



# A pre-War tour

In the late 1930s, CTC member **Frank Jones** toured Yugoslavia and Albania. This is an edited extract from his diary

The riders got to Yugoslavia via a ferry from Venice, having travelled by train from Paris to get there

**H**aving dispatched the bikes, Stan and I left Paris with a carriage to ourselves. We arrived at Turin next morning, where we should have met Steve, the other member of our tour. We missed him and so left for Venice by a later train. At Venice, no Steve; worse still, no bikes. We had to stay the night.

Next day, after a bathe at the Lido, we rescued the bikes from the station. The Italian customs official only let us have them on condition that we took them straight onto the boat for Susak, a port just over the frontier in Yugoslavia. We put the bikes on a gondola and, accompanied by a soldier attached to the customs authorities, got them on board ship.

We found Steve at Susak the next afternoon. Before leaving we had to deposit £2 each on our bikes. Our intention was to ride right down the Yugoslavian coast into Albania. A little way down the road we learned our first word of Serbo-Croatian: 'sladoled' (ice cream). We stayed the night at Crikvenica, where we learned two more useful words: 'pivo' (beer) and 'sleovitsa' (plum brandy).

## A rough ride

My front mudguard soon succumbed to the local roads, which are very bad. The coastal scenery is magnificent, however. The sea is like the Reckitt's advertisement [for blue carbolic soap], the sky is blue, and the coast itself is a succession of bays and inlets. A maze of islands rising

sheer out of the water completes the picture.

On many mornings we would get off the bikes and have a dip in the sea. We had no costumes but owing to the almost complete lack of traffic along the coast road, neither were they necessary. The best means of communication here is by a coastal steamer service.

As the northern coast is so barren and deserted, accommodation and food are hard to find. Wine is all one can get in the villages. The people are extremely poor and usually only have enough food for themselves. Leaving Crikvenica, we had to ride about 70 kilos over atrocious roads in blazing sunshine with nothing to eat or drink. We eventually reached Karlobag where we stopped the night. The next day we managed to get some tasteless fish in oil from a fisherman's cottage.

The women seem to do all the farm work here, and it is a common sight to see a woman bent nearly double carrying a huge pack of hay with a man walking along beside her carrying nothing. The peasant women wear the national dress as a matter of course. In the north it is black with bright, embroidered stockings and blouses. In the south it is white, with white stockings. Sandals are worn universally. The men in the north wear red pillbox hats with a fringe down the back of their necks, and the most amazingly patched trousers. In the south the men's dress gets more Eastern – baggy breeches and coloured sashes, and a variety of headgear, small felt hats something like fezzes being most popular.





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### Parted by punctures

We had an unsettled night in Obravac, then got up at five o’clock in the morning and rode until ten, when we stopped until four o’clock in the afternoon. We followed this plan whenever possible to avoid riding in the heat of the day. Sometimes no food or shelter was available at ten so we had to ride on until it was. Stan (on 1¼ inch steels) and Steve (on hosepipe tubulars) were suffering acutely from punctures. I had some tandem tyres and no punctures at all.

We met several bands of gypsies on the road. Romantic looking roughs, striding along with their wives and donkeys, both loaded up with wooden water barrels and other impedimenta. We were very grateful to one band who showed us a water hole when we were thirsty.

Between Omis and Metkovic we all lost each other. Stan, I later learned, was delayed by punctures. He stopped short of Metkovic and, after even more punctures, finally reached Dubrovnik. As he only had a fortnight’s holiday he went home from there. Steve also had more punctures, and after another day’s riding his tyres became unmendable. He got to Kotor by lorry. From there he went to Durazzo [now Durrës] by boat, where I ended up meeting him a week later.

Dubrovnik is hopelessly touristy, something like Brighton. However, I did quite well myself. I had, in a private house, an enormous room with a large double bed. A divan covered with a marvellously worked piece

of tapestry stood against one wall. I asked about the bike. It was promptly brought in (filthy as usual) and leant against this divan. I was speechless. I thought what would have happened in England in similar circumstances.

Soon after I left Dubrovnik the next morning, I supplemented an inadequate breakfast with a tin of sardines in oil. I put the oil on the chain. From Dubrovnik southwards the land is more fertile and water more plentiful. Accommodation was much easier to find, as there were many small watering places along the coast. I stayed that night at Crnojevica.

### An Englishman in Albania

Kotor was the next stop: not a very impressive place itself, but reached by following the coast round innumerable attractive little bays. I passed livestock being driven to market – usually one cow surrounded by a motley collection of sheep, goats and even pigs. I also saw an army officer on a bike with his sword in a clip on the forks.

