Figure 1 Our Logo!

# Hiking in Serbia before the GASi Symposium in Belgrade

This report has been put together from many contributions after taking the challenging decision to join the 3-day hike in the mountains of southern Serbia. It gives a flavour of our experience.

Figure 2 Our photojournalist

Figure 3 The whole crew

**Stefan Cerovina, Kosovo**

I would like to thank the Dallas group and Melissa for organizing this adventure, great work you did for us!

The choice of places we go is also great. It will bring you close to what Serbia is and can offer. It is not the true wilderness of high mountains as you can find in some other regions, but it has many elements of it, while being in contact with pure nature we will be surrounded by towns and villages all the time (not more than 15-20km). All the routes we may take are not very demanding but will provide us with true hiking experience. The taste of authentic Serbian kitchen is among best in this region. The sense of the soul of our people will come to you also I believe, vivid spiritual life in many monasteries and especially of Studenica will bring you closer to important elements of Serbian identity. Even though we call the region where I live (Kosovo and Metohija) the soul and heart of our people where the hundreds of old monasteries and churches (700-800 years old) resides, this region and Studenica can represent it well. So, I am very glad you are coming and looking forward to our adventure, welcome!

Due to very complicated political and existential situation here where I live, to the last moment cannot be sure will I come to be with you on the Symposium also but do hope I will make it. Since the place where we start hiking is half-way from my town to Belgrade, I would join you there.

Figure 4 Kablar Mountains.

**Teresa von Sommaruga Howard, London**

Following on from the tradition we started in Berlin, Dale and I hosted a short period of social dreaming each morning and convened a median in the evening, to reflect on our experiences together. It has always been a bit ad hoc finding places to meet between eating and journeying. We were always on the move. Each night we slept in a different family household and each meal was also in a different place. Time was always short, mainly because some of us are very slow hikers! So, our social dreaming matrix was held on the bus on the way to our first two days of hiking. On the third day, we managed it before breakfast with the help of our guides and our hosts. How did we do that? Well, a kind of magic occurred. On the bus, the guides helped us to use their microphone. It was slow but it worked somehow. For the median group we had a different arrangement each day; over dinner on the first, sitting around with tables arranged in a big rectangle before dinner on the second and sitting in circle on the grass in the shade on the third. For this the guide found a lawn mower and cut the grass and everybody who wanted one brought a chair. Even the four children joined in. Crazy? Well maybe but talking together in this way enabled us to manage some very challenging days. I learnt that if the group wish to hold the dynamic administration in mind, the container is not as leaky as one might expect.

Figure 5 Pawle mowing the grass for our last median group.

Figure 6 Breakfast on our last morning - social dreaming here before that.

Many of us thought ahead trying to figure out what we were facing. Martha researched the most challenging hike online: Kablar mountain.

**Martha Gilmore, California**

I had guessed the hiking would be hard after doing a bit of research on the first hike and looking at the warm temperatures. The effort on the first day was not too bad for me, except for the sections of the trail where they didn't use any switchbacks and it was straight up.

It was interesting to watch our guide struggle to deal with the leadership of our large and very diverse group (40 people aged 5 to 80). He was used to smaller groups and probably much fitter people and told me he was psychologically exhausted trying to cope with us. I managed to control myself so that I only gave him one or two suggestions about leadership - which he didn't take.

The company was wonderful. It was so interesting to talk to different people and to overhear different conversations on the hikes, on the bus, and during meals. The food was good - though I felt badly that we usually didn't eat nearly as much meat as they expected us to. It was a good trip not to be a vegetarian/vegan on. Our countryside hosts really didn't know how to accommodate such diets.

It was also lovely to go into the symposium knowing a number of new people and having the chance to say hello in different ways once we were all being professional.

Figure 7 We got to the top!

**Melissa Black, Texas**

Figure 8 It got very steep near the top.

