

Holiday Macedonia March 2011

Wednesday, March 23

Utrecht – Prague

At seven in the morning I take the bus to the train station. It's the start of rush hour, so it's crowded already. In the train I find a seat next to a friendly woman. When the train starts to ride, the train conductor walks to the middle of the compartment and says: 'Is everything okay for everyone? Yes? That's great. Anyone here who has no ticket? No? Perfect. Have a nice day!' (In The Netherlands you have to buy a ticket before you go into a train, otherwise you have to pay a fee. So it's unusual that a conductor asks this and walks by without checking everyone's ticket.) The woman next to me asks where I am going, while looking at all my luggage. We talk about traveling, her sister lives temporarily abroad too, and about work.

At Schiphol Airport I go to the baggage drop-off as I checked in online already. The baggage claim isn't working, so passengers have to wait a while before there is room for their luggage on the baggage claim. When I walk to the security check all the screens are turned red and show the word 'closed'. It's obvious that some things are not working well (baggage claims, screens). The people standing in line for the security check have to wait longer than usual, because the security is more sensitive than usual. Everyone has to walk through the security check twice or three times, because there seems to be something peeping with everyone. After a while the security guys tell us that we all have to take off our shoes, so the peeping sound will be minimized. And it works! No peeping sound when I walk through the security check.

I check the departure screen to see which gate I have to go to. Unfortunately I also find out that my plane has a 30 minutes delay. And that's exactly the time I have to change planes in Prague. Well, there's nothing I can do about it, so I wait at the gate and look at Twitter on my mobile phone. I can't help but notice the funny announcements at the airport: 'Mr and Ms X, you are delaying the flight! We will start to unload your baggage soon!'

The plane arrives and with a delay we fly to Prague. Czech Airlines is very modern and the plane is perfect. I have enough space around my seat and there are screens showing the flight information: where we fly, which places we fly above at the moment, how long we fly already and how long it will take until we are in Prague. I try to look at the watch of my neighbour and I see that it will be very hard to catch the next plane. Once we are landed I pack my bags and run out of the plane (I am not the only one running), look at a departure screen and see that the status of the plane to Skopje says 'Last call'. There's still chance that I can catch the plane! So I run and run, and the airport in Prague turns out to be bigger than I suspected. I have to enter another terminal and therefore I have to pass a passport check. A woman who looks angry takes my passport and looks to me like I am completely someone else than the picture in my passport. Please, hurry... I think. Finally she opens the gateway and I continue running.

I run and around a corner I see the gate I have to be. The screen still shows 'Last call!' Did I make it? No. Just when I entered the gate four airport people look at me like I am totally crazy for thinking I could still catch this plane. 'The gate is closed.' One of the airport people walks with me to the screen and we see that it shows

'Closed'. I was so close.

'You have to go to the transfer office, it's right over there,' they tell me. At the transfer office a friendly woman tells me that she will put me on the plane for the next day, same time. And I will get a hotel and free meals. Just to be sure, I ask the woman if there's really only one plane a day that goes to Macedonia. 'Well, there's a plane around midnight that goes to Budapest and there you can change to Skopje. But it's at midnight, so it's not that convenient,' she tells me. I tell her that I will take the plane the next day. I won't take the risk to miss another plane, in Budapest, and to be there at night. I also don't know how to travel in Macedonia after midnight, so a day in Prague it is!

My hotel is right in front of the airport, so I cross the parking and check in at the hotel. It's a very nice hotel and I feel lucky that my plane got delayed, so I can stay in Prague. My room is on the fifth floor, next to the Korean Air Crew Lounge. I drop my stuff in my room and take the elevator back to the reception. I ask for the nearest ATM (right around the corner of the building) and which bus I have to take to the city center (bus 119 and then change to the subway). It takes me about 45 minutes to go to the center of Prague, but once I am there I realize that I am in the one of the most beautiful cities of Europe!

I walk through the city all afternoon. I don't have a citymap, but I just walk there where I see an interesting building, statue or shop. In the city center are signs which direct the tourists to the hotspots of the city, so thanks to these signs I find the old town and the beautiful old bridge. The weather is great, the Czech people are friendly and the tourists look happy (including myself).



