



Kindness and Resilience on the Road through the Balkans and the Middle East

Discovering the hidden treasures of the Balkans in wintertime,
plus majestic and dreamlike landscapes in Turkey and Iran

In the frosty December of 2016, Leander, Maria, and their four-year-old son Lennox set out on a journey into the unknown. As night fell in their Austrian hometown, the family's converted truck, Akela, roared to life, and they began their first of many night shifts on the road. While Lennox was lulled to sleep by the gentle rocking of the truck, Leander and Maria drove until the early hours of the morning, passing through both Austria and Slovenia.

With the first light of morning, they reached the port city of Zadar in Croatia. The Adriatic Coast, bustling with life in the summer months, now presented itself as quiet and deserted in the winter cool. The gentle sound of the waves accompanied the trio on a stroll along the harbor, the dark-blue sea shimmering all around them. At that moment, time seemed to stand still, and they savored the silence. They had previously only known the Dalmatian Coast during those busy summer months, where they had been forced to share its many idyllic spots with other tourists. Now they drove leisurely along the palm-lined coastal road, passing closed hotels and restaurants, rarely encountering other people. They parked easily at picturesque coves, took long walks on the deserted beaches, and let themselves be soothed to sleep at night by the sounds of the sea.

The journey led them swiftly through Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia. The Balkan Mountains shape the landscape of these countries impressively. Steep peaks rise above deep valleys, where dark lakes rest and rivers rush. Winter painted the land in a stark but fascinating light. Even the trees defied the cold season, cloaked in their evergreen garments.

The physical traces of the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s were unmistakable. The dissolution of former Yugoslavia has left Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia indelibly marked by the consequences of the conflict. Destroyed houses and abandoned military facilities—including guard towers and ruined barracks—stand as reminders of the not-so-distant past. The rural populations of these states often lead simple and austere lives,

while young people migrate to cities in search of work. Despite these cultural differences, people greeted Leander, Maria, and Lennox with extraordinary kindness and helpfulness.

In North Macedonia, the travelers were unexpectedly met by a blanket of snow, and Akela needed some help to get used to the cold temperatures. From there, they continued to Greece, specifically to the city of Kalabaka, then further to the Peloponnese region. There they found the mystical monasteries of Meteora, perched high on distinctive rock pillars. These centuries-old buildings dominated the landscape with their majestic presence, giving a sense of both architecture and spirituality enduring across time and space.

Near the city of Lamia, the history of Thermopylae, too, started to feel alive. Here one finds not only natural hot springs with healing sulfur baths, but also the site of the legendary battle in 480 BCE between the Spartan leader Leonidas I's Greek alliance and the vastly larger army of the First Persian Empire, led by Xerxes. Although the Greeks lost this unequal battle (the Spartans famously numbered only 300), Leonidas remains a hero—not just in the popular imagination, but also for Lennox, who showed great interest in Greek history and mythology.

From Athens, the family crossed over to Crete, where they were greeted by radiant sunshine and endless beaches. Along the island's northern coast, they drove through gentle grasslands, which, as they ventured south, transformed into high mountain peaks and foothills where goatherds grazed their flocks. Back on the Greek mainland, they headed north to Mount Parnassus, the seat of the ancient Muses, the goddesses of the arts and sciences. This mountain range is not only significant in Greek mythology but also home to an excellent ski resort, and, as enthusiastic skiers, the trio naturally came prepared with the necessary gear. Lennox was excited; he had never been on skis before.

Leaving Greece, the journey took them onwards to the Bosphorus Bridge, which, in addition to connecting different districts in Istanbul, also links Continental