As the organizer of the hike, I have many things I could write about, but I keep returning in my mind to the first day of hiking. While we had total elevation gains and mileage for the hikes, that never really tells you what you are facing. This particular day was up a mountain to a summit so any elevation/distance we had was automatically steeper than if it had been a longer uphill! I won't say it wasn't challenging despite having done a lot of training, but it was beautiful as well. We hiked up steep trails through verdant forests. As we neared the top the trees thinned out and we had to scramble up some rock stacks (the guides secured a rope to help) and wind across some narrow trails to reach the summit! I got up to the top and then spent time watching as other hikers came up and around the last turn to reach the summit. The look on (almost all) of our faces was priceless! Relief, pride, awe, and joy were the most prominent. I took many photos of people as they saw the group sprawled across the summit area and realized they had made it! But one of the other stories here is seeing the care, concern and support that was shared. It was a time of people supporting each other, caring for each other and celebrating each other. My husband, David, had chosen to stay back at the steep rock scramble to lend a hand where needed and take photos of one of the challenging moments for the group. We all enjoyed a swallowtail butterfly that appeared like a moving flower in the sky as well as some type of bird that repeatedly twisted and dove from great heights in the sky. Nature had given us many prizes for summiting Kablar Mountain. But the final story was about dynamic group administration - our two mountain guides pulled me aside after the hike and we discussed changing the next days of hiking to make it fun and accessible for all. They were genuinely concerned that everyone had a good experience of Serbia and were able to create alternate experiences each day. Our group has already started asking what I'm planning for Greece, so I think it's safe to say that the Pre-Symposium hiking, albeit challenging at times, succeeded in immersing us into the gracious culture of the Serbian matrix!

**Fiona Parker, Yorkshire**

Travelling together felt familiar, reconnecting with the Berlin hiking and biking group and getting to know this new group in Serbia. It was so lovely to see young families together as well and they all managed the walks with lots of energy to spare. I found rural Serbia very peaceful, and I felt close to the land, knowing and not knowing it's history. The hospitality was amazing, the communal spirit to do social dreaming on the bus and median gatherings over dinner allowed possibilities. The first ascent was an achievement, and I really appreciated the support to get to the top. David Loder especially, a big thank you. I can still hear the young Serbian voices in the median group - you have taught me to listen even more.

Figure 9 Walking together.

**Marija Kamatovic, Serbia**

From the very beginning, I was excited about hiking, which I felt someone had been preparing for a long time with love and care. All the details that Melisa and Tina thought of, along with all the colleagues who assisted them in organizing the event, made me feel well taken care of, with every member's needs in mind. Dale and Teresa deserve all the praise for working with us in various conditions. The entire group handled everything remarkably well, whether sitting in a circle, at tables filled with food, on a bus, in a restaurant, or outdoors in the rain. We managed to be present with each other, listening to the birds chirping, breathing, walking, talking, and sweating as we climbed.

Even though I wasn't part of the organizing team, I somehow felt like a host, eager to explain who we Serbians are, what you can experience with us, where my identity comes from, and what ignites it. Studenica, the history of the place we visited, is the essence that I couldn't possibly explain even if I wrote three pages, yet paradoxically, for me, just that one word is enough.

At the same time, I had a deep interest in the identities of others, the people I walked with, wanting to get closer to them. It felt like I opened a new window into the world each time. The first day and the freedom to meet during the celebration - Slava, encountering the spirit of the people, monasteries dating back to the 14th century, culture,

Figure 10 Studenica Monastery

carpets like those my grandmother had in the village, people from various parts of Serbia, emotions, suffering, and rebirths—all of this was crucial to me.

The hermitage of Saint Sava left a special impression on me, as I went there for the first time myself! Golija and the middle group, which seemed full of hope and good wishes for the future, especially because of the children who were with us throughout, added a unique charm to the journey. I hope there will be even more of them next time. Because, I can say that my fondest memories are from such trails that I hiked with my grandmother, sometimes with my parents, and often with other children as we gathered for such adventures.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Boško and Pawle for all their efforts, for all the ups and downs we encountered. There's an expression we have that says there should always be something pinching you in your shoe. In this case, all the conflicts, struggles and pain during the trip were a special and important spice that this team could endure and carry forward.

I regret that we didn't all go on every trail together, but that's also part of the reality of such a diverse group that enriched the Symposium. I wish us all another meeting in Athens!

