

In the small Croatian village of Vrpolje, some 10 miles north of the border between Croatia and Bosnia, we stopped in the shade and spread out our map of the Balkans. Up to this point in our month-long tour across Eastern Europe — the first long trip my girlfriend Lindsey and I had taken together — we had chosen our route with the help of cyclist forums and online mapping services. Now, though, we were about to cross into Bosnia and Herzegovina, and we'd need a new strategy.

The country (often referred to simply as Bosnia) is literally off the map: EuroVelo's cycle touring routes don't cover it, and Google Maps didn't work in the nation when we traveled through, making Bosnia, which is about the size of West Virginia and just as mountainous, the only country in Europe in which we'd have to rely on old-fashioned maps and our ability to ask directions. We were also a bit nervous. The Bosnian War in the 1990s had left unexploded land mines in the countryside, and we'd have to be careful where we pitched our tent.

While we looked over the map, a middle-aged man on a cheap orange mountain bike rolled up to us. "Where are you going?" he said in halting English. We told him we were riding to Sarajevo.

"There is nothing across the border," he said. "It is all destroyed." He introduced himself as Marko and explained that he grew up in Bosnia and had been forced to flee during the war. "There are no more Croats in Bosnia," he said.

We had originally decided to ride into Bosnia because we had read that the cycling was excellent. We knew little about the country's recent war, Europe's bloodiest conflict since World War II, when perhaps as many as one out of every 20 people in the country perished in the early 1990s.

Much as I had thought we'd discover our route across the country as we traveled, I had also hoped we'd learn more about what had torn the nation apart. Bike touring is the ultimate full-sensory experience. There are no better history and geography classrooms than the seat of a touring bike.

Our research over the previous week had given us a basic understanding of the country, but we remained confused, and almost any description (including the one we provide here) is a

simplification. The Bosnian identity is extremely complicated, largely because of the nation's history. Over the past few hundred years, it has been governed by the Ottoman Empire, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, and Yugoslavia.

To the east of Bosnia is Orthodox Christian Serbia, and to the west and north is Roman Catholic Croatia. Both were also part of Yugoslavia. Bosnia's population is made up of three main groups: Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, and Muslims. During the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 90s, Bosnia's citizens voted to secede from the communist nation. Almost all Serbs, though, fearful of becoming a minority in the new country, wanted to be part of neighboring Serbia. Serbia, unlike Croatia, had not yet seceded from Yugoslavia. With the assistance of the Yugoslavian army, Bosnian Serbs attacked the non-Serbian parts of the nation, including the capital, Sarajevo. For the next few years, Serbs, Muslims, and Croats fought for control over the new country's territory.

From our rest stop in the shade, we pedaled to where the meandering Sava River separates Croatia from Bosnia. The border between the two

off the map in Bosnia

Story and photos by David Kroodsma

in Bosnia, spoke freely about the war. He had been a teenager and too young to fight, but his brother had fought in the Serbian army, somewhat against his will. "We were pacifists, we didn't want to shoot anyone," he said.

He — as well as other English-speaking residents of the Republic of Srpska — seemed to defend the Serbs,

to leave. Although cranes were busy rebuilding the city's largest mosque, only a few Muslims had returned.

Nonetheless, Tihomir had stories to share that suggested progress. He had led a protest against the mayor of Banja Luka, and the protest was joined by Muslims, Croats, and Serbs. It is one of the first examples, he said, of the once-

turquoise rapids flowed between steep green walls. The road had been blasted into the canyon, and the rock faces curved over our heads. Traffic was light, but the steep rock left little margin for error. We were thankful for Tihomir's advice. Following his route, we turned off the main road just before it entered a long dark tunnel. Bosnia's engineers are quite fond of tunnels, and almost all major roads have them, making such highways less palatable for cycle tourists.

Away from the border, we encountered fewer burned-out buildings, and we forgot for a moment that we were riding through a war-torn country. The roads led us upward — 3,000 feet of climbing in 45 miles — and into deep green mountains with rounded tops. A road sign cautioned "MINE" in large red letters, and a map showed a few forested areas that hadn't yet been cleared of land mines from the war. Tihomir had assured us that most places were safe, and said that if we had any doubts, we should just ask locals. We stayed in a tent that night on the grassy lawn of Boro, a grey-bearded artist whose sprawling property had a stream so pure we could drink straight from it. A guest of Boro's told us that their rivers were so clean because the war had destroyed all of the country's industry.

