

Frank Otta's

# Kosovo Tippler Tour...

Well, when I parted with Daniel, his son and cousin, and David and his mom, and I decided to drive to the outskirts of Osijek and get a motel room over there. There was only one motel on the way where there was a wedding reception going on – music, laughs, pairs strolling in the heat of the night... So I decided not to pay for a night during which I could not sleep and drove on about 10 more miles where I found a perfect, quiet place to park my car and sleep on the back seat (alone) for about five hours. Then I set out on the road again. Good 700 km ahead of me.

When I pulled to the highway tollbooth, the day was just breaking. Since the Croatians and Serbians had a war not long ago, there is no road sign in Croatia pointing to Beograd (Serbia). So I had to ask the tollbooth attendant which way to go. He was obviously bored after his night shift in the middle of nowhere so we had a cigarette – his approach was fantastic: “Have you got a Marlboro?” he asked. When I said I smoke Ronsons, he pulled out one of his own. During the chat he asked for my point of destination. When he heard Kosovo, he shook his head in amusement but said nothing.

From then on it was highway driving, all the way to the city of Nis. In Serbia, they speak more languages and use two different alphabets: latin and cyrilica (Russian alphabet). I can read both alphabets but I think the peoples who use those two different alphabets do not like each other very much since one guy comes and blackens out the cyrilica text on the directional road sign and the other guy comes and scratches out the latin version of the city's name. It's really tough for a stranger to get bearing. In Nis someone reversed the signs. The route number to Kosovo (according to my map) pointed towards Bucharest (Romania). Luckily, after 10 miles driving I realized I am surely heading east instead southwest and I turned back. But the back lines of the highway were closed, so I took a road parallel with the highway. When I was entering Nis again I was clocked 87km/h in a 50 zone. The police was very polite and their radar was equipped with software that shows you the amount of your fine right on the spot. Mine infraction cost 40EUR. After some bartering, we agreed on 20EUR no receipt... This is Balcan, gentlemen – who does not know it, do NOT enter, please☺ I do not mind entering, because I realize the people there must make a living and it is going to cost me some extra money.

Nis is the breaking line of the cultures, I think. You will see jackasses pulling carts full of wood right in the city.

The driving habits of the locals are different too. When they see a green changing to yellow at the traffic light, they accelerate up to 100km/h. One almost got me☺ From Nis the road started to be worse and worse – and, in a contra relation, the landscape looked better and better. Again, no road signs pointing to Kosovo. In Serbia it was still good, since I can communicate in their language. How did I get to Kosovo?

Well, I am happily driving up a steep hill – no truck ahead of me, all of the sudden there is a line of cars waiting. “Ha, I say to myself, RR crossing”. I looked at the metal crash barriers running along the road: “Why the hell have they drilled so many holes in it?” It wasn't a RR crossing, it was the border crossing, and the holes were made by the bullets shot from very heavy machine guns. Without any indication I came to the Serbian customs zone. The police house was just behind the sharp curve. 30 cars ahead of me and I waited 3 hrs, so I had the time to observe. Terrible heat, a baby crying, no toilets, never mind there was no refreshment stand, I had my own water in the car. Ditch full of waste – a ten-year-old Swiss girl added a pet bottle to that heap of garbage with a grimace of resignation in her face – the Swiss are one of the cleanest people in EU.



*The wait before crossing the Serbian/Kosovo border*

The Kosovo side is guarded by the KFOR and right at the beginning there was a high sand bag fortification of the Czech Battle Group. The Serbians really loved me. Nevertheless, they let me through. When I was entering the KFOR zone, I read a sign that indicated the international EU car insurance is not valid in Kosovo. In a while, when I entered Kosovo, I knew why☺ However, I could buy the Kosovo car insurance at the border crossing – the cheapest 15-day policy for “just” 50EUR.

Kosovo is, in my opinion, a country now completely isolated from the rest of the world - politically, economically, geographically, and culturally (the old architecture tells you it was not like that before). 90% unemployment rate, as Mustafa told me. Unbelievable. I am telling you this not to knock the Kosovo people down (they are great, very hospitable people) but to point out the flaws in our system. I do not believe we cannot do anything better than to bomb out Serbian Beograd and send troops to Kosovo. The Kosovo people do not trust any authority anymore it seems to me. And I would not trust either if I were in their place.

Well, back to the car insurance. People in Kosovo drive slow but make unexpected turns and stops, also the pedestrians and buggy riders are crazy – they do not yield☺ The kids running across the street to the few public swimming pools I saw on the way do not look both ways before they cross the road – they do not look one way☺. Because of the high unemployment, most of the cast iron street drain covers are gone. Once in a while there is a deep ditch all the way diagonally across the road to take the mountain water away. The ditch was originally covered solid with cast iron grating, now there are just two plates for the car wheels. I cannot imagine, what would happen if I did not know the road and was passing a truck at night.

