

Robin Hanbury-Tenison, *Land of Eagles: Riding through Europe's Forgotten Country*. I. B. Tauris, London, 2009, 204pp. (ISBN 978-1-85611-8556).

Well known for far more than his many books recording remarkable horse-rides through untravelled areas of the world, Robin Hanbury-Tenison (founder of *Survival International*) formulated the idea of riding through the last country in Europe which he had not visited. The achievements of the following two years must create a record. Robin and his wife, Louella (who was High Sheriff of Cornwall), completed their month-long ride through the least inhabited regions of Albania, from the northern 'Forbidden Mountains' and all the way down eastern Albania. Additionally, in those two years, he has also made a film (available on DVD), and wrote and published the book. The remarkable journey served several purposes: it has already widened the readership on, and increased positive awareness of, the country and its people; it has given a plug to the Balkans Peace Park; and it has suggested new tourist destinations.

Not only the appealing cover draws a wide range of readers. Written in a lively and amusing manner, Robin also intersperses detail of horses and their needs and variety of personality and those of their riders, with snippets of little known historical facts, and relevant literary allusions and quotations from earlier travellers of all sorts. He emphasises the strong links between Britain and Albania over many centuries, and follows routes described in print and in paint by Lord Byron, Edward Lear and Mary Edith Durham (all very well-known figures in Albania). A more recent British visitor to Albania was David Smiley of the SOE British forces in Italian-occupied Albania during the Second World War, with whom Hanbury-Tenison recorded one of his last interviews before Smiley's death, this year.

By choosing the least known areas of Albania, the north and the east, the Hanbury-Tenisons travelling on horseback closely emulated the mode of travel of the writers and historians whom the author quotes. In place of a retinue of porters on horseback which accompanied earlier travellers, they were supported by backup vehicles to meet them with tents and food each evening. For anyone considering such a trip, it should be noted that these arrangements, although carefully planned, invariably fell apart in one way or another, demanding of these riders extraordinary initiative, patience and stamina. Despite avid reading of every available map, the riders invariably came off course—with almost no signs even on the roads, how much harder still to find the way across mountain paths! Amongst the difficulties described

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throughout the book is the perhaps unexpected intrusion of ‘a drug in Albania’: mobile phones (even in the remotest areas)—so alien to the peaceful equestrian mode of travel. Many of these intrusions spoiled potentially idyllic quietness, but as the journey progressed, reliance on them increased and it was the lack of signal which added immensely to difficult detours which should have been avoided. Horse-lovers will particularly appreciate the concern and care lavished on all their several steeds described along the route.

What is of particular fascination is the discovery that, unlike, apparently *any* other country in the world (and Robin has been in far more than we could count), the space between one village and another in Albania does not guarantee *any* kind of path between the two. It is not clarified whether this is due to the tremendous out-migration of Albanians from the rural areas since the fall of Communism in 1991, though he does remark on many abandoned buildings and even whole villages. All the more importance of local guides—theirs varied greatly in competence and helpfulness.

We read how, as in so many countries recently emerging from Communism, there is a huge rise in the amount of garbage, without much attention to recycling. In earlier decades every part of every item was put to full use—there has not been time to adjust to the massive import of plastic and cans, nor funding available to organize proper disposal.

A point which needs correction, is that concerning the state of the beautifully renovated church in Thethi (funded by Albanian-Americans early this century) which was not ‘burnt down by the communists’ (20), (though they did dismantle the bell-tower). This was like so many of the 2,137 religious institutions the communists closed to religious use during the 23 years of their enforced atheist state (1967–1990). Most such institutions were put to other uses, though the buildings were little maintained. Thethi’s Catholic church was used first as a grain store and secondly as a maternity ward (that need has still not been re-supplied in the whole wider area since the fall of Communism in 1991). Transhumance *is* still practised in this area, though each year as the oldest generation dies, and most young people want to shift from subsistence farming, the numbers moving up to summer pastures for months at a time, are decreasing.

This book is an answer to Robert Carver’s over-sensationalized *The Accursed Mountains: Journeys in Albania*. Hanbury-Tenison provides gentle appreciation and

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highly researched information, though it is a little worrying that in his undisguised identification of many whom he encounters, it is not always to their credit.

The book is supplied with a clear map (other than the printer's error of turning the Lura Lakes into a train station!), some pleasing photographs, and a couple of Lear cartoons of horse-riders. There is a useful short bibliography, for those unfamiliar with Albania. Thank goodness the publishers changed their plan to feature a Chinese mountain on the book's cover, and replaced it with a genuine Albanian one photographed by Ann Christine Eek.

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