



Vignette IV.

Tirana

October 2024



Day 1

Arrival at 3. 20 PM at Rinas (Tirana's International Airport named after Mother Theresa) after an uneventful flight. The weather was most pleasant, especially after the cold, grey and rainy atmosphere one left behind in Geneva.

We took an "electric taxi" to go to a place sitting atop a hill overlooking Tirana, Lezhe and a few other places. (Lezhe is especially important in Albanian history, as it was the place where Skanderbeg came from, and he is a national hero to this day, even though the events he caused, happened more than four hundred years ago). The view was expansive spanning 180 degrees. The air was cool, with a slight wind and we found a table at the place where the taxi dropped us off at the restaurant "Kalaja e Prezes". We had a view overlooking the vast panorama. We ate local specialities that remind one of some of the food items one finds in the Middle East, with some local adaptations (The Ottomans brought their culinary specialities over to Albania given they occupied the place for over four centuries). There were cheeses similar to the ones one finds in the countries making up the former Ottoman Empire. Lovely bell peppers with a creamy vegetable filling. Corn bread bathing in yogurt with some olive oil, lamb meat balls, salads, fried kashkaval, quite similar to the Syrian variety, and a local feta cheese that was very tasty. Salad, olives and more greeted our plates.

As time passed, we went inside as the cooling winds had become cold! My friends were deciding what to drink, teas or some more manly drinks! I opted for a "Boronisë" tea which in English is translated as 'Rosehip' and my friends went for a plum alcohol to revive their cool innards! I put my lips to the glass when offered the to taste the plum alcohol, and even though I barely humidified my lips, the taste was full and reminiscent of the Yugoslav "Slivovica".



A further trip in an electric taxi, manned by a friendly young chap, whose name is Raimondo, a law student who needs to pay his studies. He spoke very good English, and he confided that he spent 6 months in the Bronx, if memory serves. He thought it was a place to make money, but not a good place to live! He dropped us off in the “Bloku” neighbourhood, near “Joni” restaurant, owned by a friend of Asllan’s - my friend who helped me set foot in Shqipëria (in 2021), that is Albania. (I spent time there from 2021 to 2023 in Tirana). “Joni” means Ionian (as in sea) and its name indicates it specialises in sea food. A new feature on the menu since I was there last time, is a selection of Japanese sea food, raw and cooked. I should add, that the fish selection and quality in Albania is amazing! We opted for light things such as local bread, a sort of focaccia, with a wonderful rendition of cottage cheese, very smooth (not at all like the Anglo-Saxon version) with a pinch of herbs and slightly spicy. Totally addictive with the local bread! Olives, yogurt with garlic were also available, items that in Arabic countries are called “Mukabilat” (starters!) and the Spaniards name them “Tapas”. Then, some octopus and calamari. All excellent. Our Spanish friend who accompanied us, also a fine wine connoisseur, wanted to savour Albanian wine.



We had a rather decent bottle atop the hill, at the Kalaja E Prezes, but “Joni” was the place where thanks to Asllan, I was introduced to Besnik (a famous Kosovar architect, city planner) who mainly works in Albania and now collaborates with Spanish architectural companies, and he loves working with them) and Besnik introduced both Asllan and myself (in 2021) to a wonderful Albanian wine that goes by the name “Nurellari Superiore Riserva” (a combination of Merlot - Cabernet Sauvignon). Thus, we decided to have that same wine, given its flavour and range, and hoped to impress our Spanish companion! The wine was duly delivered to our table, and our Iberian friend was mightily impressed! To augment the oxidation of the wine and liberate its full flavour, it was poured into a carafe to titillate our taste buds!

Fortunately for us, the chap serving us at the table knew Besnik, and told us that he was with friends (Besnik goes there very often, as he designed part of the restaurant and has a number of his recent paintings gracing the walls in the restaurant) having dinner. Asllan went over to their table to greet him, only stating that he was with friends. Later, Besnik dropped by our table and it was great to see him again, as he profusely greeted us, we embraced as we hadn’t met for over a year.

While spending time in Tirana, I met Besnik a few times, and we became quite friendly. Besides being an architect and city planner, he is also an interior architect, has created a number of impressive hotels in Albania, restoring ancient buildings and making them into lovely boutique hotels, and he opened a large and impressive modern hotel in Tiranë in 2022, if not mistaken. In a previous vignette I recounted how even before we ever met, we were linked as in a trip to Prishtina in 1967 (then Yugoslavia) I had met a super chap who, unfortunately passed away a few years ago (I was told in 2021), the uncle of Besnik's best friend in Kosovo. His name was Genci Nimani. In 1967, Genci very kindly introduced me to Prishtina's night life in those days! In the previously cited vignette, I recount how I was entertained and utterly enjoyed the spontaneity of his friends and how they suddenly in the evening all started dancing on the assembled tables with traditional Albanian music (I was living in Switzerland in those days, so it was a marvelously unconventional event for me to witness!!).

Before leaving us, Besnik (now it is October 2024!) pointed to his latest works which sort of reminded me on Nicki de St Phalle's work: rich in voluptuous shapes and forms, and colours. Unfortunately didn't have much chance to discuss his work with him, as he had to leave rapidly. He did invite me to his "Vernissage" a few days later, at an avant-garde gallery in Tirana, but I was returning to Geneva the next day, hence missed the Opening. At around 11 PM we were picked up by Asllan's brother Naim, who drove us home.

Besnik Grainca



Day 2

Fairly early morning affairs relating to bank matters that needed clearing and closing, were attended to. After the serious matters, we walked to a famous restaurant in the middle of a park, named Taiwan - a large complex with various restaurants with different menus. A lovely cappuccino and orange juice, accompanied our chats. My friends plus a new arrival had to bring José, our Spanish companion to a dental specialist for advanced and specialised work, hence a specialist!

Reflections on Tirana after 14 months of absence.

Walking from Rruga Nikola Filjia 23, to the OTP bank (to deal with bureaucratic matters) and passing by my old haunts, be they cafés, shops and restaurants - I found that many things remained the same, and others have changed: new juice bars, cafés that have been done up, etc. The pace of change is quite rapid, and the increasing numbers of tourists causing bottlenecks at Tirana airport (Rinas, or Mother Theresa International Airport) despite clever adaptations, enlargements, are evident. Just before the C19 epidemic, Albania was the fastest growing tourist destination in Europe (landscape, beaches, mountains, history, art and very reasonable prices, although massification is causing inflation detrimental to the local population - a very simplified economic overview, but the gist is accurate, I believe). What saddens me is that the wonderful Skanderbeg Square has become completely enclosed as the latest hotel construction encircles this amazing square where a lovely 17th century mosque cohabits with a massive communist era building housing a theatre built by the Soviet Union if I am not mistaken.