When I came to the capital of Pristina, it took me longer than an hour to cross it. Again no signs – road in the town and no road out it seemed. Pristina is a typical Middle East city. Ladies do not talk to you on the street. Most people speak Turkish. I was running low on gas. Maybe I could make it to Prizren on the gas I had in the tank, but I no longer had enough cash in EUR. I needed to use my Visa card and Pristina looked like a good place to do so. I think it is a city of 300 thousand inhabitants (Mustafa will correct me if I am wrong). I pulled in to many gas stations – cash only. Finally, I found one that accepted my credit card. The only problem was that the gas station attendant, in spite of the fact he spoke German and English in addition of his native languages, did not know how to operate the computer. We came to the agreement that he will pump a full for me, add a 1/2 EUR to the price and I will take care of the computer business for him. It worked to my great relief☺

I arrived in Prizren in mid afternoon and went to the Theranda Hotel as we had agreed on with Mustafa previously. But there was no Mustafa waiting. It wasn't because he did not want to wait, it was because Zeljko Fajdetic misunderstood me in Crkvenica and wrote to Mustafa that I was going from Crkvenica home (which I was just to take my family home from vacation and to

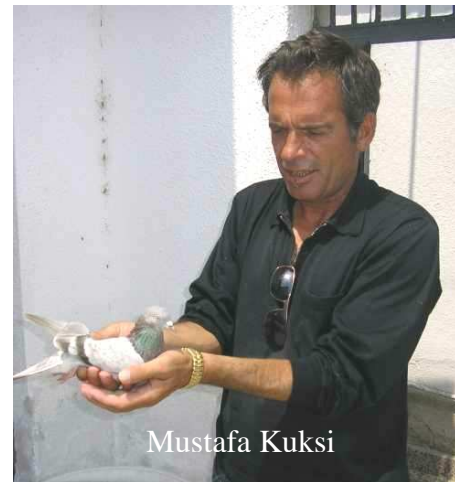
bring the Fajdetic tipplers home as well). There I had a short sleep and set out for Osijek and Kosovo alone.

Well, the hotel receptionist knew Mustafa. He promised me he would find him for me. The receptionist was a pigeon man too (he keeps Serbian Highfliers) so we had a nice chat about pigeons and I showed him my recent pictures from my notebook. I checked in the hotel hoping to exchange some CZK for EUR in a bank the following day to pay for the room.



*The view from my hotel room window*

Well, I managed to exchange some Croatian money for EUR from a street currency vendor still that evening when I went for a walk and to take a few photos. You guys do not have them street currency dealers, but we used to have them here in socialism. They are sharks☺ that come handy if you are in a pinch. The following morning there was a mile long line outside the bank and



*Mustafa Kuksi*

I was glad I made that bad deal with the shark.

Now, I am finally getting to meeting Mustafa and tippling. It was after dark when Mustafa knocked on my door. The

receptionist found him as he

had promised. Mustafa is a college graduate, major: juvenile delinquency, speaks a very fluent English (and several other languages). I wish he could write English better. The tippler-flier community would be much richer. He has got a computer in his head. He remembers every pigeon that flew over 16 hrs anywhere in the world by the bird's ring number. Hard to believe, but true. When we talked the band numbers, I was getting

lost most of the time. He gave me some good pieces of sound advice – for me to remember, it is always better to hear the words than to read them. I showed him my notebook photos and we talked tipplers and smoked cigarettes till 3am. I had couple beers that I brought with me for us from CZ but Mustafa does not drink alcohol.

The following morning we met in the reception hall, rather early for the Kosovo custom (the life starts at 10am over there). Mustafa invited me for a cup of coffee and we planned the day. I told him that I would have to leave in the afternoon and that I would not dare to smuggle any birds across the Serbian border. Mustafa told me there was a chance of getting a veterinary health certificate for the birds but I knew that with the bird flu it would not be possible. I did not say anything.

First we walked to Kuitim Lubeqeva's house. He is a car electrician working for himself. When we were there he turned down a customer and told him to come later☺ On the street we met tippler fliers (strangers to me but not to Mustafa). We shook hands with them and talked. Mustafa interpreted for me into English, sometimes Serbian. I could see they were pleased to see a Czech tippler flier in their hometown. Great people. Kuitim has got his aviary in the elevated back yard and the breeder loft in the attic of his barn. When I saw the tipplers I decided to smuggle 4 of them out, later, I changed my mind to smuggle 6 of them out☺ The birds were just so gorgeous. Mustafa smiled and said: "You can have 100 of them, my friend". See, Mustafa does not have his own loft now and keeps his birds at his friends' lofts for the time being. Mustafa talked about each individual bird and then asked me which ones I want. I left the decision up to him since he knows the birds and I do not. He equipped me with 4 very nice tipplers and Kuitim equipped me with a cardboard box. The three of us returned to get the car and drove back to get the birds and take them to the veterinary.



