

Expedition Report: Walking in the Western Balkans



The Plan

The idea for this project came from a deep appreciation, and longing for, natural forested landscapes; an awareness of their fragility, and a drive to document them.

Although the Scottish landscape is inarguably beautiful, the absence of the native forests feels like a palpable loss. As magnificent as the gorse studded heathlands and desolate moorlands are, the glimpse of spindly birch peeking out of a gully, or the sight of bluebells covering an empty hillside serve as jarring reminders of the forest that once was.

Through this project we aimed to capture the beauty of the native forests in the Western Balkans, documenting them to help promote global forest conservation and restoration.

Forests need us, but we need them more. The Woodwell Climate Organisation reports that, globally, forests absorb nearly 16 billion metric tonnes of carbon dioxide per year.

At one point, forests of birch, hazel, oak and pine would have covered most of Scotland. Today, according to Scotland's Nature Agency, native woodland covers just 4% of the total land area. The remaining woodlands are scarce, fragmented, and are under extreme threat from overgrazing, invasive species, disease, and climate change.

In comparison, the Forest Stewardship Council reports that The Adria-Balkan Region has a forest cover of over 40%. However, these forests are also under threat. These factors include the development of infrastructure, resource extraction, and intensive agriculture.

According to the organisation One Earth, one of the main conservation actions being implemented is the cross-boundary collaboration with all countries that share wildlife species currently threatened by the changing landscape. By walking through Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania, we hope our project can aid ecological connectivity across international borders. Doing so by presenting the Western Balkans as a region of essential and precious biodiversity, rather than an area fragmented by international borders.

We were drawn to the Western Balkans by a longing for forested landscapes, and what we found there exceeded our highest expectations. We hope that by documenting these landscapes, we can aid in their conservation. The plan was to travel, without flying, by train, bus and ferry from Scotland to Bosnia and Herzegovina. From there, we would navigate the trail on foot to Albania.

The Via Dinarica

The Via Dinarica is a 1930km long-distance trail stretching from Albania to Slovenia, following the Dinaric Alps. There are actually three Via Dinarica hiking trails. The oldest and main route, the White Trail, connects the highest peaks of the Dinaric Alps. The Green Route passes through valleys and forest. The Blue Trail follows the Adriatic coast. The paths are marked and maintained primarily by volunteers and are considered by many as *concept trails*, with some disconnected sections that must be patched together by varying methods. The 'Via Dinarica Project' was launched in 2010 with the aim of promoting eco-tourism in the Western Balkans. The initial trail strung together ex-Yugoslavian trekking paths with former military tracks, ancient trading routes and shepherds' trails. The vision was for a trail that not only promoted tourism, but also cross-border cooperation and ecological conservation. On our expedition, we decided to follow the main, most established, White Trail.



Our route

Logistics

As this is not yet a well-travelled route, traversing these landscapes would require our own navigation. We spent the first few months of 2025 carefully planning the expedition, taking into consideration access to water, and resupply points for food. We obtained the necessary permits and booked our train to France. We poured over guidebooks and maps, searching for information on the allusive Via Dinarica White Trail. Thankfully, we were able to find useful advice and guidance on online forums, as well as route reviews on hiking apps.

We aimed to camp whenever possible. In areas where wild camping is prohibited, we sought out guest houses, mountain refuges and hostels. In areas without these, we knew we may be relying on the generosity of local communities to allow us lodging.

We spent two weeks travelling from Paris to Jablanica, where we would begin our walk. The route we chose took us first through the French Alps, where we could begin to test out our mountain legs. We then travelled by bus and train to Ancona, Italy, before taking an overnight ferry to Croatia. From there it was a bus ride into Bosnia and Herzegovina.

