

The Local Hero

In 2015 I met Ana, an inspiring young woman during a trip to Pristina. Oozing with self-expression and individuality she was a symbol of the new Kosovo. Also, a major player in the driving force behind the burgeoning feminist movement. We spent a wonderful afternoon together. I felt privileged to learn about her life and the city where she was born. This, in a country slowly coming to grips with the bloody conflict that happened in the late 1990's.

A shock of black dreadlocks, she sashayed her way across Skanderbeg Square. As she got closer, I could see that her rock-chick look was topped off by the piercings dotted about her face. And a sleeve of tattoos, where a fine black outline of a rose, with razor-sharp thorns took centre stage as it twisted its way around her shoulder. She was swathed in a sea of elderly Muslim women, covered by hijabs in cobalt blue and hues of green and russet. Weighed down by mesh bags groaning with fresh fruit and vegetables. Then, there were the white-collar workers. Surrounded by debris crumbled from the walls enclosing the square. Sitting in their drab office attire on layers of slithered slate. Chomping on sandwiches they'd slipped out of lunch boxes, nattering with colleagues. Everyone in the square was taking full advantage of the bright autumn afternoon and all heads turned as the black clad Ana strolled into the limelight.

I'd been zigzagging my way down the Balkan Peninsula, an area fragmented by war and destruction in the not so distant past. Whilst staying in Niška Banja, in southern Serbia, I'd booked a seat for the bus that would take me on the 7-hour journey, over the border and into Kosovo. This decision was much to the horror of my Serbian friends. Shaking their heads furiously and with eyes growing wider they urged me not to go. It was dangerous. Their bias was sparked by the propaganda surrounding Serbia's continued refusal to recognise Kosovo's independence. This underpinned the scorn directed towards the nation and her people. I didn't cancel my ticket and was so glad I went.

When I finally arrived at my homestay all I wanted to do was sleep. However, a furious curiosity got the better of me. So, I dumped my bag and was soon off exploring the city. I'd landed in Skanderbeg Square looking for the 'Newborn' sculpture but even better, I'd found Ana. Rather than dig out a map, I tend to ask local people for directions and in the past, it's opened up so many brilliant cultural opportunities. So, there I was, unable to stop myself, I *needed* to chat to this iconic gal. I simply walked over and asked her the way to the monument. In an instant, she swung her bubble-gum pink backpack off her shoulder and dropped it to the ground. And using the heel of her hand, she pushed her sunglasses up onto her forehead, to expose huge milk chocolate eyes and a glint of silver stabbing her eyebrow

In perfect English and with no hint of an accent, she smiled, "Hey, sure!".

She started pointing and talking me through the directions I should take. Then suddenly stopped mid-sentence and turned her face to mine, with an expression that looked like she'd just had a brainwave.

Glancing swiftly at her watch, she paused for a split second.

Before hesitantly asking, "I've finished classes for today, so if you want, I can take you?".

As we walked away from the square, probably looking like a couple of friends in full mourning she said, "Your hair's cool, I love purple". Then after quickly running her eyes over me said, "And your boots! Wow look at all those zips".

It was almost like we clicked immediately; two women, divided by 30 years, neither any intent to conform to societal expectations.

A 19-year-old art student, she was in her first year at the University of Pristina. Being the creative type, Ana had shaped her own unique style in a society seeped in modesty. There were no body art outlets in Pristina and hungry for self-expression, she'd taken it upon herself to modify her own body - with a little help from YouTube. She'd pierced her nose, tragus, navel, lip and eyebrow. Tattooed her arm and transformed her hair

into a wild tangle of dreads. Remembering the pain from my own skin being drilled into, by a *professional* tattoo artist. I asked if it hurt.

She giggled, "Oh yeah, but it was worth it".

We passed a dingy car park, attached to a derelict building that had once been a supermarket. Scruffy teenagers in ripped t-shirts and oversized khaki bottoms had claimed it as their own. Practicing kick starts on battered skateboards, the tinny shriek of Nirvana filling the air, as they yelled 'cool' and high-fived whenever a trick was perfected.

Ana pointed out her brother and waved over at a friend and shrugged apologetically.

"I need to be home by 7, I'm piercing *her* belly button", she chuckled.

It seemed like she was setting a trend, inspiring other young Kosovars to embrace their identity. In a country ripped apart by war and hatred and playing catch up with the rest of Europe. And indeed, the rest of the world.

'Newborn' stood in bold block capitals. Each letter represented by its own 10-foot metal sculpture. Unveiled on February 17th, 2008, to signify Kosovo's independence from Serbia. Its original colour was yellow, although Ana explained the design was prone to change every year. She told me in 2013, it was painted with the flags of all the nations that had, so far, recognised Kosovo as an independent state. Her face twisted, as if in pain and she shook her head in frustration. As she said.