After a couple of hours I go back to the hotel. In the restaurant of the hotel I get a free dinner: spinach soup with bread, salmon with potatoes, and citron and strawberry icecream. The restaurant is almost empty. Only in a far corner there are two business men. When I finish my dinner I go to the lounge which offers free WiFi and surf over the internet on my iPad. It's the end of a perfect first day of my holiday.

Thursday, March 24

Prague – Kavadarci

With breakfast I sit at a table next to a Japanese family. I wonder if they chose to stay in this expensive hotel, or if they got stuck in Prague too. As I can see the airport from my hotelroom there's no need to worry at all that I may not catch the plane today.

Czech Airlines flies with an older plane to Macedonia, but it's still okay. The plane isn't crowded. I have an aisle seat, next to me is an empty seat and in the window seat there's a guy. He is on the phone when I take my seat and I can't understand a word of what he's saying. It could be Czech, but it could also be Macedonian. After this call he makes another call and this time I can understand every word, because he talks Dutch. I take my book out of my bag and the guy looks at the book. Now he knows that I am Dutch.

During the flight there's turbulence. Right after the cabin crew gave all the passengers a sandwich and something to drink, the captain of the flight tells us that we have to fasten our seatbelts for the rest of the flight. The plane is shaking and I have to hold the cup with tea, otherwise it falls on the ground. After a couple of minutes the worst

turbulence is over, so the cup is able to stand on the table by itself, only the tea is still shaking in the cup. I eat my sandwich and read my book.

When the plane is landed at Skopje Airport we walk out of the plane. On the stairs I hold still to look around, and so is the Dutch speaking guy. 'Wow,' he says. 'I can't believe this is still Europe.' The first thought that comes to my mind is that the vaccinations I took before I went to Macedonia sure are no waste of money. Where are we...?

While we walk to the airport building I ask the guy if he's in Macedonia for business or for pleasure. He tells me it's for business. He works in the fruit and vegetables industry and he found a cheap supplier of apples in Ohrid, so he's visiting this supplier. He was supposed to be there yesterday, but his plane got delayed, so he was stuck in Prague. So it turns out we got both stuck and stayed in the same hotel.

We have to stand in line for the passport check. You can't visit Macedonia that easily. Crumpy border men take their time to check all the passports and register every person. Once I am through the check I wait at the baggage claim (yes, they have two baggage claims; both very small, but they are there). When the luggage got dropped on the baggage claim (you can see the men outside putting the luggage on the claim) the baggage claim starts to move. It makes a horrible sound, like it's a very old baggage claim and it prefers to retire soon. I have to laugh and even the Macedonian people laugh about this very old baggage claim.

I walk with all my luggage to the arrivals 'hall', which is a small room with some police men. And then I am standing outside. I have to take a cab to Skopje, but I have no Macedonian money, so I walk into the departure 'hall' and I am happy to see an ATM. With my money I walk to the cabs and a big man asks me where I want to go. I tell him that I have to go to Skopje busstation. He asks where I will take the bus to. That's Kavadarci. He shows me the standard rates for the cab drives in Macedonia to the most common places. My sister already warned me that these rates are over the top, but they can ask these prices because there's no busstop at the airport, so everyone have to take a cab anyway. With a cab to Skopje is very expensive, but when I see the rate for Kavadarci I decide I will take the cab all the way to Kavadarci. It's a lot of money, but it will save me a lot of walking around with all my luggage. The big man is happy with my decision (ofcourse), and points a cab driver to me. The cab driver takes my suitcase and put it in the car.



The drive from Skopje Airport to Kavadarci takes an hour. If the cab driver would have followed the speed restrictions it would have taken almost two hours. He drives like his life depends on it. The only thing I can think of is that my life really depends on it. I was happy I survived the flights to get here, but now that I am in the cab, I realize that flying is much more safe than driving in a car in the mountains, especially with a driver like this man.

In Kavadarci I wait at the busstation for my sister to pick me up. She arrives within ten minutes. It's nice to see her again, but it's also weird to see how she 'fits' in this town. I look around and see poverty, homeless cats and dogs, old and small houses, garbage and bad roads. It's something I have never experienced before.