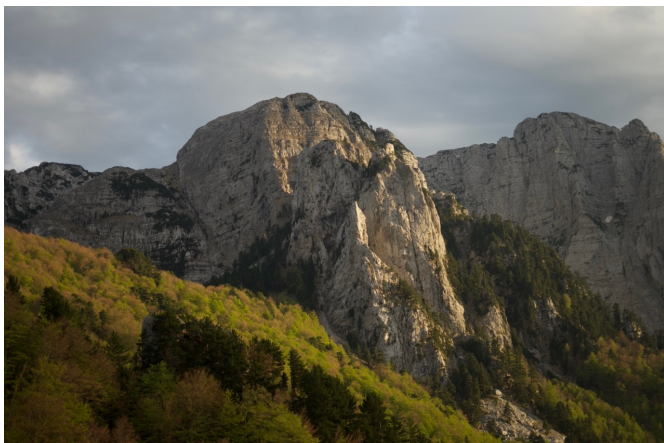


The Expedition

Our first day on the trail led us straight into dense forest and steeply up into the Prenj Mountain Range.

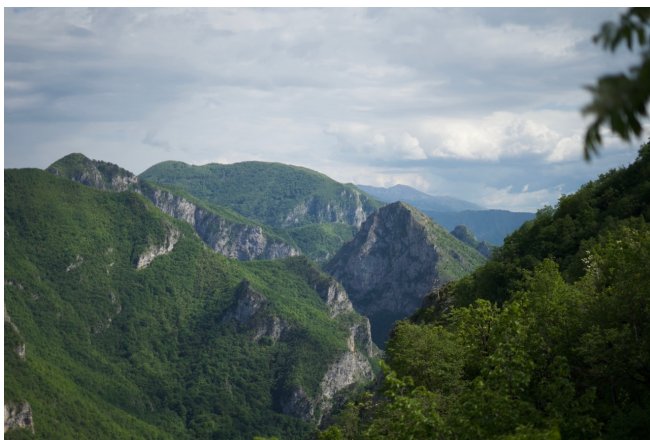
"Sunlight flickers through new beech leaves. Caterpillars descend from above on thin threads, relentlessly tickling bare skin. Lungs heave and legs burn as we climb. The forest is denser and wilder than expected; views through occasional gaps in the trees reveal an endless sea of green. We are making our way up the spine of a ridge. On either side the ground drops steeply away; cascading beech and pine. Years of fallen leaves crumble and slip under foot; the musky smell of earth and rot. The huge, blackened mass of a lightning struck tree bars our way. We clamber over twisted, charcoal limbs; reminded of the power of this mountainous landscape. Hours slip by in shades of green and brown, the climb unending. Soft beech trees give way to pine; their shiny needles a sharp contrast. The sun makes its steady way towards the horizon. Legs ache to stop; minds dreaming of food and rest. The slanting roof of the mountain hut welcomes us. Layers shed, beds made and a fire lit. Our path continues for many weeks; through valleys and over mountains. But for now, the world is dark and quiet and all there is to do is sleep."

- An excerpt from Meg's journal.



Prenj was our first real glimpse of the beautiful wilderness in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We spent days walking across the rocky heights of this karst landform, looking down on the dense green forest below. As timeless as these mountains felt, the warnings of landmines served as stark reminders of the recent conflict in this region.

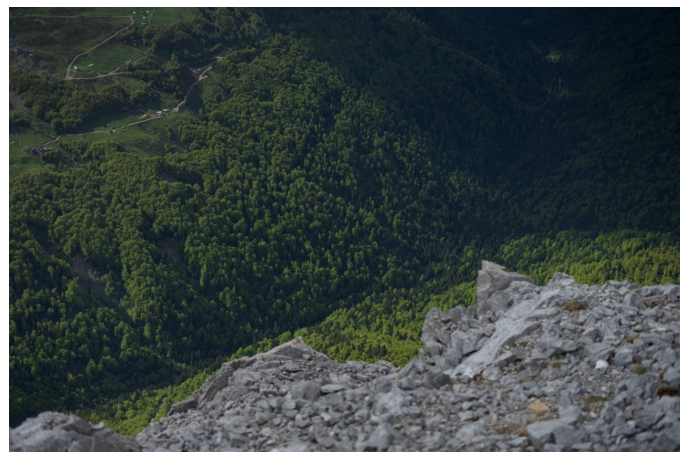
We spent the next two weeks walking towards the Montenegrin border. During this time there was a sudden change of weather that brought unseasonable rain and snow. We had to adapt to these new conditions and change our plans so that we spent less time camping at altitude. We spent more nights in guest houses and camped only at lower elevations. We relied heavily on the people we encountered during this time and were shown immense generosity and kindness.