"It's good we're seen as a country by some, but we're still isolated and can't go abroad because they won't give us a visa".

It seemed that independence hadn't changed life in Kosovo in the ways people had hoped. 'Newborn' was situated slap bang in the middle of a busy shopping precinct. Kosovars trudged past it in droves seemingly oblivious - they'd long given up hope of any prosperity. On the other hand, tourists rushed to capture the symbol of a new era through the lens of their camera.

I was surprised to see a branch of *Mango*. The fashionable clothing chain was sitting directly behind the monument. I found it strange because the general fashion sense in Pristina more accurately resembled the 1980's. It took me back to when the Berlin Wall was torn down and East German citizens emerged from the rubble in frumpy dowdy clothing. This image wouldn't have looked out of place transported to Pristina in 2015. It was almost like Kosovars were in a fashion time-warp. However, it all became clear once I shared these thoughts with Ana. Her tone switched to angry mode for the first time.

"It's a lack of money", she retorted. In a country where the average salary was 200 Euro per month, she told me, "most people can't afford to shop in Mango".

So, not being able to obtain a visa was probably the least of people's worries. They'd expected the economy to strengthen after independence, along with a much-needed boost in jobs and fairer salaries. The daily struggle to meet the most basic needs was still a reality, six years after independence.

Ana was itching to take me to the lesser known 'Heroinat' memorial. She explained on our way there, that the word heroinat was the Albanian plural for hero. A spectacular 3-dimensional structure, its tall solid frame outlined against the high-rise apartments typical in Pristina. Embedded with 20,000 bronze medals, it honoured the same number of ethnic Albanian women who were raped during the 16-month conflict between 1998 and 99. These atrocities had been deeply rooted in the decade long cycle of violence and vengeance - the Serbian persecution of the 93% majority Albanian population.

Ana rubbed her finger gently over the engraved face on one of the coins and around its decorated edge. Then her eyes welled up. She fixed her gaze at the sky and tried not to burst into tears. Ana had been 13 years old when the bloody conflict started. An ethnic Albania herself she'd have been old enough to remember the horrors of trying to survive during that period of terror. Whilst she didn't disclose any personal details about her family's experiences, she did share that her school had been razed to the ground. However, she couldn't hold back the tears any longer as she sobbed.

"We work with these women who were raped in the war they still have trauma". elaborating further, she said, "Most of these war crimes are still untried, and victims live with the horrific memories and scars, every single day".

However, it's only when the 20,000 symbols of honour come together that the powerful image is generated. A single magnified profile of a hero, now golden, from the twinkle of sunlight reflecting the bronze. She towered over us as we gazed up in humble admiration. We both walked off in silence.

The aroma of grilled meat and the sizzling of onions, wafting over from a Turkish food stall soon brought my senses back to life. I could already taste the spicy lamb tingle in my mouth. Ana said it was one of the better kebab joints in town, but she'd have dinner at home. Spoiled for choice I settled for the lightly marinated chicken kebab sliced off the side of a rotating spit with a long sharp knife. Enveloped in soft warm flatbread with a spicy garlicky sauce, onions and voluptuous scarlet tomatoes. Garnished with a few crunchy fries but sadly, no napkin.

As I wiped the juices off my chin with the sleeve of my jacket, Ana led me to parts of the city tucked away down alleyways off the main drag. Great places I'd never have discovered on my own. We trawled the second-hand shops, searching for those clothes she often alters before stepping out with a quirky panache. Twisting a button on the baggy black shirt she was wearing, she laughed.

"This was a man's and I cut off the collar and sleeves". And as it started to glide down her shoulder, she said, "It cost mmmhmm 50 cents?".

"Wow! You got a bargain there" I replied.

Pyramids of shiny orange and red paprika were piled high on wooden carts and lined both sides of the street as we made our way to the market. Curly hazel feathers fluttered from small wire cages stacked up on the pavement, crammed with screeching chickens. The Central Bazaar was wedged between the mosque and an area where farmers gathered to hawk their tart goats cheese. The creamy cheese was scooped up by a gloved hand from huge wooden barrels bound by metal hoops.

They also sold *kos* a pungent goats-cheese yoghurt. Ana's eyes crinkled around the edges and a smile grew gradually on her face as she pulled the plastic spoon, that'd been heaped with a free sample of *kos* slowly out her mouth. I wasn't too keen, suppose it's an acquired taste but I didn't tell her that. It was just as well because with great fondness, she said.