The apartment where my sister lives is on the fourth floor of a flat. The electricity in

the stairways flashes out ('Oh, that's very common here,' my sister says). In the dark we walk to the apartment. When we open the door I see four people standing in a small room. It turns out to be the livingroom. The three roommates of my sister are home, and one of them has a visitor too. They were just leaving, so it's not that crowded anymore and I can look around in the apartment. The large bedroom is shared by two girls, there's another bedroom for one girl, and my sister's bedroom is the smallest one. There's no space to put a inflatable bed on the ground, but my sister says she can sleep in one of the other rooms. There's also a bathroom and a kitchen.

I would like to see Kavadarci and the youth center (Kreaktiv) where my sister works as a volunteer, so we walk through the town. We visit Kreaktiv, it's in the main street, and I see the different rooms of the building. There are some boys and one girl hanging around, most of them are sitting at a computer to check their Facebook. The youth center is for boys and girls from 13 to 20 years old, but most of the youth are 16 years old boys. They are all very friendly and want to know all about me. They speak English pretty well. Kreaktiv is open from Monday until Saturday, from eleven in the morning until nine in the evening. The youth can hang around, attend workshops and lessons or give their own ideas. It's very good that there's such a youth center as Kreaktiv. I see that the kids are happy and that they like to be there. My sister shows some paintings she was working on earlier today, and then we continue the town tour. We visit the huge park and climb the tower to enjoy the view.



In the evening we eat spinach and cheese bread and I send some emails and write a blog. We also make plans for the weekend: we are going to Ohrid, a town next to a lake, in the south west of Macedonia.

Friday, March 25

Kavadarci – Ohrid

At seven thirty in the morning we take the bus to Ohrid. At the busstation we meet a guy my sister knows from Kreaktiv. He's also going away for the weekend. Ohrid is about 150 kms from Kavadarci, but as the roads are bad, it takes the bus four hours to get there. We make some stops in other towns and not only people are traveling with the bus. The bus goes only once a day, so people use it for other stuff too. Several times someone at the street asks the bus to stop and gives a bag or tiles to the bus driver and tells in which town someone else will pick it up. So the bus is some sort of package service as well.

During the bus drive I see a lot of the country. I also notice the very old and colourful cars that drive around. It's like we're in an automuseum.

Just when I want to close my eyes for a bit, the Kreaktiv guy tells us that we are in Ohrid. 'Aide!' (Let's go!) The cab drivers in Ohrid are as aggressive as the ones at Skopje Airport. They want to drive you somewhere, even if you tell them that you don't need a cab. There are also people who want to rent you an apartment. We told the Kreaktiv guy about the place where we were going to stay: at a grandmother of someone who knows someone at Kreaktiv in Skopje.

One of the people at the busstation looks like a grandmother and the Kreaktiv guy asks if this is the one we're going to stay. Well, we don't know. My sister says that she didn't expect the grandmother to pick us up from the busstation, but this old lady looks like she's expecting us, so we follow her. After a while she calls someone and hands the phone over to my sister. The person on the phone asks what we are looking

for and how many nights we will stay. So this is not the grandmother..

The next ten minutes we try to get rid of the old lady (I know this sounds not very nice of us, but it was just hard to communicate to her that we didn't need her). We asked for directions to the address of the real grandmother and we walk to the street. The number we are looking for (13) is hard to find. The numbers in the street are not in a logical order: 1, 4, 7, 8, 11, 14, 18. The numbers in between are no where to find. We walk the street up and down, and right at the moment we decide we have to ask someone for number 13, a grandmother-looking lady comes out of her house and starts to talk to us. She's very enthusiastic and it turns out that we needed number 14, her place! Many volunteers of Kreaktiv stay at this place when they visit Ohrid, and the name everyone knows this lady as is 'Baba Ohrid' (baba means grandmother).

