The strain of the climb was over, and the road rounded the final bend to reach the summit of the 5,250-foot pass between Lake Prespa and Lake Ohrid.

Noon, above the shoreline and in the cooler air, I was pedaling freely. I had only a dim memory of my sweaty struggle with the eight miles of loosely coiled road that took me from the shores of Lake Prespa and several miles in each direction across wooded slopes before it made its final approach into the neck of the pass.

Once in the narrow pass, I looked up to the crest for signs of Macedonia’s once-tense border with Albania — a country that 20 years ago was a tightly controlled hermit state in the North Korean mold.

On the way, I counted fewer than six cars and not one fellow cyclist. The handful of people enjoying a barbecue dinner by the side of the road looked at me with incredulity and made unintelligible comments that nevertheless sounded encouraging.

Despite being late September, it had been a very hot day, and I had lingered over lunch in the shade of a closed bar by a beach on Lake Prespa, hoping that the temperature, which was approaching 100 degrees, would subside.

When I eventually set off alone late in the afternoon, I was worried that I wouldn’t make the summit before dusk and I’d miss the view.

Elated to arrive before nightfall, I dallied at the summit. There I looked down on Lake Ohrid 3,000 feet below to watch a passenger ferry heading out of the Albanian port of Pogradec, creating a white wake in the deep blue water.

On the hillsides around me, an alchemist was at work as the short yellowish grass glowed golden in the fading sunlight. Only when the sinking sun graced the mountains on the Albanian side of the lake did I remount and give in to the indulgence of a fresh trout and a tall cool beer.

I had begun my six-day tour of western Macedonia four days earlier in the mountain town of Kruševo with my guide for the first part of the trip, Christine Moore, a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer from Los Angeles. Christine had lived in Macedonia for three years, advising start-up companies and learning the language.

Along with other volunteers, Christine was instrumental in encouraging a young entrepreneur, Zoran Grozdanovski, in setting up Cycle Macedonia, the company running my tour, and getting it to the stage where it was ready to accept paying customers.

Perhaps the poorest country in Europe, Macedonia is still coming to terms with the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, of which it was a constituent republic. Every idea to get the economy moving is a classic chicken-and-egg situation — that is, which comes first, the visitors or the investment?

Peace Corps volunteers aware of the work of Adventure Cycling back home hit on the idea of introducing Macedonia to cycle tourists as the best way of building the rest in neighboring Bulgaria.

Progress has been made and several successful tours have taken place, but when we wheeled our bicycles out into the small square behind the church in Kruševo, it was clear that the sight of a bicycle loaded up with panniers still had the potential to cause a stir.

The men drinking coffee in the café under the lime tree put down their cups and turned to look, and the street sweeper stopped gathering up the fallen leaves to lean on his broom and stare. Only the butcher, who was adding up his sales on a stool outside his store, remained engrossed in his task.

When we had loaded up with snacks and fruit, we set off downhill on a narrow street lined with bright white villas topped with red tile roofs. On the edge of town, an ascent led us around ski slopes and to the resort’s only ski lodge, and to the other side of the mountain and a mammoth downhill that would take us into the wooded valley of the Crna River.

While we remained above 4,000 feet, the temperature was pleasant for cycling. However, the valley floor that lay far below us was already hidden in a heat-dancing haze.

The thrilling downhill made for an excellent start, and the guilt that I felt for not having earned it passed readily.

Besides, the easy start was only part of the reason we started from Krusevo.

To understand Krusevo, what went on there, and why it is so important to Macedonians is to understand modern Macedonia and its precipitant.

Small and landlocked, the modern republic is but a small part of the all-conquering ancient kingdom of Macedonia that was ruled in the 4th century BCE by the father of Alexander the Great. The biggest part of the ancient kingdom now lies in Greece and the rest in neighboring Bulgaria.

As a result, Greece regards the current state of Macedonia as an anomaly and vociferously objects to its choice of name. Thanks to Greece, Macedonia has struggled for recognition since the 1991 break up of the Yugoslav republic.

Using its veto, Greece has blocked Macedonia’s membership in the European Union and NATO. Anxious to compromise, Macedonia changed its flag and was admitted under the provisional name of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia or FYROM for short. The U.S. is one of the few governments that recognises Macedonia as its official name.

To steer around such controversies, Macedonia considers the relatively recent Ilinden Uprising of 1903 that took place in Kruševo against the long-ruling and often brutal Ottoman Empire to be the pivotal moment in its history.

For 10 days, rebel fighters held out against the Ottomans, and for 10 days, Krusevo was a free republic. Inevitably, the rebellion was crushed and the rebels martyred.

Every year on August 2, Macedonians make a pilgrimage to Krusevo and its mountain top memorial to celebrate their independence. More than that, it has been decided that the town will remain in a 1903 time warp. Walking the streets of Krusevo will reveal craftsmen working as they would have done over a century ago.
Nuts & Bolts: Macedonia

While I was in Macedonia, I was the guest of Cycle Macedonia, the company set up by Zoran Grozdanovski with the assistance of volunteers from the U.S. Peace Corps.