### Dale C Godby, Dallas

Figure 11 The Slava group

Our hiking in Serbia brought unexpected surprises. We had practice hikes to prepare our bodies, but it was the inner world of the Spirit that the first day helped me to see. I overheard my Serbian friends talking about their Slava. I was curious. What is this Slava they spoke of with obvious excitement? A Slava is a celebration. What do they celebrate? I didn't want to miss the first day of our hike, but this celebration tempted me, and I was invited to come along. A decision had to be made. As John Muir, the patron saint of the American wilderness said, “The mountains are calling, and I must go”. But which mountain should I climb? The physical mountain in front of me or the spiritual mountain of Orthodox Serbian spirituality that the Slava represents.

I decided to go with Marija, Stefan, and Marina to the mountain monastery of Marija’s family saint. What I learned was that a family’s Slava is as important or perhaps more important than Christmas celebrations. All are welcome. There was a festive spirit as we arrived at the monastery. A free meal is served, and you are surrounded by a celebratory spirit.

At the heart of the Slava is an intimate chapel filled with icons. Icons are an unexplored territory for me, a Christian from the West. But I learned icons offer access through the gate of the visible to the mystery of the invisible. They speak more to our inner than to our outer senses. An icon is like a window looking out upon eternity. As we visited many of the icons, I was allowed into a very personal private space as I observed the intense way in which visitors gazed deeply at the icons. The focus on the visual contrasts with the emphasis on hearing that is emphasized in group analysis. I was profoundly grateful for having been allowed this experience.

Figure 12 “If you want to repair the world repair yourself first!”

There are over 200 mountain monasteries in Serbia, and they have been foundational in preserving Serbian identity. During the Ottoman period Serbian monks fled to the mountains to avoid domination and erasure by the ruling powers. The Slava is a way to connect to ancestors who were often martyred in their efforts to practice and preserve Serbian spirituality and culture. On leaving the Slava and the mountain monastery, Marija gave me a simple gift to remember our visit.

I missed the first day of hiking, but caught a glimpse of Serbian spirituality, hospitality, and identity. My hiking colleagues had an arduous first day—their reaching the summit is a spirituality of its own kind.

**Kavita Avula, Seattle**

Serbian hike. Kids in tow.
Will we climb a mountain, you never know.
It might be fun, it might be tears,
with a group behind us,
we can overcome our fears.

Table late night
Serbian chats
to understand the history of wars and traps.

The Serbian people
their story was told
in a way that left me shivering and cold.

Despite the sun and rains the last day
At the end of the hike
we wished we could stay.

My first social dream experience on a bus
we got right into it
without too much fuss.

The guides jumped in
Serbian stories galore
Leaving us wondering what is in store.

Some hated the mountain
while others fell in love
the group found options
stay down or go above.

Above and beyond
we all went together
chatting it up
like birds of a feather.

Conference? Oh right.
We have that to do.
Seeing each other
helped me as a newcomer
to feel less new

Figure 13 Kavita and family

**Maria Puschbeck-Raetzell, Berlin**

I would like to highlight one specific experience during the memorable hiking the Dallas Group Analytic Practice had thoughtfully organised. Studenica Monastery located in the Raška is the most important monastery in Serbia. It was founded near Studenica river in the late 12th century by Stefan Nemanja who established the medieval Serbian state.

Figure 14 Memorial Wall to those who died in war with Kosovo.

When we entered through one of the fortified gates of an almost circular wall, I had all sorts of feelings. In holy sites like that I try extra carefully to absorb the energy of the place and to imagine what has happened during many centuries. I try to get in touch with sounds and smells, I listen to the wind who tells stories of the past, I tune in with curiosity but also caution. I reach an almost meditative state and like to be on my own.

When going into the main church, one of our guides was enthusiastically lecturing about priceless collections of 13th and 14th-century Byzantine paintings. I looked at the frescoes. But I was struck by something else. A young couple with their newborn baby, only a couple of weeks old, had a baptism ceremony in the church. It felt a bit intrusive to watch them because it is a family ritual, at least in my culture. The openness made me also curious, and I had fantasies that the baby fully arrived in the community, also in an international community that our hiking group represented at that moment in that church. Seeing the young mother gently holding her baby moved me to tears. The birth of my second baby happened just two years ago and my memory and all the bodily sensations of it, still fresh. Children are the most precious gifts in this world. They are life. And we have to protect them.