Baba Ohrid likes to tell us a lot of things about Ohrid and about her grandson and the rest of her family. My sister never even met this grandson, but it doesn't take long before we know all about him. Although... I don't know anything about him, because Baba Ohrid only speaks Macedonian, so I can't communicate with her. For my sister it's a good test to listen and to talk Macedonian. Fortunately, my sister knows a basis of the language after living in the country for 2.5 months now, so she tries to understand Baba Ohrid. We get cookies and pink tea (which is very sweet). The room we stay in is quite large and we both get a two persons sofa.



We spent the afternoon in the city center of Ohrid. Ohrid is a touristic place, but the touristic season didn't start yet, so it's still quiet in the town. When we arrive at the lake we totally understand why Ohrid has a lot of tourists during the summer. The lake is beautiful and surrounded by mountains.

We walk along the boulevard next to the lake and we find the monument of the Dutch author A. den Doollaard. He was a Balkan expert and wrote stories about the Balkan and Macedonia. When we continue our walk we see a nice cafe, Cuba Libre, with a great lake view. We sit in the sun and enjoy the view. And a bonus: there's free WiFi at the cafe, so I can check my email and Twitter on my phone.

In the evening we come back at Baba Ohrid's place. We have already eaten in the city center, but she wants to give us food too. So she brings two plates with brown beans, bread and pickles. I can't believe my sister eats all the beans on her plate, 'cause it doesn't look very appetizing. But it seems to be a Macedonian treat and my sister is used to it already.

Saturday, March 26

Ohrid

In the morning we have tea with Baba Ohrid and then we walk to the fortress. We have to climb a lot of stairs, but the fortress is worth it. When we walk around the fortress we enjoy the view at the lake and the town. At a monastery we finally see other tourists, a whole group. They are Macedonian, but still, they are tourists in Ohrid. When you want to take a look inside the monastery you have to pay a fee, and then sign at the door tells us that foreign visitors have to pay twice the rate as domestic visitors. We walk downhill to the lake through small streets with nice old cars. At the lake we watch some children learning how to canoeing.

Around noon we are back at Baba Ohrid's place and we take a siesta. I am pretty tired after three days of traveling and all these new impressions. In the afternoon we start walking again. We liked the cafe at the lake yesterday, so we go there again. There's not that much sun today, so we don't sit there for a long time. At the boulevard there's an old man with a captain head who says: 'Hey girls, how are you doing?' We don't react and continue walking, but then I hear him ask 'Where are you from?' so I turn around and answer him. And then he starts talking in Dutch to us! The old man is a Macedonian sailor who learned to speak Dutch from the tourists in Ohrid, and he visited the Netherlands for six weeks. Sometimes he puts a German word in a phrase, but his Dutch is very good. He says he can give us information about Ohrid, what we have to see, where we can stay, et cetera. He gives us his phone number and he says we can give it to everyone we know. (So if you plan to visit Ohrid, you can call him.) My sister will visit Ohrid again, so she might call him or look him up in the future. To remember this man my sister made a picture of him, together with me. The sailor said that we can call him Piet Hein, but his real name is Ricky.

We find a small path along the lake that's leading to a monastery on a hill. After a while we can't walk further because men are working on a terrace. Just when we think we have to turn around, one of the men calls us and waves that we can continue our walk. He tells the other working men to step aside so we can cross the working place. We like the path and the lake view. And then we see a sign with the following text: 'Drop a coin – Touch your sing – Make a wish'. Touch your sing? Which part of a body has a sing? But then we see astrological signs, so we understand that you have to touch your sign, and not your sing, before you make a wish. We look again to the sign with the text and then we see that someone drew an arrow on the sign at the word 'sing' to show that the 'n' and 'g' has to be turned around. We laugh and drop a coin, tough our 'sing' and make a wish.



The monastery is very nice, but when we enter it, we see the rate and we are not going to pay, so we take a quick look around in the small room and go outside again. The view is, again, very beautiful and we realize that we make a lot of pictures of the lake. We walk back to the city center and have dinner at an Italian restaurant. I laugh when my sister says that it's an expensive restaurant: 'The meals are 2 up to 5 euro! That's much more than I usually pay at a restaurant.' For me these prices are very low, but apparently these prices in Ohrid are higher than in other parts of Macedonia.