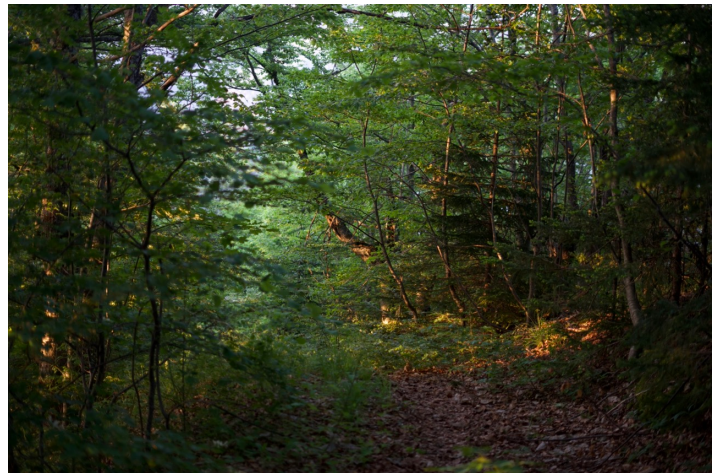
Before crossing the border into Montenegro, we passed through Sutjeska National Park, which contains Perucica, one of last remaining primeval forests in Europe. The UNESCO world heritage conservation states that “Perućica conserves a diverse complex of protected forest ecosystems which exemplify the South-Eastern European mixed forests terrestrial eco region. The area has an exceptionally high nature conservation value, including extensive old-growth forests”. We feel incredibly grateful and privileged to have witnessed this place.



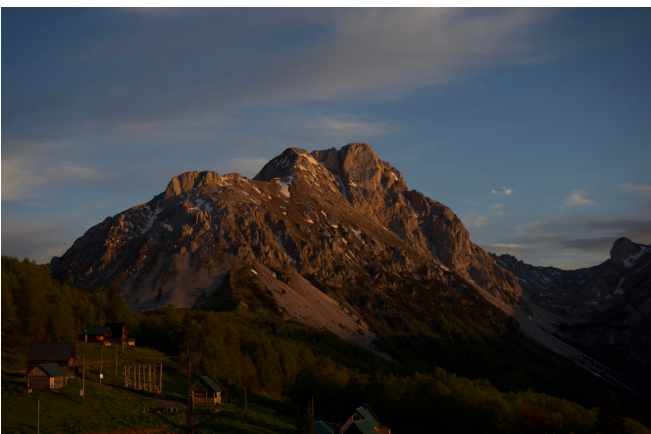
Shortly after we crossed the border into Montenegro we entered Durmitor National Park. We were greeted by clear lakes and dense pine forests, along with snow, sleet and rain. We heard rumours of bears further up the valley but did not encounter any ourselves. We had some of our hardest days on the trail scrambling over icy mountain passes, nevertheless the beauty of Durmitor made it feel hard to leave.



