

Bosnia, Easter 2001

by Maggie Beecher

Here is a report of an experience which was interesting, educational, rewarding and great fun. The trip was organised by "Hope and Aid Direct" - of whom I cannot speak highly enough. If, after reading this you are interested in participating in a convoy, there will be one in August to Belarus, and then every year in October and Easter. You need to raise £2,000 (now £2,500 to £3,000) per truck, you do not need an HGV license, and there is usually a load ready to be transported if you don't have the time to collect. You need to have an adventurous spirit, to enjoy being a team player and have 10 days or so at your disposal. Please contact Mike Kelly on 029 20 485939 or 07932 744081 for more details.

We departed from Cardiff at 6.30 Sunday 8 April, with a truck loaded to 8 tonnes. Various goods had been donated from Church groups, schools, (A special thanks to Jan and David Pedwell who between them co ordinated one third of the load!) playgroups, the health food wholesaler "Nature's Table" and kind individuals. I bought food from funds raised and donations. My friend Colleen had flown into Heathrow from the States 2 days previously and was my co-driver for most of the journey.

The convoy consisted of 5 trucks and 12 people:

Charles (the Leader) and his girlfriend, Bev (Essex)
Tom (Slough), Lin (Buckingham) and Paul (Cardiff)
Steve, Will and David, (Liphook, Hants)
Phil (Cardiff) and Paul (Swindon)
Me (Cardiff) and Colleen. Quincy CA - USA)

We all had vehicle names for recognition - ours was "Bad Girls" !

The outward journey was fun and uneventful, taking just over 2 days. The route was through France, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Slovenia, sleeping in the truck and showering in autobahn service stations. The 2nd night stop in Gralla, Austria, was proceeded by a dinner where it was clear that we were to have a great time together, the banter and jokes whizzing back and fore from the word go.

We arrived in Zagreb on Tuesday pm. and went straight to the 1st drop off.....Gornja Bistra is a hospital for severely handicapped children. It was a heartbreaking sight and the drop off was small. Most of the kids were bed ridden and few could even appreciate toys. It was interesting for the people who had visited before that there was definite progress regarding the facilities for these kids. Then on to Donja Stubica, an adult mental hospital where a few of our group delivered various items such as wheelchairs, climbing frames and some clothes etc.

Day 4

We went to an orphanage run by Carmelite Sisters, delivered more boxes, mostly food, and ate a good lunch washed down with local wine and Slivovic, the local schnapps. The Nuns abstained! The forecourt of the orphanage was being improved and I am hoping to collect some bikes and roller-blades for the next visit.

That was Zagreb done. Now on to Vukovar - an entirely different story. During the journey we began noticing the houses that were being , or had been, rebuilt. The government supplies new windows and a roof to demolished homes.

The new bricks are obvious and whatever fascia the original house was built in was irrelevant. It was rebuilt or repaired in red brick with awful pointing! Apparently the original family must be seen to inhabit their plot before government help is given. There are landmine signs everywhere. This is a stick in the ground with a rag tied to it, but we drove along carefully and were not affected.

Day 5

We arrived in Osijek and were met by priests from the Adventist Church and were given a good meal. Then on to Vukovar. The priest Damir was to be our sponsor for the three days and we stayed with families, Colleen and me drawing the long straw and having a flat to ourselves! Vukovar was 90% shelled in the war. Most of the remaining buildings were full of holes, many had a few bricks remaining and weeds the size of trees were growing out of the piles of rubble. The whole town was an eyesore, there is little work and most people have next to nothing. Before the war the main employer was the Bata Shoe factory. Then there were 20,000 employees, now there are 400. There is not the money to get the factory properly up and running.

Day 6

Was gloriously sunny. We unloaded three trucks into the Velepronet Yard, a warehouse where we sorted the goods into family piles of provisions, clothes, toiletries and blankets which we then put back on to the truck and distributed to the most needy. I took a box to a little old lady dressed in rags, she showed me her home (I didn't show how shocked I was!) Tears rolled down her cheeks. That started me off, I hugged her and this was probably the most emotional moment of my trip and not captured on film! Serb families get no state benefit, Croatsians get a little, and most are destitute and desperate but still manage to smile! The Adventists were taking care of all poor families, regardless of religion. That evening a really sweet Serb lady called Mira, and her Down's Syndrome daughter, entertained us to a wonderful meal. It's rare one comes across someone so resourceful. We know she has no income yet she appeared as happy as if she'd won the lottery!

Day 7

We dropped off 90 parcels at a kindergarten in Ilok, a nearby town and were plied with Slivovic and Croatian coffee! Ilok is was a lovely old walled town but now has the eerie emptiness of a town with no work to offer its inhabitants. It seems that Croatian Serbs exist on humanitarian aid and help from relatives. Then we made a diversion to a mass burial ground. Zeljco, a helpful local chap, had escaped a mass murder when the truck which the Serbs had thrown him into made a wrong turning. Many of his friends and relatives had faced the firing squad and this graveyard was just one of many in both Croatia and Bosnia. So many everywhere, all new, all well tended. Zeljco told us of his experiences in a concentration camp. Almost back into Vukovar, Damir showed us the hospital that had been invaded by Serb soldiers, which resulted in the well documented massacre after the capture of the town. We took boxes to a gypsy camp at Bel Manastere and in the evening we ate a meal with the locals. The table was set like a "Dinner Set" wedding but we had one course - bony fish soup! They entertained us with their great musicianship. They knew all words all to the songs, which fleetingly reminded me of our choir in a pub situation!