Sunday, March 27

Ohrid – Kavadarci

We have breakfast in the sun on our balcony, ofcourse with Baba Ohrid sitting next to us who gives us the very sweet pink tea. We spent the morning at the lake in a 'hang' chair. We watch Macedonian people who walk over the boulevard and we see that many of them make pictures on the pier. It looks like a great picture place, so we have our own photo session on the pier too.

At the cafe Cuba Libre we have lunch and enjoy the sun. And then we have to go back to Baba Ohrid's place to pack our bags, because we take the bus at 15h30 back to Kavadarci. Baba Ohrid brings us halfway to the busstation (we walk to fast for her, so after a while she says she has to go back). We thank her again and we go to the busstation to buy tickets.

At the ticketshop we meet one of my sister's roommates who just came to Ohrid,

together with a friend, and they are going to stay at Baba Ohrid too.

During the bus drive we see the Macedonian landscape, people, houses, some shepherds with sheep or goats, and people who walk along the road with a donkey. It's hard to see that they hit and hurt the donkey.

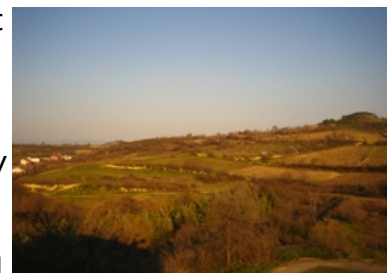
When we arrive in Kavadarci we go to the supermarket to buy some food. While we walk back to the apartment I see a large animal standing in the street. 'What is that?' I ask my sister, 'cause I can't see it very good in the dark. 'Oh, that's the homeless horse who lives i Kavadarci,' my sister answers. 'Sometimes he is walking on Main Street,' she continues like it's very normal to have a homeless horse in town! I want to make a picture of the horse, but my sister says I can't behave like a tourist; the people in town know her and she doesn't want them to think she is a tourist too. For this same reason I am not allowed to make a picture of the tree with papers pinned to it with announcements of people in town who died. They don't put these announcements in a newspaper; they just put it on the trees. Not only in Kavadarci, but we also saw it in Ohrid.

As two of my sister's roommates are not at home (one is in Ohrid and one is in Skopje), my sister can sleep in the bed of one of them. Only the other Dutch volunteer is home. We have dinner and watch our pictures on my sister's laptop. We also make a plan for the next day: we're going to Skopje.

Monday, March 28

Kavadarci – Skopje

In the morning we walk through Kavadarci, as this is my last day in this town. We visit Main Street, the square where all the men stand or sit and talk with each other, we walk uphill to a school and a playing field. When we walk downhill I see a beautiful cat, which is nice to see because I only saw many homeless cats before. I ask the cat to look to me so I can make a picture. I didn't notice the man sitting in the garden. When I walk further he says something, so I look at him and he points to another cat he has in his garden. He puts the cat in a place where I can make a picture of it. I know I shouldn't behave like a tourist, but it is kind of fun that this man helped me to make a picture of his cat.



We also visit Kreaktiv. Some kids are waiting outside. It's a couple of minutes to eleven and they want to go inside, but the volunteers who have to work today are not there yet. Again, it's good to see that these kids are happy with the youth center, as they are already waiting outside before Kreaktiv is even open. I meet some other volunteers and I get a copy of the newspaper they make every month at Kreaktiv. This issue contains an interview with my sister. I try to understand it, and only by reading one or two words of a sentence I can understand some parts of the text. It feels like deciphering secret codes when I try to read Macedonian.

At 13h00 we take the direct bus to the capital Skopje. It takes the bus 75 minutes to drive there. When we arrive in Skopje it's the first time I see a real city in Macedonia. Although it doesn't mean that there are no homeless animals here; there's also a horse standing on the street in the suburbs.

We walk with my luggage to the city center and we look for a hotel we found on the internet last night. It's not easy to find, so we look for another hotel. But then,

suddenly, we see the sign of the hotel we were looking for. We drop our stuff in the hotel and we start the sightseeing. There are many churches and mosques in Skopje. And ofcourse there's a fortress. The old town looks cozy with small streets with stairs. In the new town it looks much more modern with a 'real' shopping street and shopping malls. The city isn't very special. My sister already told me that, but I wanted to see it with my own eyes. Now that I am in Macedonia I wanted to see the capital too.