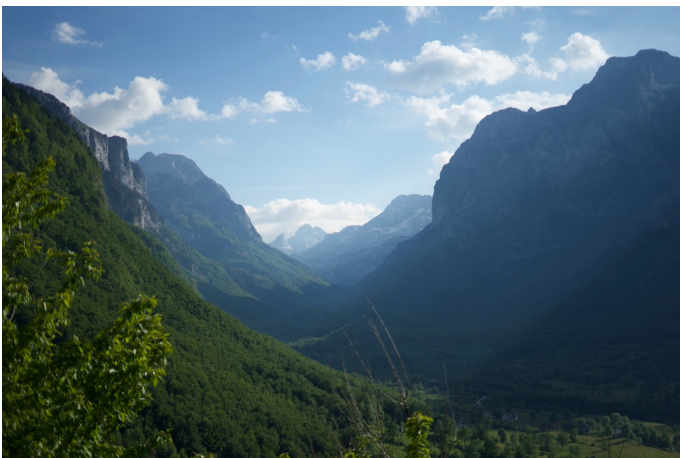
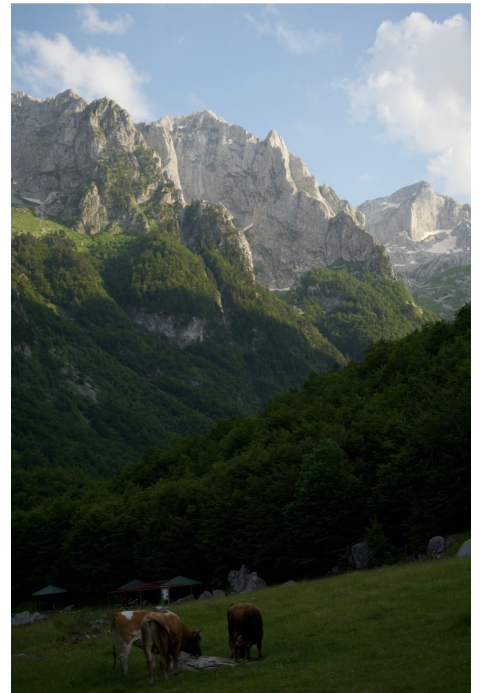
The weather still felt more like November than May as we continued through Montenegro. With sore backs and blistered feet, we arrived at Biogradska Gora National Park. The park contains another of Europe's last remaining virgin forests. Surrounding the dark waters of Lake Biograd, this forest is home to over 86 species of trees and bushes, including beech, pine, maple and ash.



We spent the next few days following a ridge-line up to the summit of Kom Kucki, where we had our first view of the Albanian mountains. We walked into Albania and into what finally felt like summer. The next two weeks were full of blue skies, lush forests and flower meadows as we approached the end of our expedition.



The seven weeks we spent walking on the Via Dinarica were as beautiful and rewarding as they were challenging. We wanted to be immersed in forests and to experience real wilderness, this we did. The picturesque fantasy of waking with the sun and skimming effortlessly over mountain ranges, we did not find. Instead, we experienced a landscape that is unrelenting in its power, awe-inspiringly beautiful and, at times, stunningly brutal. Our carefully laid plans quickly became somewhat obsolete as factors out of our control forced us to adapt. The promise of the forests ahead kept us motivated. As the weeks past, the translucent new leaves around us became solid and we too, began to toughen.



We set out on this trip with the goal of documenting the forests of the Western Balkans through photography and film. We were humbled in this mission by the sheer vastness and beauty of these landscapes, which felt impossible to fully capture. On our journey, we experienced pristine wilderness and met wonderful people. We also witnessed the lasting effects of the recent conflict, the ramifications of changing climate, and the results of the exploitation of natural resources. We came to see that these landscapes, from deep canyons to craggy peaks, are as fragile as they are powerful.

We are currently curating a large catalogue of photographs from our trip, and will be sharing them online. We hope that these images can help encourage the protection of the world's native forests. With the help from some talented friends, we have put together a short film of our expedition, which can be found on YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijY3CDhAaul&t=95s>

We are both currently working towards our Mountain Leader qualifications, with the eventual goal of becoming Mountain Guides. Through this, we hope to join the growing movement of environmental education and help others connect with the wilderness.

Thank you to the Des Rubens and Bill Wallace Grant for helping make this trip possible.