After having been deeply in touch with the beginning of life, something else happened. In a smaller side entrance or mausoleum – I think it is part of the Bell tower – next to the souvenir shop, there were lots of candles of unusual shape that caught my attention. Nobody was in there, but something drew me in. I saw a marble wall in the center full of names in Cyrillic letters. I could only read the years of birth and death. All died in 1999. Lots of young people, in their 20s, 30s and 40s. That made me breathe heavier as I felt sadness crawl up my stomach.

Figure 15 Twisted candles at the memorial

On the left and right side of this wall there was space to put candles anywhere you like. The yellow candles were thin and long. If you put them on the surface and lit them, they could not really stand by themselves. Lots of them bent easily in the heat, they had no choice but to go down. And when they were on the ground, there was no way of getting up again. I saw some of them holding on to each other. Others were trying to 'climb up' the wall as a last resort. Eventually, they would all slide down and burn the rest of their candle wicks. The crackling sound and symbolic meaning were so powerful that I was paralyzed for a few minutes. I took some pictures as you can see here, but I had to get out, out of this place of death and sorrow.

Figure 16 One of the many monasteries built into the mountain.

One of our guides was explaining to some of us what had happened in 1999 in this area of Serbia. I wanted to know as well but I could not take it in. I was full of emotions, the joy and labour of birth, investing in raising children, and deep despair of losing them in war. Whoever was fighting each other in 1999, it could have been avoided. War has no winners. As a mother of two sons, I related to the pain of sending them to battle. I needed to walk for a bit on my own. I was standing in the ruins around the main church and saw plants emerging through stone walls and some flowers. And a little girl was climbing on the rocks and enjoying herself in the sun on this beautiful summer day. That gave me hope.

At the end of this eventful day, I had a lovely conversation with another group member who was in the army teaching soldiers. He shared that when he thinks of young men going to combat, he imagines what it would be like if they were not opponents set out by their governments to fight each other. They would probably have a beer together, play cards, laugh, and have a good time. He left the army eventually and to me, that was a relief to hear although I know that lots of nations still invest a lot into their military, including Germany now after the war had started in Ukraine.

To me, being at this monastery was getting in touch with the life and death as well as bloody history of the Balkans, of humankind in general, and the wish to run away from it, the wish to not know, while simultaneously sensing that this is not possible. The past wants to be heard, understood, and integrated. This experience was part of my experiential overture for the GASi Symposium 'When divided worlds meet' in Belgrade a few days later.

**Joan Fogel London**

Looked forward to for so long and away.... through online covid and cold winter. It was six years since seeing continental colleagues, some even longer, changed and aged but not.

Social dreaming on a coach (tight or leaky container?!), group (median or large, does it matter?!) over dinner...outdoors, in the rain.... worked as well as ever. The frame is internal, dynamic administration more necessary than ever.

Thrown into that first extreme climb, we saw each other in the raw. It was close to a miracle that none came to grief: made of stronger stuff than we knew. Flexible and adaptable, as ever. As we will have to be as climate changes, as planet ages.

What is democracy? Messy. Choices incur losses and disappointment: hermitage or waterfall? How would we have managed without guides?

Figure 17 Our first lunch together.

**Steven Fogel, London**

Feelings: At first wary about being a guest of the group…felt quickly welcomed and much enjoyed the camaraderie, the beautiful setting, the group dynamic and the individuals, the charisma and knowledge of the guides and the pleasure of unusual but delicious food and enriching conversations. I also felt some pain in my ageing body but was, overall, pleased to cope.

Thoughts: My mind wandered between (a) making observations of the professional group setting, (which I hadn't experienced before except when learning about group work) (b) comprehending the expression of the occasional but all too human tensions in the group arising mainly from different expectations and levels of ability; these were, nonetheless, gently resolved and (c) considering the geo-political dimensions of Serbia and its adjacency with Kosovo in the light of my memory of the history since I first visited Yugoslavia in the early 70's.