Something that is actually interesting in Skopje are the statues in the city. Most statues are of Alexander the Great and Mother Teresa, but there are also statues of total others: musicians, shopping women, a woman who is on the phone, a shoeshine guy, and in the river is a statue of a diver in a bathing suit and you see the legs of 'someone' who just dove into the river.



As the rest of the country the roads in Skopje aren't very good. There are many holes in it and no one seems to care about it. So it's kind of weird to see the Macedonian people spending their money on another statue of Alexander the Great, a huge one in the middle of the main square, instead of using the money to repair the roads. And there's not even enough money for the huge statue to finish it, so they only built the pillar where they plan to build the real statue on. And apparently, they thought it was nice to use the other part of the money to build a look a like of the Arc de Triomphe... Ofcourse, it's nice to build these things if there's enough money and if the basic things, like roads and houses, are in good shape, but now I think it's incomprehensible that they spent their money on statues.

We walked a lot, had something to drink at a Coca-Cola sponsored place (which worked great, 'cause almost everyone ordered a coke – me too), and saw the Dutch embassy. In the evening we had dinner. It was probably 'expensive' again, but I really loved it.

Tuesday, March 29

Skopje – Prague – Utrecht

Breakfast is at the top floor, said a sign in the hotel, so we climbed some stairs. 'Some' turned out to be eight floors! But the view from the breakfast room was nice, even though it was raining outside. After breakfast we walked through the city center for the last time. At noon we check out of the hotel. My sister had to go back to Kavadarci and I had to go to the airport. We said goodbye and there was already a cab driver who was waiting for me (it's the easiest thing in Macedonia: getting a cab). The cab driver laughed when he saw that my sister took a picture of me in the cab.

After a dangerous cab drive I am happy to arrive alive at the airport. I check in for the flight to Prague and for the flight to Amsterdam. I didn't pay attention to the seats in the plane, so when I got the boarding passes I saw that I had a window seat for both flights. Well, maybe that's nice too.

As Skopje Airport is probably the smallest airport of all the capitals of Europe there's not much to do around there. So I watched other passengers and I read my email on my phone (free WiFi they do have at the airport!).

I am wondering about the security check at this airport, but when the passengers for Prague can board, I find out that it's actually not that bad. It's the first security check where there's no peeping sound when I walk through the check, but the man behind

me has to unload his handluggage, so they do their best to monitor the safety. There's no time to sit at the gate, because the airport woman is asking everyone to walk to the plane immediately.

The plane is not crowded at all and I have three seats to myself (as the most passengers in the plane). I am sitting next to the wing at the emergency exit (no, I didn't ask to sit here), so I have much extra space than people at the other rows. During the flight we get a turkey sandwich and I read a magazine. I am almost feeling comfortable while I am in the air.

When we land at Prague Airport the crews announces that we landed earlier than planned, so I know I have enough time to walk to the other terminal and to catch the next plane. I have to go through another passport check and security check. This time I hear the peeping sound again, so I have to take off my shoes and then it's okay. I have even some time left before I have to get on the plane to Amsterdam, so I look in some stores. When the boarding starts I wait until almost everybody is on the plane, so I don't have to be in the plane longer than necessary.

The plane is full with passengers, every seat is taken. Next to me sits a man with a woman, who is very scared to fly. She is pinching the man the whole flight and won't open her eyes, not even for the snack and drink we get. I think she's a little overreacting; flying is not that scary. And when I think this, I realize that I have flown three days within one week. Maybe that's the best way to work on a fear: face it, over and over again.



I have had a nice holiday in Macedonia and I have a lot of respect for my sister who lives there for nine months. I would never fulfill living such a long time in that country. It's not that Macedonia isn't worth visiting, it's just such a different world than I am used to. It's a country where everyone is relaxed, there are no rules, no restrictions, everybody knows how to behave without bothering others. So that's good. But I need more regularity and planning in my life, so it's not the country for me.