I left Kotor early in the morning and started immediately on a 4,000ft climb. Towards the top it was refreshingly cool. On the way up a lorry passed me and eased up for me to hang on. The awful surface and hairpin bends caused me to decline with thanks. From the top, magnificent map-like views were obtainable. A curious thing in such a barren country is that now and then there are delightful scented breezes. Wayside herbs, baking in the sun, I imagine.



Frank had no punctures thanks to the tandem tyres on his solo, but Steve and Stan were plagued with them

That night I reached Padgorica [now Titograd] and after I had put up in a hotel, a man who spoke English quite well made himself known and helped me to change some money into Albanian. We also had a very interesting political discussion and some beer. The late king it seemed was 'a very good man, very democratic, everybody cry when he die.' The present king is a minor and his uncle is acting as regent. My friend's description was graphic and to the point: 'sonofabitch'.

Next morning I left for the Albanian frontier. About halfway there I stopped to eat a melon that

I'd bought from a small village. While I was sitting there an English car (the first I had seen) drew up. 'Albania?' queried one of the occupants.

'Yes, I hope so,' I replied casually.

'An Englishman!' They sat aghast for a few moments. When they had recovered we commiserated together about the roads, and they passed on. I got to the frontier a little later and presented my document regarding the £2 deposited on my bike. This was all in order except that I should have to go back to Padgorica to get my money. I gathered that one of the customs officials would come back with me when the local bus turned up. I was in no hurry so slept in the shade while we waited.

### Travelling light

The Albanian customs were equally polite when I got there, offering me a chair, a fag and a drink. In Yugoslavia shorts occasion little interest; the more outlandishly one is dressed the less notice is taken. Not so Albania. When I arrived at Scutari all the small boys immediately piped up 'Touristi, Touristi', and I was glad to get into an ancient pair of flannel trousers I had with me. I also bought a shirt here and chucked my other one away.

A few tips on travelling light. Sandals save taking any socks. An old jacket, left at Venice, kept me warm on the boat crossing over. With a little thought it is possible to travel with the proverbial toothbrush. Such luxuries as pyjamas and underwear are soon dispensed with after a little practice. I bought a thin racing jersey in Paris on the way back which in combination with two shirts I had acquired by then was quite sufficient to keep me warm crossing the Channel.

To return to Scutari: it is very Eastern, with open shops and a picturesque collection of inhabitants. Very baggy trousers with the seats reaching at least down to the knees are general with the men, although the younger generation sometimes wear ordinary lounge suits. The baggy trousers are worn with a very short embroidered waistcoat and a side coloured sash. Headgear: usually a fez (often white).

The women carry pots and bundles on their heads – old women, that is. It is unusual to see a young girl, as most of the population are Mohammedans. At the hour of prayer the priests can be heard calling the faithful to prayer from the balconies on the minarets of the mosques.

### Trouble with trains

The next day I suffered for 125 kilos to get to Tirana, the capital. A crowning effort was somersaulting into a six-foot irrigation ditch running by the side of the 'road'. Fortunately there was no water in it at the time.

I often saw snakes and tortoises, sometimes in ditches and sometimes basking in the sun. Crickets kept up an infernal chorus wherever there was any green stuff. Around Tirana, where there is irrigation, frogs took over.

Tirana has a very fine main street, Avenue Zog, with some fine government buildings grouped round a spacious square at one end. At the moment that's all there is. The old part of the town is very similar to Scutari.

Arriving at the main port of Durazzo [now Durrësi] the next day, I was met with: 'Doctor Livingstone, I presume?' 'How the devil did you get here, Steve?'

Explanations followed and after spending that night under mosquito nets we left the next day for Bari in Italy by boat. We arrived late that evening and after our usual beano with the customs we proceeded to eat ourselves stiff and then retired to bed.

After breakfast Steve bought some tyres and we rolled off northwards, scarcely believing that such a smooth road could exist. In the fields by the side of the road, we passed numbers of donkeys walking round and round in circles. This motion is utilised via two large wooden bevels to raise water in a chain of buckets for irrigation purposes.

We began our journey home by train at Foggia. We had to get off the France-bound train at Bardonechia, the last station in Italy, as we had only been able to send our bikes as far as this. We found them quickly and tried first flattery and then blasphemy to persuade the official to put them on the same train again. We were unsuccessful and had to wait for the next train. As the officials wanted an excessive amount to send them to Paris we only sent them to Modare, the first French station. From there we managed to send them through to London. Back on the train just in time, we arrived at Paris early next morning. After two lunches and a dinner each in Paris and another night's travel we arrived back in London rather in need of a bath.