Reflections: A contrast between (b) and (c) gradually occurred to me. Serbia, with its capital Belgrade, was the proud and powerful heart of a large region and was reduced against its will into physical insularity but grapples with nostalgia, repentance for past actions and achieving economic and sporting success despite its reduced size and status.

Participating in a group dynamic prompts thought about the pooling and dissolution of individual sovereignty, the viability of an entity, public admission of guilt, atonement, reparation and resolution, accommodation of difference and celebration of shared humanity.

Figure 18 Markus!

**Markus Schirpke, Berlin**

It was a pleasure to hike with you and a nourishment for my soul to listen to your thoughts, dreams and stories. After many self-organised trips, I also enjoyed being guided.

Figure 19 A very fit daddy - Vipin carrying his little daughter up the mountain.

I also tested positive; the symptoms are not too strong. My suitcase hasn't arrived yet, as we only had a small window of time when changing planes.

**Zahra Ali Mohammad, Dallas**

I came to the pre-conference hike with my husband and my young girls. One is 9 and the other is 5 years old. Though we all practised hiking for several months leading up to the trip, I was nervous about how they would fare around strange grownups that liked to tell each other their dreams every morning and process their feelings at night. The knowledge that 2 more children were also attending gave some comfort. Turns out, when you combine engaged and kind adults with energetic and curious kids, it makes for a powerfully vital group. The adults listened empathically, shared their knowledge and provided timely distractions to help the kids persevere when the path, quite literally, got tough. The children in turn, contributed with endless questions, awe in the smallest of bugs and comedic relief when it was sorely needed. They also eagerly shared their thoughts in the process groups, inspiring some of us to hold on to our hopes for the future a little more tightly. This hike transformed our group into a mobile community that carried the sense of comfort and belonging with them in every step.

**Caroline Meller, Berlin**

On arriving back in Belgrade happy with sore feet and muscles the first evening in the overdue Sauna someone asked: "So, how do you feel about the hike?" Spontaneously it came out: "This is my natural form of being I just hadn't realized, and I haven't practised for a while."

Figure 20 Our last median group.

When I was a little kid and the group was hiking in the Lake District, stopping every now and then to recite poetry, I did not understand the language yet. But I did absorb the matrix of togetherness, friendliness, caring and the music in the poetry. When I hiked my path outward bound in Wales with the experiential educationalists, we shared English language and a strive for peace and international understanding. When I hiked my way through New Zealand 1993 - I needed to have a break and get far from Germany - it was all of that, plus meeting the first traumatised young soldiers of my generation from all over the world in the aftermath of 1989. Before starting out now to our hike through the South of Serbia someone in Berlin reminded me: "Make sure you keep on the path - you might step on a mine!" I said: "Yes, that would be my part with realistic probability, but I think we might have good guides!"

And so it was: adding social dreaming and group reflection to the repertoire that included little kids that spoke, and our guides who could also stop talking and still be with us. Not to be imagined any better! I see a gradient from poetic sound through humanist idealism to facing more down to earth reality - and Group Analytic tools! I will keep up social dreaming, be it standing up in a bus or sitting down on the grass in the rain, group reflection with food or without food!

Figure 21 On the bus – social dreaming?

One time on the trip I found myself calculating the possible dates of birth of these wonderful young men who were our tour guides to guess something about their relationship to the military and the war. I stopped myself in this German impulse or habit and decided to be open for full encounter, be it the innocent or the wounded souls of soldiers. When we stumbled into the baptism in the monastery it was just before they opened the coffin of the mother of the Saint. There was a big hesitation in me, and I definitely did not want to inhale...but I am a Lutheran, they are not so sensual. How wise was that mother leaving one son to power and the other to religion? What was the mothers' part in this construction? Did she even try for mothers' law? Or is that a cheap way out being 'holymummy' in a golden coffin? Did she even have other options? But then there was that family picture. Happy proud faces and a huge Serbian flag held up as background to present the baby. Should I have been envious or rather appalled? Should I have maybe tried to be in the picture???? At least witness in writing and my best wishes for good guidance, a big thanks to Melissa and god's blessing for all of us!