The following day, after we descended from a traffic-free 3,000-foot pass on smooth pavement, a family roasting a goat on a spit waved us down as they stood in the shade next to their small wooden home. A man, probably in his 40s, extended a shot glass, spoke some Serbo-Croatian, and urged us through body language to take a sip. We determined the clear liquid to be *rakija*, a delicious homemade plum brandy that is popular in the region. For my second drink, I raised the shot glass and said "Bosnia and Herzegovina," as if toasting the country. The man shook his head and finger disapprovingly. "Republica Srpska," he said confidently, making his allegiance clear. Like others we had met, the man seemed to consider himself a citizen of the Serb Republic, not the country of Bosnia and Herzegovina. We finished the brandy. Then an older lady limped over to the nearby house and

THE MAN SHOOK HIS HEAD AND FINGER. "REPUBLICA SRPSKA," HE SAID CONFIDENTLY, MAKING HIS ALLEGIANCE CLEAR.

or at least said that the international community blamed them too heavily for the war. I found these statements, as well as the copious Republic of Srpska flags, somewhat disturbing. According to most accounts, the Serb forces had been responsible for most (although not all) of the atrocities. Sixteen mosques were destroyed in Banja Luka during the war, and almost all Muslim and Croat residents had been forced

warring factions joining together for a cause. "It has been all over the news," he added. Tihomir has also promoted cycling at a national level, working with his counterparts in Sarajevo.

After a night at the apartment of someone we found on Couchsurfing, we left Banja Luka and started riding south, following the route Tihomir suggested. It first followed the Vrbas River into a deep canyon, where bluish



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Abandoned villages in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina near the border with the Republic of Srpska.

brought back another bottle. We left before we were obliged to drink more and carried with us, wrapped in tin foil and plastic, a leg of the goat they had insisted that we take for lunch.

After a 2,500-foot climb through one of the country's many verdant river canyons, on a nearly car-free paved road — and after a night hidden off the road in an area where many people shook their heads yes when we pointed and said, “Mines?” — we reached the border between the Republic of Srpska and the

Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was overcast, and despite the heat at sea level the day before, we now needed our arm and leg warmers. The road followed a high plateau at an altitude of about 4,000 feet, almost entirely above tree line. We passed bombed-out ghost towns, some adjacent to thriving towns. In the emptiest village we rode through, along a bumpy dirt road, only about one in every 30 homes still had a roof and was occupied. Some of the buildings had “HVO,” the initials of a Croatian militia,

spray-painted on their side. We passed an unkempt Muslim graveyard where tall grass grew between the crescent-adorned gravestones. Then we passed a much better-kept Orthodox one, where the lawn between the crosses was freshly mowed. The Muslim residents of this town had most likely been forced to leave during the war. Hearing only the bouncing of our wheels on the car-free dirt road and riding under a cloudy sky with a treeless horizon, we felt as if we were in an enormous graveyard — with empty homes for tombstones.

Rejoining paved roads, we descended from the highlands and passed through small vibrant towns. Some had churches, some had mosques, and some had both. All had curious children playing in the street. We spent the night camped behind a house on the banks of a large turquoise reservoir. We hadn't needed our Serbo-Croatian (which consisted only of the phrase “Tent, one night?”), because our host spoke English. He invited us to his porch where his wife served us pita, beer, and a tomato salad. After the neighbors joined us, we learned that several religions were represented at the table as they joked that we should have more to drink and then they could marry Lindsey and I. “We have the Pope and the Imam here,” they teased, indicating they could perform either a Catholic or a Muslim wedding. We went to bed unmarried and left the next day for the capital.

Sarajevo is a long, narrow city surrounded by rolling mountains that made great cover for the army that once encircled it. Signs of the past war were everywhere. Countless buildings, many Communist-style high-rises, were riddled with holes from shrapnel. Some sidewalks had divots with concentric spattering around them, likely from grenade strikes. Yet, unlike the ghost towns of the countryside, the city was bustling. New buildings with reflective glass were either under construction or already standing. One burned-out five-story building, which was now just a huge rusting metal frame, was covered with billboards advertising cell phones and department stores. And the historic, largely intact downtown was full of tourists and locals. It felt as if the city was still defying the siege.

Unfortunately, the city also defied cycling, as Sarajevo has a total of only 800 meters of bike lanes. It is one of the few places in Bosnia and Herzegovina that was unpleasant to ride. Bicycle advocates in Sarajevo told us that cycling has been increasing every year but they have yet to get support for more bikeways.

We went on a walking tour with a few members of the youth Rotary Club. Mahir and his friends showed us around the downtown, explaining that Sarajevo is like a “mini-Jerusalem” — within just a few blocks, you can find a Catholic church, an Orthodox church, a Muslim mosque, and a Jewish synagogue (although the city has few Jews as most fled or perished in the Holocaust). The city is about half Muslim, and we were there during the holy month of Ramadan when many Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. Mahir didn’t fast — only about half of the inhabitants were that observant, he said — but he did abstain from alcohol. We ate more pita and also more *cevapi*, a serving of juicy, spicy sausages between pieces of flatbread, another high-calorie cycling favorite.



Can anyone spare some vowels? A road sign in the Republic of Srpska.

Mahir lived in Sarajevo during the war, and although he was a young child when it started, he remembered what it was like to live in a city under siege. In 1992, after the country voted for independence, Serb forces encircled the city with tanks and started shelling. Sarajevo miraculously held off the militia but only barely — many supplies and almost all weapons were smuggled into the city via an 800-meter-long tunnel that linked it

to Bosnian-held territory. Mahir told us that his family had lived so close to the front line that he could hear the soldiers taunt each other. His family spent days in the basement while the city was shelled. “How did they do it?” we asked. “You have to go on living,” he said.