"It's a pity you're not staying longer, or I could have taken you to my grandmother's place in Dragas, in the mountains. She makes her own goats cheese and *the* best *kos* and thyme biscuits."

I told her I really wished too that I could have visited her gran in the mountains. And it also reminded me of how close I had been to my own gran as a young woman.

"Maybe next time" she smiled.

Next to the farmers stood the butchers in their white aprons, streaked with dark blood. They were squabbling with customers, bartering for the newly slaughtered meat and poultry. The butchered meat had left a stream of fresh blood that ran along the cobbled street trying in vain to find a gutter.

Inside, the market was pulsating with denizens. Ana linked my arm, as she guided me through the maze of kiosks, knowing exactly the best route to take. People shoved or elbowed their way to the front of crowded stalls, screamed over each other and grappled to catch the vendors attention. In the middle of the bedlam, I was fascinated by the painstaking care Kosovar women took as they held and squeezed one apple after another and scrutinised the pale green flesh. This process would continue until a woman was satisfied the fruit was perfect in every way.

A musky clean smell from the vibrant flora, plucked from the forests of Kosovo, lingered after us as we scuffled our way around the ear-splitting market. The likes of coral carnations, indigo peonies and apricot forsythia - all poking their pretty petals out from the huge plastic buckets where they stood. Customers hunched their shoulders as they scooped the flowers protectively up into their arms. Trying to keep them intact as they squeezed their way between the stalls pushing to get to the exit.

They left a trail of water that dripped from the stems of the flowers, once removed from their temporary home.

Ana was on a mission! We were heading to a stand that sold memorabilia from the former Yugoslavia. And she'd guessed correctly, I'd found some of the souvenirs interesting. As we approached the stall, the blinding light from a single bulb haphazardly dangling from the ceiling, illuminated the elderly owner. He was sitting cross-legged on a wooden milking stool wrapped up in a grey herringbone coat. And he adorned what looked like, a pure gold crucifix, that crept over the collar of his mustard cardigan.

And his glasses nearly touched the military medal he held in his hand, polishing with care. He smiled up and invited us to look around. The stall was jam-packed with army knives, metal militia helmets and decorated officer uniforms. My favourite items were the eye-catching flags on display. They were all mementos from the conflicts prior to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia fragmenting into distinct countries.

Translated by Ana, the man asked where I was from as we were leaving. She dared me to answer 'Skoci'. So, when I did, he sucked in a long deep breath and held the palm of his hand in front of my face. To stop me from leaving. It was only when he'd heard us talking in English, he had realised I wasn't Kosovar. So, perhaps he felt touched that someone from as far away as Scotland had made the effort to visit his country while others avoided it? I'm not sure.

Anyway, he reached under the counter and dragged out a huge cardboard box, battered around the edges and began to rummage through it. Tossing aside tattered maps and parachute berets so he was able to delve deeper inside the old box. Then, as if by magic he pulled out a glistening fridge magnet. An outlined border of Kosovo set on wood. The blank space was filled in with clumps of artificial silver quartz. When he handed it to me, he refused to take any money.

It was a gift. It touched me more deeply because the man was a Christian Serb, identified as such by his crucifix. So, he was part of the minority 1.3% of Serbians in Kosovo. He had somehow managed to remain in Kosovo, whilst most others had been

exiled to Serbia and Montenegro pre-1999. So, every time I open my fridge, I'm reminded of this gentleman's strength and kindness.

Ana suggested we visit a nearby tea house, one of the few traditional places left having survived the phenomenon of time and war. I must admit, when I heard the word 'traditional' I had flashbacks to those tea houses I'd once visited in Japan. Beautiful architectural structures with intricate patterns carved into wooden panels, draped from the walls of softly lit establishments. And the green tea, streaming from those slender sterling silver teapots. Only, around the middle of the vessel had been replaced by crystal clear glass. So, you could watch as the tea leaves swirled when it tilted forward to pour tea into your china cup.

On the other hand, *Tedaja Sabit* was a pretty small and spartan affair. A few shaky tables scattered around the pavement, with a similar number of seating available inside. However, it was renowned for its vitamin infused *chai rusi* or Russian tea - served black and very heavily sugared. We sat at one of the few alfresco tables as dusk began to fall. Watching as customers began to drift off and Ana mentioned, most probably home for dinner.

She explained the old tea houses were in fact communities unto themselves. Hubs of activity where the older generation mainly men, went to not only drink tea but socialise and roar with laughter. Voices and tempers were only said to escalate when the more serious issues were up for discussion. The arrival of the waiter was signalled by the rattle of tiny narrow-waisted glasses carried on a metal salver. Together with a double-stacked copper tea pot, blackened around its sides from where the flames had licked the metal on the open top stove. Tilting the spout forward, he began to top-up the near-empty glasses for the last few remaining customers.