Since my childhood and student times this was the first time that somebody organized for me a trip into the nature. I especially liked the combination of the 'organizing team'. Our colleagues and friends from the Dallas practice took sensitive care of our individual and group needs including our amazing hiking shirt (which made it possible for everyone to become obviously a group member), and the Serbian travel guides, who provided logistics and knowledge how to explore the Serbian landscapes, nature, rural life of local people and not only facts either than feelings about history and politics.

**Judith Enders, Berlin/ Zürich**

I was very happy that we hiked up the cultural import mountain, Kablar (was hard work up to the edge) and visited the monastery 'Studenica', where former king and queen of Serbia are buried. There we got a short but deep impression of the religious traditions (by praying visitors and very old frescos too) of this region and did our own circle with some body work in the shade of the church (another form of prayer, I guess).

It moved me very much to see so much forest and wild rivers, I was surprised not seeing too many wild animals and wondered where they were. We saw beautiful plants and flowers and meet local people during our lunch and overnight stays.

Figure 22 Arriving back in Belgrade.

It was a special joy to explore all this in an international group coming earlier to Serbia for that reason and it was a wonderful experience that we become open and adventurous enough to do our daily social dreaming in the bus and our median group during dinner or on a meadow including a rain shower. It was wonderful to explore the Serbian / Balkan social unconscious as well as the international and personal on those different places, not in a therapeutic room.

Coming back to Belgrade was a sharp contrast of rural and urban life and feelings; of local experiences and globalization in consume and food; and leaving an adventurous international group and becoming part of a quite bigger scientific international group of colleagues from more parts of the world.

Coming home to Berlin with Covid showed how close we were and brings local and international dangers and fears together and at the same time (by being vaccinated and not feared as in the beginning of the pandemic anymore) a result of international scientific, collegial and passionate (group) cooperation between humans – like our wonderful hiking trip.

**Melissa Wallace, Texas**

There were many awe-inspiring moments of beauty on our hikes, but my favourite part was getting to know my fellow hikers and connecting on a more personal level. This was my first GASi symposium, and while it was overwhelming at times, those new friendships provided some vital grounding to help me through. I'm grateful for the experience and to everyone who welcomed me into the GASi community!

**Stefan Cerovina**

I couldn't imagine to be that much surprised (and more then few times) with various elements of our pre-Symposium hiking adventure. First it was the approach and care, warmth, love from organizing team, especially Melissa who did so much for all of us! Then the beauty of our in vivo meeting after long time, not only souls and faces but also bodies. Then the beauty of country I thought I knew well but was surprised with places that were new to me! I was not relaxed and had to keep my car near thinking of my family and if should go back home asap. Due to this I missed the Social Dreaming bus matrix, but the dreams were flowing with us all day long while we were experiencing different spaces, people, tastes, ups and downs, sweating and enjoying the breaks and evening groups.

Figure 23 Delicious lunch.

It cannot be described in a few words, but the mosaic made of the few of words of each one of us will be most accurate, mirroring the experience we had, it was a joint endeavour and only as such it could be, and it was a success!

My observation and feeling during the Symposium are that this group and/or its matrix were present during the whole Symposium, and it had very important role, more than one but containing one was maybe most important and there was also something about movement and genuine wish to explore.

To share this experience with all of you was precious and I also got chance to see some places in my own country that I haven't seen before. I felt the presence of hiking group and experience during the whole Symposium and even if this sounds like too much, I also felt and think that this group did additional containing for the Symposium whole.

Thankful for this experience, hope it will continue to be standard part of pre-Symposium activities and would love to be again there in Greece!

**Bob Bennett, Dallas, Texas**

I am very appreciative to Melissa for getting the many details together and choosing our wonderful guides. After the first day they took our feedback quite well and helped out wherever needed. The good vibes our hike produced will last with me for at least 3 years if not forever, thanks. The Serbian hospitality impressed us all and your beautiful countryside was lovely to encounter so closely. I have tested positive for covid and have a few more days off, mostly resting. It is wonderful to be back home, and I look forward to being with you all again in Greece, if not sooner.

