



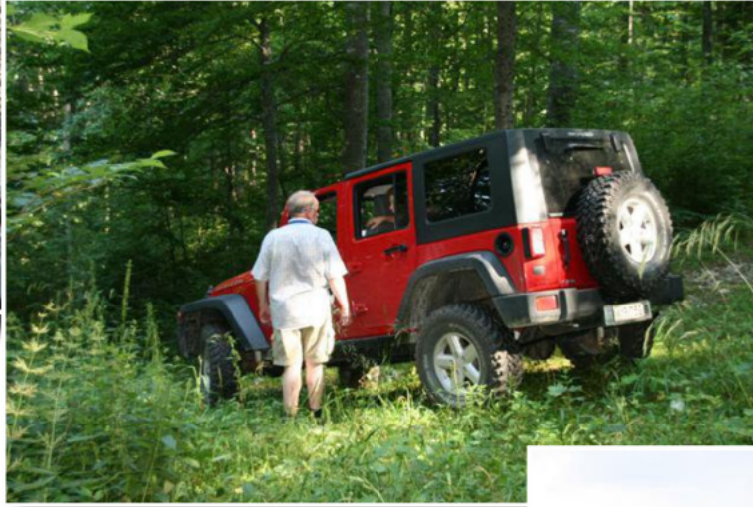
ALL ROADS LEAD TO SERBIA

By Hendrik de Backer

The aftermath of an Easter holiday to Romania in 2010 brought us a pleasant surprise: an inviting e-mail from Jeep Club Serbia asking us if we would be interested to visit Serbia and if so, an open invitation to meet and share experiences.

And so, the destination for our family excursion was quickly found: Serbia, and more notably a very beautiful mansion in Southwest Serbia near the Bosnian border which was going to serve as a luxurious basecamp for reconnaissance day trips into the Tara National Park. The park is a protected region filled with hills and mountains of which the Tara Mountain stands out, with its slopes clad in dense forests with numerous high-altitude clearings and meadows, steep cliffs, and deep ravines carved by the nearby Drina River and many karst, or limestone caves.





Apart from the call to adventure because of the unspoiled nature and off-highway possibilities, Serbia was also very intriguing to us because of the recent history with the Balkan wars. A lot of (false) ideas still live in Europe about Serbia and its inhabitants ... Serbians are unfriendly and aggressive, Serbia is a nationalist country ... But none of these were true or important once we got to know and appreciate the very warm and lively Balkan atmosphere of the friendly hosts we met in Serbia.

We set off on a 2000 kilometer, one-way trip to Serbia starting in Belgium and crossing Germany, Austria, and Hungary to arrive in Serbia near Novi Sad, where a final leg of 400 kilometers of smaller local roads awaited us. We took our Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon for this holiday, fully packed and stuffed with clothing and gear, along with gifts, guides, and maps, knowing that our mildly lifted and mud-tyred beast would also, without any doubt, allow us to have full off-road freedom once unpacked in Serbia.

So we arrived on a sunny afternoon in the magnificent Drinska Kuća house near Bajina

Basta, consisting of a movie-like superb villa, complete in its own setting on the slope of a hill and complimented with a pool, sauna, whirlpool, and all other amenities one could wish for on a holiday. The kids dived in the pool immediately, and we started planning our day trips to discover the region.

Bajina Basta is the nearest small town, functioning as a local commercial center and also as the gateway to the Tara National Park. It gives access to this protected region in southwest Serbia, bordered by the mighty





Drina River and filled with exciting woods and hills to be discovered. The landscape is rich in its variety, and consists mostly of hills with trees, run-through with bigger and smaller roads and tracks and rivers. The national park is very rich in flora and fauna, and is the native region for the rare and special Serbian spruce.

Most of Serbian culture and heritage has been kept and preserved through the ages in a series of orthodox monasteries and very close to Bajina Basta, where the Rača monastery can be found. It was built in the 1200s and can be freely visited. It's a truly impressive experience as you walk around through the halls. Directly from the monastery upon departure are multiple, small off-road tracks so we combined the visit with a very nice off-road tour. Also near Bajina Basta is the Mokra Gora region, meaning the Wet Mountain in English, where the main attraction is a completely restored authentic wooden village.

An absolute must-do activity when in this area is a visit to and a ride with the Sargan Eight. The Sargan Eight is the name of an ancient but restored railroad track, running through and over two mountain ranges in the form of an eight, and an absolutely scenic ride through areas otherwise inaccessible by foot or car. The track was originally used for commercial



purposes and later abandoned but with the help of the famous film director Emir Kusturica, it has been restored and now runs near his wooden film-director-school village.

After a few days of cultural excursions, we felt the need to do some more explorative and off-road drives, and we set out to visit the Drina Gorge, a very narrow slit across the mountains where the Drina River runs along the bottom. A few tracks run across the edges of the gorge, and guarantee impressive and unique views on the height differences and landscape.

An absolute fantastic part in the holiday was also our meeting with the driving force and President for Jeep Club Srbija, Aleksandar Veljkovic, who was so kind as to offer us his expertise of knowledge on the area. The moment he shouted through the radio, "We will now show where Jeeps have been built for," and the mind boggling ride down and up



Slideshow



a steep muddy hill that followed this, will never be erased from our memories! His old and loyal Cherokee was amazing on the tracks, and we had so much fun stopping 30 minutes for pictures, and then taking off again for a thrilling off-road drive.

A second day of off-highway travel was started with a visit to friends of Aleksandar, who moved out from the city to the countryside and who started to live almost self-dependent, making goat cheese and honey amongst other things. Just like as if we had been friends for years, we were welcomed with traditional drinks and a breakfast, and this was a most heartwarming experience. This encounter set the atmosphere for the rest of the day, and Aleksandar showed us the most beautiful parts of the National Park including special hills and viewpoints. A major surprise was to find a number of artificial lakes, all used to produce electricity, with one on the beaches, the carcasses and frames of three big unfinished holiday houses apparently built by a local singer who eventually ran out of money.

Next was the white, wounded city: Beograd. We ended our holiday with a two-night stay in Belgrade, former capital of Yugoslavia, and now the proud capital of Serbia. It is in all meanings an exciting and bustling Eastern Europe capital and definitely a recommended place to visit. Belgrade, meaning the "White City," was heavily under attack during the Balkan wars in the late 1990s, and almost as

some kind of souvenir and reminder, some of the city center buildings are (kept) in a destructed state, giving a most surreal view and feeling when you are walking up and down the big lanes.

Definitely recommended in the city is the Kalemegdan Fortress, boasting a park and big green open area in the center of the city, but also a military museum amongst others. We visited it all with much enthusiasm, and got to understand and hold a quite more subtle view on all the emotions of living in Serbia and the Balkan, and even an understanding for the Serbs who were hammered for years in history by the Turks.

We look back upon this holiday with a lot of happiness because of the very unique experiences it brought us in the combination of off-roading, a lot of local culture and foods from friendly people, a rich cultural heritage, and a truly deeper understanding of some of the everlasting emotions fueling politics and relationships in this part of Eastern Europe.

Links:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mokra_Gora

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalemegdan>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ra%C4%8Da_monastery

<http://www.discoverserbia.org/en/south-western-serbia/tara>

