

TRAVEL TALK - LETTERS FROM ALBANIA

By Jeanette Lizotte

By Chase Binder: Retired Bow High School Librarian Jeanette Lizotte is in Tirana, Albania, for a two-year stint as head librarian for the brand new international school, Albanian College of Tirana. This is the third in her occasional series, Letters from Albania. She and her husband Jeff and their two dogs, Basin and Scuppy, are so smitten with the country and the experience that they will be re-upping for another two years at the end of their contract in August, 2017. If a similar adventure appeals to you, visit International School Services at iss.edu.



Drive through Albania

It's hard to believe we've been in Albania for almost 18 months! Each month has brought new and interesting experiences and I think we will be discovering new things for many more months.

Most often life here seems natural...extremely enjoyable with an almost leisurely pace. Jeff is still relishing the European approach to food. There are no supermarkets, so you have to get to know the butcher, fish monger, produce stands and (best of all) the bakeries. Jeff heads out in the mornings, dogs neatly tucked beside him, and strolls through our section of Tirana looking for the freshest ingredients for dinner. The locals are cheerful and friendly and I know that Jeff would say this is a wonderful way to experience life in retirement.

Now that we are a bit more acclimated, we have been able to get out and explore the countryside. From the steep mountain scenery to the beautiful beaches along the Adriatic, Albania is just stunning. Even better, the citrus harvest is in full swing now and you can find wonderful roadside stands and well as street vendors who sell the produce that comes in from the farms every day. Even the trees in our yard are bursting with lemons, oranges and mandarin oranges.

Albania is a mix of the old world and the new. There is a tremendous growth in the infrastructure—it seems like they are working on the roads day and night. At the same time, there is a large Roma (gypsy) population in the city. Many are employed as street sweepers, and they use homemade pine bough brooms. They roam the streets in large motorized bicycles and carts, always ready to pick up discarded items like old washing machines and carpets for recycling. They announce their arrival by singing some ancient Gregorian-like songs. Along with our neighbors' roosters and the early morning Muslim call to prayers, the city feels and sounds timeless.

The holiday season is quite different here. No nativity scenes. No



Ice skating at Holiday carnival

Santa Claus. But there are wonderful winter-themed decorations along the streets and boulevards as well as a winter carnival right in Tirana's Mother Theresa Square (named after the most notable Albanian, of course!). Locals products were everywhere—honey, crafts, rugs, table linens and more. We had a wonderful time sitting in the sun and enjoying the local wine.

Albanians also have a unique way to celebrate the end of the year.



Chestnuts for sale

Many families that have yards buy a live turkey a few weeks ahead of New Year's Eve for "fattening up." Come New Year's Eve, the turkey is ceremoniously sacrificed! You often see live turkeys and chickens for sale on the streets.

As wonderful as life is here, I do think of home and how I miss some things. You can't find New England clam chowder, maple syrup or corn tortillas. There are very few clothes dryers and I wish I had my cast iron skillet! And I am finding some special challenges: the metric system, military time, reading the temperature in Celsius and their weekly calendar goes Monday-Sunday--crazy!

My work at Albania College is fun and rewarding. Our enrollment has almost tripled and the curriculum is taking shape. The student's mother tongue is Albanian, but classes are taught in English, though French and Mandarin are offered as foreign languages—and the Albanian education ministry requires all international students to take Albanian literature. But more about the school in my next letter.

Although we have made a few trips home, we are finding the experience of living and working abroad so compelling that we can't resist signing up for another 2-year contract. We'll be right here in Albania, anxious to see the progress they are making on so many fronts. Of course, Albania is also a great launch pad for exploring Europe. We're headed to Florence, Italy, soon and have just returned from a ferry trip to Greece—complete with dogs!

It's wonderful to be able to explore the continent with our dogs, but they've also gotten used to international air travel. Basin, our Golden Retriever, seems to do well in the special pressurized cargo area, and Scuppy, our Yorkie, sits in the cabin with Jeff. It's been pretty routine, actually, except for one incident where a TSA agent mistook Scuppy for a live chicken! Too funny!

For those who are wondering what impact our elections have had in this part of the world, it seems to be shock. Albanians loved Bill Clinton—in fact one of my Albanian friends is name Clinton after him—and are saying, perhaps jokingly, that America will never be the same.

Until next time! Jeanette Lizotte



Roadside produce, honey, tea

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