**Joan Fogel, London**

Yes, I can't work out whether I am simply exhausted or coming down with something.

**Haim Weinberg, California**

Reading the first draft of this report brought back many good memories. I am grateful to all involved in organizing this hike (especially Melissa Black, but also Dale and Teresa and the Dallas people).

In retrospect, it was a very good experience, and a good preparation for the GASi conference. The first day was really too challenging for my aching back and my age (it made me face my limitations, which I didn't like...), but since the group accepted my 'grumpy old man' role (and continued to show care), it helped me feel better. It was good to connect with people, some of whom I know only from conferences and Internet forums. I got to know some colleagues and their spouses and felt that we created a good community through the experience, the social dreaming and the median group. I already look forward to Greece.

**Sebastian Hale, Berlin**

Fond memories…
The first email exchange with Melissa.
All the emails that followed from the other members of the group.
The exchange of hiking tips and reading recommendations.
Many roads and flight paths to Belgrade.
Booking another flight to be able attend the pre-hike dinner in Belgrade.
Social dreaming on the bus.
Deep conversations with people I had just met.
Secrets (not) shared at the back of the bus ;-)
The warmth, friendliness and humour of the group.
Being active AND led and fed.
The huge portions of delicious Serbian food.
Insights into Serbian history.
Feeling moved by new friends' histories.
Dale and Teresa facilitating a median group for us in the rain (on a meadow that had just been mown be Pawle). And feeling sad that our adventure was coming to an end.
Looking forward to the next chapter of our adventure...

**Daina Langner and Ulrike Schwarz, Berlin**

It somehow cost us quite an effort and courage to participate with our 'not so good' English and most of the participants knowing each other already. All the greater was the joy and relief finding lots of openness and patience concerning language barriers and newcomers.

Initially 40 people seemed to be a very large and confusing group, but from day to day we got more familiar with each personal contact and so we sort of got well prepared for the symposium.

A special delight for us was the modified social dreaming in the bus, that was so easy, unorthodox, handled so flexibly, even our very nice Serbian guides could participate in their own way. Always we could enjoy very rich food offered with great hospitality and effort, such as a great bobbin lace tablecloth at a long table with buffet.

One cute memory applied to the Serbian dance group with Balkan folk music after the first and for some of us quite demanding hike. Although the introduction to this experience was a bit bumpy, as we had just been asked to reflect on the day where highly intensive emotions were revealed and then being suddenly cut short to watch the dance group perform. That required quite a bit of switching around, with emotions and attention, but then it turned out to be very enjoyable.

One interesting learning was that it is not so easy to assess hiking difficulty levels for oneself in advance. Fortunately, everything worked out well. Especially because the guides turned out to be quite flexible and could divide our group into those who could do very challenging hikes and those who could not. That also affected us because we had to decide and drop something.

We liked the impressive monastery in Studenica, the cold bath under the waterfall, as well as the little event afterwards on the road: a friendly old farmer was driving a very old tractor while his beautifully dressed wife standing

behind on the open trailer gave instructions while entertaining us passing walkers. On the last bus tour back to Belgrade our guide Pawle talked at length about the local situation.

The amazing experience was that strangeness in this huge conference was reduced by 40 faces that we now knew...a bit better. Those familiar faces appearing every now and then in the mass of people at the symposium delighted us. So, the hiking had become something like a warmup for the symposium, the symposium became more special because of the hiking.

Thank you so much for having us on this amazing hiking trip, mainly to Melissa and the Dallas Group, but of course to all of you, because we started becoming a wonderful group.

**Bev Godby, Dallas**

Figure 24 We got there - resting at the top of Kablar.

