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Real Stories from Young Travelers Abroad

Europe FROM A Backpack

Edited by Mark Pearson & Martin Westerman



Angels of the Adriatic

Badija Island, Croatia

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AS I SWAYED TO THE MUSIC OF *STARI*, OR "THE MOSTAR SONG", with little Amila on my shoulders, I could hear her singing about raising the spirit of Bosnia. She was joyfully waving our home-made peace flag, her voice merged with the other kids' at this last sunset of summer camp. Everyone was singing, hugging, taking pictures and declaring that love will prevail over hate. My heart was engulfed in emotion, a flood of tears rushed from my chest to my eyes and I smiled at the power of this moment and of the human spirit.

I was a volunteer then, at a peace-building camp for kids who had suffered in the Balkan wars, and I have not been the same since. Organized by the Global Children's Organization (GCO), a Los Angeles, California-based non-profit, it sits on Badija Island in the Adriatic Sea off Croatia. I'd heard stories about it, about Bosnians, Serbians and Croatians, Muslims and Christians not only sharing rooms but making friends, and I knew that waging peace would take patience and understanding.

Badija is no major tourist destination, although it is surrounded by the gorgeous aqua waters of the Dalmatian coast, across from Italy, and is a short water taxi ride from Korcula Island, the much-visited birthplace of explorer Marco Polo. The calmness of the surrounding sea and the picturesque setting inspire visitors. By day, they lounge on beaches under crisp blue skies and wispy white clouds; by night, brilliant galaxies unroll across the inky black sky, and moonlight sparkles on the water to a symphony of crickets on the island. My summer, in June 2001,

the sea around Badija was busy with the usual jet skiers, windsurfers and kayakers, and island tourists were living the usual *la dolce vita* — lounging in the warm southern European sun, sipping their beer or wine and lapping up risotto and ice cream.

What most of these tourists didn't know was that there were also 100 kids and more than 50 volunteers, mostly Americans, on Badija, inhabiting most of the rooms in a converted 17th century monastery, now a quaint, albeit decaying, hotel. GCO's program mission for the camp was simple: let the children just *be*, and refill their souls with peace and compassion after being displaced by war, and suffering unimaginable terror. If they got to experience some of *la dolce vita* in luxurious settings too, with fun activities, that was bonus. At the camp, they created their own new reality, away from ethnic hatred, nationalistic politics and a crippled economy. They played, dressed up, sailed, swam, canoed, painted and imagined themselves as free, happy spirits existing in a peaceful world.

There was much contrast at camp — happiness and melancholy, youthfulness and maturity. I'd imagine my girls cowering at the sounds of bombs outside their window, wailing when they learned of their parents' deaths. Some had seen their mommies fall from running through trenches to get water, or collapse in grief at news of more massacres. Many of the kids lived amidst displaced, depressed adults in their home countries. Here on Badija, they were surrounded by beauty and comfort that it took time for them to understand. One girl at first would hustle for coins and collect extra jams at the breakfast table to hoard up in her room for some "emergency." It took her time to realize that this was a *safe* place, and she would in fact get fed the next day and the next, in great abundance, surrounded by people who loved her.

When I try to say what these two weeks truly meant to the

kids and volunteers, I realize it was a two-way street. I had come there to contribute to the kids' peaceful reality, and I realize that the kids' spirits nurtured me, too, and gave *me* a renewed sense of my own humanity. They made me believe that angels do live on earth. None of this, of course, was apparent when I first saw the boats full of them arriving on Badija. They were from Sarajevo, Mostar, Tuzla, Banja Luka, Dubrovnik and other parts of Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia and the Republic of Serbska. They wanted to carry their bags themselves, decorate their nametags, chat and play, right away. I got a precious bunch of girls in my "family group": 15 of them, mostly nine-year-olds. It took a while for me to memorize their names, from A to Z, literally, but now they slip off my tongue.

There was Aykuna, the tempestuous, melancholy girl who seemed more like a woman than a child; Sanela the gypsy orphan from Dubrovnik, who was at first ostracized for her looks and her tortured loneliness. There was Karmela, the precious, funny spirit from war-torn Mostar who said one of the highlights of camp was me teaching her how to "jump with her head" when she dove into the sea. Amila was the sweet angel who made me laugh every night at bedtime, and sang along to our goodnight "*Laku Noć*" song. Ziyada from Sarajevo appeared to be an old soul full of wisdom, grace and compassion most of the time, but was just another girl who couldn't swim once we hit the beach.

As the girls roomed together, they bonded: they played tag, sang, danced, swam, jumped with their heads and giggled. I took great joy in teaching them new games, sharing in their joy of *skolke* (shell) hunting around the island, and tossing them into the water at the count of *yeden, dva, tri!* They taught me the different pronunciations of "c", I taught them how to say "ice cream," and I became obsessed with making them happy. I cheered "Bravo" when they played volleyball well. I tickled them and played paddy

cake — simple joys lost on those whose lives have been shattered by war.