*Kuitim Lubeqeva and Mustafa*



*Photos of birds I took in Kuitim's loft*



Unfortunately, and as I expected, the veterinary declined to issue a health certificate – even two bottles of Czech beer did not change his mind. It was on the orders of the country's chief veterinary officer. So we draw Kuitim's home to drop him off and went to Enver Gjikoli's.

Enver is a man who suffered a stroke not long ago. He still cannot speak and walk well. Yet, when we came, he stretched his left arm towards me for a shake. Then we went two floors up to his loft. He waved us off to go ahead and declined Mustafa's offered to help him - a real tough man. On the rooftop Mustafa opened the loft/aviary door and let the birds onto the terrace floor.

Enver's wife made coffee for us, and his daughter brought it up. Later his grandson came to join us. We were drinking the coffee and talked tipplers. The birds were walking happily on the terrace picking grain that we threw down for them. I worried that the birds are going to take off, especially when some droppers took off, but when I started to handle the tipplers that Mustafa was bringing out for me to see, I realized why they did not take off... the tipplers' wing feathers were clipped. It you leave 2 or 3 of the outside primaries and clip the rest of them on one wing, the bird will look, at first observation of a tired man as I was, like a bird in perfect condition to fly. But it can't☺ That's what Enver did to his and Mustafa's breeders.



*The terrace parade - at this point I had no idea the tipplers wings are clipped, if you take a closer look you will see it, especially on the white tippler in the second*

*photo down.*



Again, I left it up to Mustafa to pick the birds for me. He selected a beautiful young Shannon lady from the fliers loft. He said: "Put this one together with Tomica's Shannon cock." Enver wanted to clip the hen's wing but I said it was not necessary. Enver said losing a hen like that would be a great pity, so we clipped one of her wings – all primaries to make sure. Enver's face was full of happy smile. This bird was very dear to him. Just as was the other one I got from Mustafa.



*Mustafa and Enver Gjikoli on the terrace*

Mustafa brought out two Boden cocks for Zeljko's hen and said: "I will not advise you now, take your pick, they are both of the same qualities and they look the same because they are brothers." I hesitated a bit, then I selected the one with a white feather on the neck. Mustafa said, that it would be his choice too. That made me feel great. When I was taking the Boden cock, Enver touched his heart and so did I. Again I realized how close these birds were to his heart and how much he loved them even though they were Mustafa's tipplers. I felt like a thief...

Well, at Enver's we parted with the words that we would see each other again – maybe here in CZ and Mustafa offered to take me out of Prizren, an offer which I gladly accepted since, even though Prizren is a small city, it is full of unpredictable one way streets.

Now, one of the last events worth mentioning here is when I approached the Serbian border, I put the birds into the socks and stocked them under the car seat. I knew it would be tough to cross the border without being subject to a car search. When I "checked out" from Kosovo KFOR zone and came to the Serbian part of the border a policeman with a machine gun almost pointed at me came to my car and told me (did NOT ask me): "You take this forwarding agent to Beograd". And the agent, a very pleasant looking, tired man walked right behind him. (For you to understand the situation, to get to Kosovo, you have to come through Serbia or Albania and if you transport goods to Kosovo, you must employ a Serbian forwarding agent that will sit in your truck as long as you travel in Serbia all the way to Kosovo border. Of course, you have to pay his wage. This is what I call a total economic blockade. These agents work for a big company that sends them out and cares less how they get back, so the agents ask the border police to fetch them a ride home – this is the way I understand it).

I had to count till two to nod my head on that machine gunner's "offer" (I did not want to look too eager) and my heart jumped with joy: "My car won't be searched." And it wasn't ☺ The agent got in and the police waved me off on my way. God himself sent this agent angel my way, let me tell you I said a little prayer before I got to the border. God almighty EXISTS (and is watching over me) !!!

Well, the last episode happened at the Hungarian side of the border. My birds were discovered by a custom clerk. I was back in Central Europe but the Balcan system worked here too. Nearly 100 USD in Czech Crowns did the trick to bribe the clerk and there was no more troubles all the way home.



*The birds packed in socks when they arrived in their new home*

Those three days (Osijek and Kosovo) and 2.600 km seem like two months and thousands of miles to me. I

have met many great fliers, talked a lot of tippler issues, and seen hundreds of birds. I will remember this trip as long as I live and tell it to my grandchildren, or anyone willing to listen. I glad you have read up to this point and I hope I did not bore you.