It was somewhere in that first hour of hiking in Serbia that it began to dawn on me that all the earnest attempts I had made ahead of time to be fully prepared and ready to meet this adventure head on was not going do it. Not the early morning 8-mile practice hikes back home or our endless trips to REI for hiking gear, travel books on Belgrade stacked high beside my bed or the amazing friction-fighting goo in my boots, as grateful as I was that day for every bit of help I could get, none of it would be enough to drive me up that arduous trail that led only higher with every turn. There are times when it truly is a saving grace to have no idea what lies in front of you. And that was the story I was in that day, one that was yet to be told, with an unknown ending waiting for me at the top of Kablar Mountain.

When we finally reached that pinnacle, my initial emotion was sheer disbelief. We were actually there, standing on a peak with an acrophobic, breathtaking view so far below us, it was surreal. As I sat down, newly grateful for the mercy of that position, all I started noticing, was everyone else. There we were - there was the person that had given me a hand up or my water from the back of my pack, there were the companions that chatted or made me laugh along the way, the entourage that shared snacks or encouragement or commiseration, depending on what was needed - it was humbling to be a part of something so extraordinary. An achievement made possible by the power of the group. Some of us had poles or electrolyte packs or youth or experience or fitness, but whatever else we had to share, we each brought our whole selves to that climb. And as we enthusiastically cheered on the last person appearing up over the edge of the summit, all that mattered was we were now the group that prevailed to make it together.

Figure 25 Off we go on the first morning.

We may have been a bleary-eyed, ragtag and undefined group that tumbled off the bus to begin that first morning, but by evening it would be an organically forged cohort that was being returned to the host village. Beginning with the social dreaming on the trip to the trailhead, facilitated by the helpful leadership and supervision of our guides, and doing the hard work of finding our way forward individually and collectively while being pushed to our limits - we would forever be the intrepid band of hikers who had persevered that day to reach the top of that mountain together.

The days that followed afforded the privilege of time and opportunity to really get to know several of the group members better, as I was curious to hear more of the story they had and what had inspired the grit and the grace I appreciated so much throughout our shared experience. Their kindness of spirit and gift of presence I will always cherish as the most precious memory I have brought back with me. I will treasure those encounters, remembering each face and the wonder only that person could bring to life, holy ground that feels sacred and deeply gratifying to experience. So, I have no words to adequately thank Bob for being our photojournalist, adding to the joy of discovery by capturing so exquisitely the place and the people that made this amazing trip one-of-a-kind.

I could not end without saying, I can think of no more satisfying or fitting place as a backdrop to our adventure than the land of Serbia. The incredible beauty of the terrain we were fortunate to travel through was only surpassed by the indomitable spirit and generosity of the people we met, the national pride and resilience they displayed, and the way

they opened themselves, their homes and their deepest feelings to us, travellers from far away, meeting us with the best of their hearts and souls to welcome us in as friends.

**Ingrid Gould, Chicago**

My thoughts keep returning to the maturity of the children, the playfulness of the adults, and the care and curiosity threaded through the whole experience.

**Saoirse Avula, Dallas**

The children joined us for everything, even groups late into the night. Here is the experience through the eyes of one of the children!

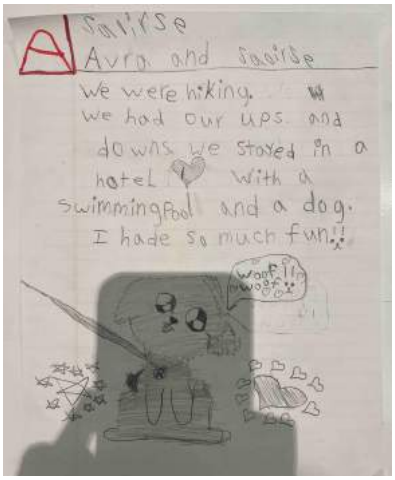


Figure 26 A child's view!

Figure 27 An Unexpected achievement!

Next

# A Different Kind of Hike in Serbia

Here is a wonderful account of the pre-GASi symposium hike exquisitely put together by Teresa von Sommaruga Howard. It includes photos and experiences from some of the participants.

The great photojournalism is by Bob Hsiung

The organisers of the hike were the Dallas group, including Dale Godby and Melissa Black.

What an amazing experience for those involved.

Click on the link below to access the reflections from those who participated.

A Different kind of Hike in Serbia V2