When he reached the table, he poured our tea and asked Ana a question in Albanian. She grew excited and nodded her head enthusiastically. We attempted to drink the tea from the dainty glasses, but they were too scalding hot to pick up with our fingers. When the waiter returned, I realised why she was so amused. He placed a lilac ceramic bowl filled with boiled eggs onto the yellow and black chequered tablecloth.

She'd watched enough American movies, to know that it was pastries and cakes folk usually stuffed their faces with in cafes. The eggs were still sealed in their speckled brown shells. I turned to Ana in the way of asking for an explanation. As she rolled an egg on the table with the palm of her hand cracking the shell, she smiled.

"Oh, it's a tradition here, we love to eat eggs together with sweet tea, it's delicious!".

Curious to know how the tradition originated, she laughed.

"Oh, I'll need to ask my grandmother and tell you then!"

She gently nudged my arm and rolled her eyes. Then when she had my attention, nodded her head to the side. Two old men, one exposing salmon pink gums looked like he'd just had a fright. They were both wearing white brimless skull caps and sitting at the next table. The handles of their walking sticks were hooked over the back of their rattan chairs and they were glaring at us. Despite the looks of disapproval, Ana didn't seem to care and neither did I. She told me she was used to being shunned and despised for the way she looked.

As the call to prayer echoed across the city, she spoke about her elderly Muslim neighbours. They yelled "you will rot in hell" every time they passed her on the street. She laughed as she told the story. Quite right I thought, she should feel proud when other people disapprove of her style. I was the same when I was younger, I told her. If older people looked at me in horror, I was happy they were shocked. It meant I had the ability to express my individuality through my appearance. So, rather than deter her, I believed any condemnation would probably encourage her to push the boundaries even further. I gave her *one* quick example of a time when my mother criticised my hair or lack of it.

I'd come back from India with my head shaved. All my friends thought it was cool, but my mum absolutely hated it. Feeling quite indignant when she criticised me, I roared.

"Well, all my friends like it!". Said she, "Well, if anyone tells you that's nice, they're kidding the arse of you". Glaswegian slang for 'they're lying to you', which I explained to Ana who was laughing her head off.

She spoke fondly of her own mum, a Social Worker.

She told me, "I think I'm the way I am because of her. She never judges anybody and has been honest with me since I was a child. She encourages me every day to follow my dream to be an artist".

"My dad's a secondary school teacher and he's always helped me academically so I could get into a good university" she added.

I told her it seemed like she had the perfect combination of parents. She said.

"You know during the war he helped me a lot 'cos it was too dangerous even to go outside, so studying at home helped and kept my mind busy".

Her mother's frustrations, about the severe lack of legal protection for women in the country, motivated Ana to campaign alongside her. So, together with a small group of local women they'd begun to acknowledge the sexual violence inflicted against the female population by the Serbian army. She went on to explain.

"You know, we have lots of monuments in Pristina celebrating male war heroes. But it was only after 2013 that the sacrifice made by women was recognised with the Heroinat monument, then that really broke the silence."

They were also reaching out to women and girls currently experiencing sexual and domestic violence. And attempting to shatter the age-old stigma around speaking out about what was considered by many 'private matters'. She explained the severity of the situation for women and children. A recent survey had found 68% of Kosovar women had experienced domestic violence, at least once in their lives. The same 2015 survey concluded that 20% of the male and female respondents believed it was acceptable for a man to beat his wife.

Her mum had been key in setting up a women's refuge in Pristina. It provided safe accommodation for women and children along with support, information and advice. Ana believed the country had a prevailing patriarchal mindset and a difficult economic situation.

"A lethal combination that increased violence and trapped women and children in abusive households", she said.

Women were coming forward, slowly but steadily for advice or to seek the scarce refuge space. Together they were advocating for the right to be treated with dignity and to speak for themselves, being undermined by men in their families, as well as by men in public spaces.

After Ana had left to go home, I reflected on her urgency to show me the 'Heroinat' monument. I was so glad she did. Even though it had cost her a great deal of emotional pain. She'd placed herself in a vulnerable position, to raise awareness of the persecution of ethnic Albanian women during the conflict. Violence that had continued to that present day for many Kosovar women. Only this time, the perpetrators weren't soldiers.

In Scotland, services responding to gender-based violence, whilst not perfect, are more developed than in Kosovo. So, meeting this young woman scratching at the surface of the lengthy and complex process of effecting change; in a society entrenched with misogyny has remained with me to this day.