As luck would have it, a friend of Mahir’s was a cycle tourist, and like Tihomir in Banja Luka, he looked over our map and advised us on the best

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route to Montenegro. After a day and a half in Sarajevo, we left the city to cycle the final two days across Bosnia. These roads did not disappoint. We dropped into an impossibly green canyon with a pristine river and then climbed into high grasslands beneath granite peaks where we passed by thousand-year-old tombstones left by a now extinct sect of Christianity. The road led us back into the Republic of Srpska, past a few more burned-out villages and graffiti that told of a more violent time. We left the country and rode into Montenegro on a steep climb overlooking yet another deep blue reservoir.

Bosnia and Herzegovina was just part of our tour through Eastern Europe, but it was the most memorable portion of our journey. We had entered the country without a plan and left it with a handful of new friends and vivid memories of the country's scarred landscape and resilient people. The bikes allowed us to meet individuals in the countryside and also made it easier to make contact with people in the major cities because they were interested in meeting us and giving us advice as we rode across their country. We might have learned more facts about the country in a classroom, but we're more likely to remember what we experienced on a bicycle.

Tihomir, as well as other bike advocates we met in Sarajevo, said that everyone in society benefits when more people ride bikes. Cycling across a country is an implicit statement of peace. It is a declaration of confidence in a society, showing that a nation is friendly and safe enough to ride through. Perhaps what is most remarkable in a country that endured civil war just two decades ago – where ghost villages still dot the countryside – is that cyclists can make this statement by pedaling across it. According to Tihomir and other bicycle advocates we spoke with, the number of cyclists in Bosnia and Herzegovina is increasing. 

David Kroodsma and his then-girlfriend, Lindsey, are now married (although the marriage was performed by neither an Imam nor the Pope) and in the process of cycling from Turkey to Myanmar. David is also the author of The Bicycle Diaries: My 21,000-Mile Ride for the Climate, about his solo journey from California to Argentina. See more at rideforclimate.com.

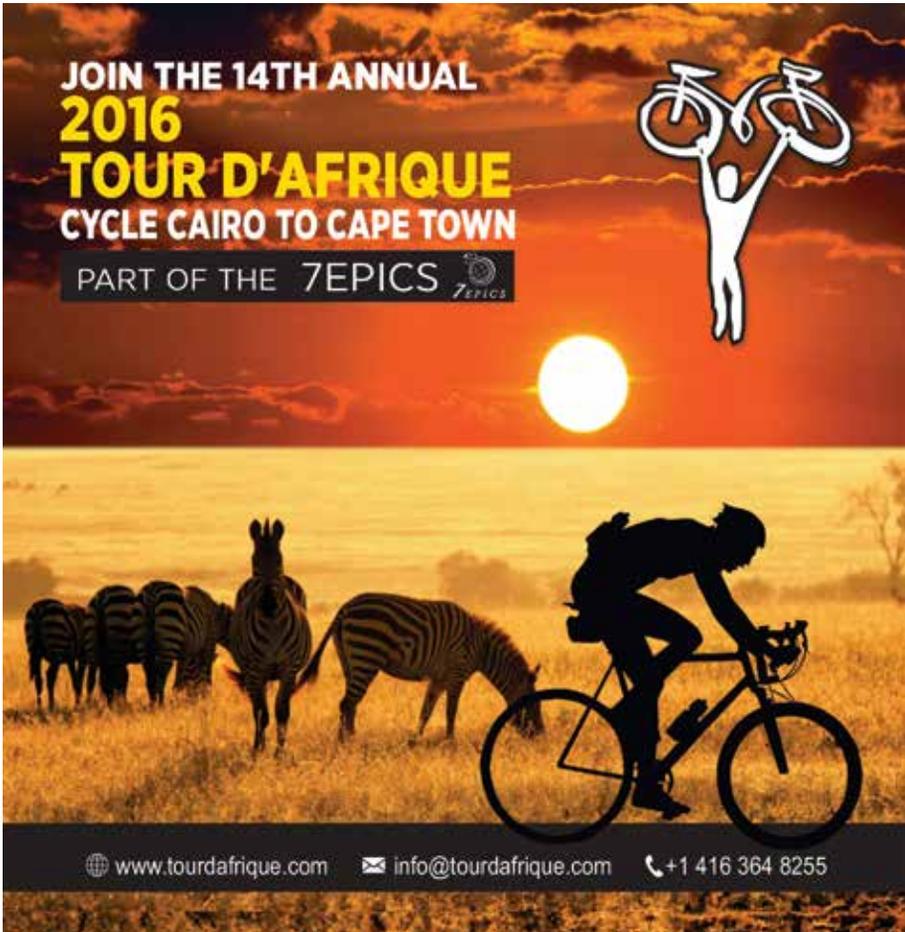


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