I joined a shortened version of their standard tour that involves six days of cycling and two rest days, although there are cycling options available on rest days if you’d like.

The tour is 171 miles and starts in Skopje and ends in the ancient city of Ohrid.

Maps: I was unable to find any detailed maps of Macedonia, but my guide, Christine, relied on her own maps and her garrulous grandchildren.

While cycling was rarely unpleasant, and the cycling was hardly challenging, it was hard to feel odd among the world’s biggest city in Macedonia. While we were the novelty, it was hard to feel odd even though we were the novelty.

Throughout the trip, our fellow travelers were a constant source of color. In villages heavily-painting, dogs would force us to go around, whereas horses running free would move off, let us pass, and then return to block the road.

A family of Roma gypsies traveling in the opposite direction made good time on a flatbed wagon pulled by a pig. At the center of the wagon, the matriarch in a colorful headdress provided a proper figurehead.

As it was September, the fields were also full of men and women working hard to bring in the apples and the tobacco, which they would hang in garlands by the side of the road to dry on barn walls.

When we stopped by the roadside to collect our thoughts or drink deeply from our water bottles, we soon had company.

The Roma would stop to discuss their endless preoccupations across Europe in search of work, and farmhands would approach to make a spontaneous gift of apples.

At times, I felt that my journey resembled an anxiety dream in which I never reached my destination. Stopping at a grocery store for supplies and some advice resulted in an invitation to enjoy a cup of mint tea in the storekeeper’s cool garden.

Sandwiched between the apple orchards, the tobacco fields, and the world’s biggest city in Macedonia, it was hard to feel odd among the world’s biggest city in Macedonia. While we were the novelty, it was hard to feel odd even though we were the novelty.

As we were able to stay in the saddle, the cycling was rarely unpleasant, and I found that the guidebook warnings of numerous reckless drivers were wide of the mark.

On almost every road, the older cobbled road underneath threatened to burst through the asphalt. On the high road near Pelister Peak (the highest peak of Baba Mountain) between Bitola and Lake Prespa, the road remained for the most part in its original cobbled state.

When climbing, the cobbled surface added at least 10 percent to the effort that was required, and on the furiously fast downhill to Lake Prespa, the curving arrangement of the small cobblestones proved maddening to the eye. However, a new highway is planned for the locals so, we had the old road to ourselves.

Once we were on the west side of Pelister Peak heading south towards Greece and Albania on the road by Lake Prespa, the minarets of mosques outnumbered the domes of Orthodox churches, and the regular calls to prayer often rang in our ears.

Only on this beautiful but empty blacktop road did the road signs express the destinations in both the Cyrillic and the Latin alphabets. On all other occasions, I had to defer to Christine to know where we were and where we went.

As touring cyclists, we blended easily with the hodgepodge of vehicles we found on the roads, and I would like to think that our philosophy of promoting a low-impact means of intimate travel, by which you determine what things, fit well with the Macedonians’ ethos of simple kindness, especially for weary travelers.

Hotels are rare, and I think the experience of taking a room in a Macedonian

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The blacksmith works between his anvil and his hearth, and the cooper shapes his wooden barrels by hand.

Ilinden Uprising and some understanding

wooden barrels by hand.

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were no different from other grateful and weary travelers who had done so over the previous seven centuries. The room was basic, the bathrooms were lopsided iron bath. In a stern warning, the priest told us to return from dinner before outside, and the single shower was over a stone wall. The Ultimate Scottish Cycling Book

**Daily chores.** A Macedonian woman cleans her fishing nets on the shores of Lake Ohris.

In the early-morning gloom, I was awoken by the sound of soft voices singing in an ancient monastic harmony that resembled Gregorian chant. The monks and nuns emerged from shadowy corners and processed across the courtyard to the church at its center.

Many wars in the past have disrupted this continuity, but newer generations have rediscovered it. Macedonia is looking for the features of its past that will justify its future. I doubt that cycle touring will have much impact on the country’s future, but I do believe cycling will enhance rather than detract from its progress, and perhaps it will persuade Macedonians to keep certain things as they are.

I left Macedonia convinced that it is a destination well suited to cycle touring, and I know that as awareness grows many more two-wheeled tourists will follow. For the time being at least, Macedonia remains a travel rather than a tourist destination, and experiencing it by bike will leave you open to its charms. 

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**Bicycle Tour Operators / Advertisers**

We can’t necessarily vouch for them, but feel their support makes them worthy of highlighting here. A more comprehensive list of tour operators is available at adventurecycling.org/cyp.

**Adventure Cycling Association**
adventurecycling.org/tours
800-755-2453

**Adventure Corp**
adventurecorps.com

**Adventure South**
advsouth.co.nz
865-479-9297

**America By Bicycle**
abike.com
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**Bike Tours Direct**
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**Daily chores.** A Macedonian woman cleans her fishing nets on the shores of Lake Ohris.