Day 8

Was the drive to Banja Luka. This was pretty uneventful. We had to suffer the bureaucracy of Bosnian Customs who were very suspicious of the load in my truck, which was still full at this stage. They didn't keep us too long, fortunately, but we had to pay them a fee for being kept at their border!!!! On then to the Army Base which was to be our home for three days, sleeping in large tents containing several bunks. The first night it was—5C° inside the tent, but for the following two we were moved to one in the Metal factory itself, so at least it was warmer.

Day 9

The third night we shared with about 40 squaddies who woke at 3 am for a military operation. Trouble was brewing in Mostar! The UN have a stabilization force (SFOR) fully operational in the area and we found the soldiers, mostly Brit, Canadian and Dutch, most helpful. It is a fact that the army will need to keep stability in this area for years to come. This day was David's birthday and we managed to produce a cake. (I didn't need to exercise my culinary skills at all) It was delicious and we enjoyed yet another fun evening.

Day 10

I took my truck to customs clearance #2. They tried to put obstacles in the way and make life difficult but thanks to the army's interpreter we were on our way before noon, then dropped off some boxes at an orphanage. This was full of happy kids of all ages but very few staff. I pulled out a trendy white dress, about size 6, and gave it to a teenager who was obviously pleased but it was my guess she didn't know how to show emotion. We gave them toys, clothes, food etc and they were very happy. While we were doing this three of the trucks visited other camps in and around Banja Luka that the army had recommended as being in need. Apparently the most desperate people of the whole trip seemed to be refugees living in Kosorac school. A fight broke out over towels and they treated a pen as if it were a gold nugget! Many of our group were emotionally affected by these desperate people.

Day 11

This day the weather had turned cold and wet. We left the base and Chas, our leader, said "the scenery will be quite nice today!" This was an understatement. The deep ravines, wild rock formation, waterfalls and mountains were spectacular! It was snowing by the time we arrived at our destination, Boskanski Petrovic, where we met up with G5 (UN civil liaison) officers/soldiers who advised us not to deliver to this Kosovo Albanian Refugee camp as there was the possibility of danger (we persuaded them otherwise.) As "Hope and Aid Direct" had been there 6 months ago and found the residents living in grim conditions in large tents, it was encouraging to find 12 wooden huts had been erected, each housing around 12 families. The rooms were tiny with wall to wall beds, a small television and electric fire. The ladies were only keen to show off their big families. The fact that there is no hope for a decent future for them doesn't enter the equation. There is little else but sex for the adults to enjoy out here!! One of the other trucks that had been emptied in Vukovar had been filled with a large quantity of fruit and veg, surplus to requirement by the army. This would have normally been thrown away, as apparently is a large quantity of food every day. The amount of waste would be sinful anywhere, leave alone Bosnia and I will be bringing it to the attention of people here that I think may interested and able to help.

(Don't hold out much hope. The ol' bureaucracy again!) If anyone reading this has any contacts in this area PLEASE get in touch. Food wastage is dear to my heart! There was rubbish everywhere in the camp and I dread to think of the state the 10 beautiful prams will be by next week! They were excited and constantly wanted their pictures taken. One father was pleading for help because of his son's eye condition. He had learned to say " please for a doctor"! I feel too much was dropped off here and the remnants after the 12 huts had been filled were likely to be sold. And the proceeds? Cigs! Even young boys under 10 were being encouraged by their Dads. One wonders where they get the money! What is needed here is adult education --- on tobacco damage, birth control etc. plus millions of contraceptives. At the moment, Hope and Aid Direct are pursuing this area.

After 5 hrs. we were on our way and stopped at a roadside restaurant for the most delicious lamb, which the landlady produced in minutes. How did she know a party of 12 starving Brits would descend?! Since arriving in Bosnia we had eaten well: too well! The food in the mess was tasty, huge choices and well presented and this comes from a "gourmet". We arrive at this place, the feast continues and my jeans get tighter! Another fun night with 12 extremely tired Conveyers, not one of whom winged!

Day 12

After a local B&B and another tale from the owners who had had to abandon their business for four years, we were on our way, stopping at Regensberg, Bavaria, then a full day's drive to Calais, via Lille, where we dropped off Colleen to get her train to Paris then flight to San Francisco.

We caught the 19.20pm Ferry and I arrived in Cardiff, exhausted but exhilarated! What did I gain from this experience? A cocktail of emotions which are difficult to describe and wonderful memories that will be with me for evermore! I can honestly say, as an intrepid traveller that this was one of my richest experiences.

What is needed in Croatia and Bosnia? Nourishing, dried and packeted food, in date, outer clothing, shoes, especially trainers in reasonable condition, toiletries, blankets, bedding, TOWELS, bikes, STATIONERY, simple children's books, BASEBALL CAPS, footballs etc...If you have any item(s) you feel may be appreciated please see the contact page and get in touch with us. Thanks!