studied in their great holy cities, Constantinople and Moscow- but also in crucial sets of far-flung monasteries: in the Judean, Sinaitic and Egyptian Thebaid deserts; on Mount Athas; way east of Moscow in Vladimir, Suzdal and the River Nerl- and in the Orthodox lands of the former Yugoslavia. Only last year was I able to explore and drink in the arts and spirit of six great Serbian monasteries in southern Serbia, Kossovo and Montenegro. Only now was I able to complete my bliss in the monasteries in and near Ohrid.

For the story begins in the Cathedral of Ohrid. Orthodox for over four centuries, it was seized by the Turks for a mosque for over four more centuries, and the polytheist frescoes were whitewashed over. But Royal and especially Communist Yugoslavs meticulously removed the whitewash and revealed what is now the outstanding example of Byzantine painting from the 11Century. For a post-Justinian Orthodox church, it has a long frescoed channel and a sizeable, frescoed apse. In the blue conch of the apse with a green stripe below, a majestic frontal Mother of God, in a dull red cape over a dull blue robe, sits on a grand brightly multi-colored throne, holding up before her the Christ Child in a white mandorla (He embodies the Holy Wisdom). On all the

walls and vaults are successive Christian scenes, from the Sacrifice of Isaac to the Ascension of Christ (borne up by four swirling angels in even more swirling drapery) to the Deeds of St. Basil the Great and St. John Chrysostom. Serbian and Macedonian patriots, and many historians of Mediaeval art abroad, see here the beginnings of the Late Byzantine Renaissance, which outlasted the Empire, in which evermore dramatic compositions, dynamic figures and striking colors marched toward a greater expressiveness and a greater realism. This movement spread to Italy in the 13 Century, where it made the Italian Proto-Renaissance...and the rest is history.

Farther up the hill is another major shrine of Orthodox art, a church which guidebooks and art historians called Sveti (=Saint) Kliment. Not anymore. Sv. Kliment and his disciple Sv. Naum established Christianity firmly among the Slavs of Ohrid in the 10 Century. Kliment was buried in a church that was seized by the Turks 500 years later for a mosque. His body was moved to another church, then named for him, which stayed Christian. But in 2002 Kliment's original tomb-church was rebuilt, and he was moved back there, and it was renamed for him. The Sv. Kliment of the books is now the All Holy Mother of God Peribleptos. "Peri" is Greek for "around" and "bleptos" is "gazed". In Latin (and French, English, etc.), it became "ad"= "to" and "mire"= gaze. The sense is that what is gazed around or at is intensely to be approved of (=admirable).

Sv. Kliment/the Peribleptos is a major shrine of Orthodox frescoing. Built and frescoed by then conquering Serbs, rapidly, in 1294-95, it retains its complete, overall program. In the conch of the apse the Mother of God, now not frontal but slightly bent and twisted, stands in a blue robe and dull red cape – Orans - praying with both arms up (without Her Child)-against a blue conch above a broad green stripe. She looks across the naos (=inner hall of the not large church) to its back wall. This is completely covered by a large, very complex scene of the Dormition of the Mother of God, Who lies on Her bed, with Christ Her Son behind Her, taking up Her soul, as a newborn swaddled baby--with all the Apostles, and every other character in Christendom, in varied and agitated attendance. This is the masterpiece of Ohrid. There are many, many other scenes, and sequences in the Peribleptos, which you can't want to hear described without a long slide show or a fine art book. If the Cathedral's frescoes have great hieratic dignity, those in the Peribleptos are more complex, more dramatic, and dynamic, more expressive, more "advanced", more Renaissance....

There are other churches in Ohrid. The tiny Sv. Iovan on a point jutting into the lake.... But enough of that.- We were taken in a boat for an hour and a half ride south and east along the curving shore of the lake. Past the flat new town and its tourist hotels, past the "Riviera" of more hotels and villas, including one of Tito's, on a small headland, past a fishing village, past an archaeological reconstruction of a prehistoric wooden lake town, on stilts in the water (toward which Bilbo the Hobbit and the Twelve Dwarves were floating on and in barrels), past fine forests and 7,500 foot mountains in a national park. The waters of the highland, mountain-girt lake were indeed preternaturally clear. We could see thousands of black minnows and hundreds of eight inch long black fish. Were they among the ten out of eighteen species of fish in the lake that are endemic?

And the varying late lights on the mountains and the waters....

We landed by an enormous spring, boiling into the lake like a river. We climbed a bit to the Monastery of Sv.Naum, on a terrace over the lake. It is at the border with Albania, which was set there in 1913 to preserve Sv. Naum for Serbia. The saint was buried there, and a new church was built and frescoed for him in the 14 Century, at the height of the Serbian empire. Patriots and the Faithful believe that is what we see. But the church got lurked and was rebuilt in the 16 and 17 Centuries. Is that what we see? Unpatriotic, skeptical art historians say the complete frescoing of the present church was done as late as 1806. If so, the artists had a remarkable talent for archaic recreation.

But that is not the way to approach Sv.Naum. For Ohrid and its lake were also holy places for Rebecca West, whose 1100 page book about her journeys through tragic Yugoslavia in the 1930s, "Black Lamb and Grey Falcon" is arguably the greatest travel book ever written. Every page drips with mixed admiration and acid. She loved the Serbs precisely for their (alleged?) primitiveness, never more so than in most primitive Macedonia- as she scorned the British for what she saw as their hypocrisy and corrupt pseudo civilization. But she hated Orthodox Christianity, and all other anti-pleasure and anti-sex Christianity. She wrote (p. 736 of the Penguin edition),

"So we went straight into the church, which is the supreme example of the Serbo-Byzantine architecture that burrows to find its God. It is small, it might be the lair of a few great beasts. There are a few narrow windows, and most of them are slits in the cupolas. If it were not for the candles burning in front of the icons the dark outer church and the darker inner church would be hardly more distinguishable than the walls of dungeons. The gilded iconostasis here shines only with a dim coppery gleam. There is a curious smell here, strong yet clean; the two squat columns that divide the churches are based on the living rocks. A low door leads from this darkness to a darker place, where there is the tomb of Sveti Naum....

"On a fresco above the tomb was a portrait of Sveti Naum, almost certainly by someone who knew him. He was the successor to Sveti Kliment, the first Christian missionary to be sent... into these parts, and he had to bring not peace but a sword, since none of the persons involved had yet heard of peace. He looks a warrior...."

Amen!