I played and connected with the children however I could. Badija had great facilities for a camp, and all the volunteers, including the bilingual ones from towns all over ex-Yugoslavia, formed an affectionate community there. We saw each other in the dining hall, smiled as we sat in the cloisters of the old monastery, laughed, frolicked in the sea. Once the kids were asleep, we adults would hold intense conversations about what it was like to be in Sarajevo during its four-year siege, to put land mines down in one's own backyard, and to see one of the most beautiful countries in Europe turn into a tinder box of frayed nations after communism fell and Milosevic gained power. Late into the night, breaking from the conversations, the ex-Yugoslavs drank, danced, and sang songs from what was once their united country. I was moved at how the inhumane experiences of the recent years in the former Yugoslavia could melt away here, that these people could create a community of people rich with humanity.

During the day, we adults focused our energy on helping give back to the children some of the joy that their wartime trauma had taken. We were blessed by the presence of the Sarajevo Drum Orchestra, a group of compassionate young men who had been in concentration camps. They taught the kids rhythm, confidence and teamwork, and also blessed our summer with our camp anthem: *Stari*, "The Mostar Song." It describes the famous Mostar bridge that had connected different ethnicities for centuries until it was bombed in the mid 1990s. Its lyrics capture Bosnia's soul:

*Ja Pogoden Nisam Ni Umbro, no Pao, Samo Sam morao skociti
dole. Nastavicu tacno, tamo gdje sam sto izronice Stari za one so
ga vole.*

*I'm not hit neither died, neither fell down, I just had to jump down.
I'll continue exactly where I stopped, Old will rise for those who love it.*

The kids would sing this song more and more passionately as the two-week camp neared its end. *Inglisbki* or the “local languages” didn’t serve us for communicating nearly as well as music, eye contact, playing, games, affection, smiles and moments of silence. Wordless communication, in fact, gave way to instances of profound emotional honesty, such as when Sanela finally got comfortable dancing with others and pulled off a perfect break-dancing move, then rushed to my side in embarrassment. Or when Miranda curled up next to me on the shore and I wrapped her in my towel so we could sit and hug for half an hour without uttering a sound. When Seydefa cut her leg, her friend Ziyada and I held her hand as we walked back to the room. As Seydefa cried, we sat, stroking her hair to show our concern. I couldn’t help but think of Seydefa’s tears, and how many must have been shed in moments of horror and tragedy. I felt relief that this cry was for a minor cut. As we learned about each other non-verbally, I saw how compassionate these kids were to one another, truly like angels, and I wondered, has the *pain* these kids endured enabled them to be so *loving*?

Asmira, the sullen girl whose father had been killed in Srebrenica, a town that suffered an infamous massacre of Muslim men, the worst atrocity in Europe since 1945, impressed me with her grace. She’d offer me her salad, and silently accompany me to the beach, lacking in the joyful innocence a 9-year-old girl should have. One day in the second week, she slowly took my hand for the first time, after I had taught her how to push her way through the sea. When I was taking a picture of her the last day of camp, she forced a smile so I could remember her that way. It was her way of saying thank you, *bvala*. My heart swelled as I saw her angelic image captured through the viewfinder.

The histories of these kids ran deep. I would take note of the sadness in Miranda's eyes one minute, then laugh with Amila the next. Amila liked to chew on flavored dental floss, dressed up in pretty dresses every night at our disco. One night, when some girls were crying for their mommies, Amila triumphantly announced: "I could stay here three months without my mommy. This is the best place there is!" I suspect she had never been happier in her nine years of life.

Witnessing the children's transformations were part of the power of camp. Sanela went from awkward outcast to fun-loving camper, kicking our volleyball and hiding my tape recorder. As we adults put faces and hearts to the tales of the Balkans we had seen and heard reported overseas, we watched the children grow into a joy and safety they'd never known. Many of us volunteers continued our experience after camp ended, by visiting Mostar and Sarajevo, with their abiding hatreds, bombed out buildings, cemeteries that had once been parks and cripples who'd lived through Hell. I tried to imagine what it felt like to live here. What effect might all these broken buildings, grief-stricken faces, and tombstones have on a child's psyche?

As my two week experience in the Balkans drifts away in time, I still feel a deepened connection to my own humanity. And I'll never forget the passion of song, the warmth of the hugs, and the tears in our eyes as we said goodbye to the angels of the Adriatic.

Rebecca Kraus studied psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara and Social Policy at the University of York, England. Former managing editor of Entertainment@Home magazine, she has contributed stories of travel and pop culture to many publications: from Request, Rolling Stone and Premiere to Soma and Abroad View. When she's not traveling around the world, she makes her living writing for the Games Design team at Mattel in Los Angeles. See www.globalchild.org.