

A THIN LINE BETWEEN LOVE AND HATE

By Chris Green



According to The Persuaders' 1971 hit, there's a "Thin line between love and hate." It's my experience that there is a similarly thin line between paradise and perdition. In both instances what separates these polar opposites is human behaviour.

I first visited Bosnia in 1995 as a young soldier seconded to the United Nations during the Balkans War. Tasked with running aid convoys into a besieged Sarajevo and the Muslim enclave of Gorazde, I witnessed first hand, not only the human capacity for cruelty and barbarism, but also the seeming indifference of the international community.

Cave waterfall - Chris Green

I returned home disillusioned by the organisational failures of the United Nations to protect the citizens of Sarajevo and Srebrenica and harbouring a painful and lasting regret that I had not done more personally to alleviate their suffering. In words most commonly attributed to Sir Edmund Burke, *'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.'* I questioned whether I was even a good man. A quarter century would pass before I would return, this time with my sons Harry (15) and Alfie (12), in search of redemption.

During the war there had been little opportunity to appreciate Bosnia's outstanding natural beauty; if anything, the rugged terrain was just another obstacle to overcome. Bosnia is not technically an Alpine country but there is plenty enough for any alpinist, Austrian or otherwise, to admire in the beautiful, unspoiled landscape. The Rakitnica Canyon is just one such example.

Where the Rakitnica river flows south east from Sarajevo to Mostar it has carved a canyon described as one of the deepest and least explored in Europe. The first officially reported exploration was in 1956 when an expedition of Bosnian mountaineers and naturalists spent ten days in the canyon. In 2001 the Bosnian film maker Dinno Kassalo followed in their footsteps to make the documentary film "Expedition Rakitnica". A few years on local mountaineers and guides started to take the first tourists. To date, only a few hundred people are known to have entered the canyon.

To get there it is first necessary to travel to Sarajevo. It is a city that still bears the scars of war but which today is a fascinating blend of East and West that feels reconciled with its troubled past. Having travelled this far it is well worth spending time exploring the city before heading to Rakitnica.

The canyon itself is best tackled with a guide or rafting company who can provide equipment and organise logistics. There are plenty to choose from, all of whom can be found online and who will be happy to help. An expedition can be tailored to suit almost any level of experience from a rafting day trip to a multi-day tour, wild camping on the banks of the river.

To navigate the entire length of the canyon will require a minimum of 3 days for the very fittest and fastest but in order to be able to truly enjoy its spectacular natural beauty a slower pace is recommended which a fourth day will allow for.

The upper levels of the canyon are accessed via a mountain path sixty minutes' hike from the nearest road. You and your guides must carry everything you require for the next 48 hours before you can rendezvous with a support team further downstream.

The upper sections of the canyon are not navigable by boat and must be explored on foot. Specialist boots together with a well-fitting wetsuit for warmth are essential as you wade, scramble and swim through the boulder strewn river. A quality dry bag is critical if you want to keep your kit dry. Some sections are quite technical and will require a harness and ropes for abseiling the steeper pitches.



The cliff walls that rise up majestically on either side of the canyon were formed 50-100 million years ago when immense lateral pressures deformed and over thrust layers of sedimentary rocks, creating impressive anticline folds which, once in the canyon, make it almost impossible to turn back. The upper reaches are the most remote with only a few paths used by local fishermen for access. These are not marked on any maps and you must rely on the local knowledge of your guides for whereabouts to these access points. This is worth bearing in mind in your contingency planning.

Anticline folds - Chris Green

As you descend through the canyon the river becomes wider, deeper (and colder). Raft or kayak become the best modes of transport. Access points to the canyon also improve and your support team will be able to rendezvous with you with this equipment and some well-earned creature comforts. There are sections of white water but nothing too technical or intimidating.

A trip through the canyon is highly recommended for anyone looking to experience genuine wilderness travel. The scenery is breathtaking and well worth the effort (and the odd bruise) required but it does demand a level of physical fitness and robustness. One must also be comfortable living without creature comforts for a few days as it is simply not possible to carry a lot of equipment into the upper reaches of the canyon.

Having successfully navigated the canyon an overnight stop in Mostar should not be missed. A chance to recuperate and reminisce while enjoying the hospitality of Mostar's historic old town. If you are lucky you may even see locals diving from the famous bridge into the azure waters of the river 22 metres below.

You don't need to be an old soldier, exorcising demons to enjoy the warm welcome you will receive in Bosnia, but for someone who escaped a violent and bloody conflict a quarter of a century earlier, returning to Bosnia was to catch a glimpse of paradise. Not just in the spectacular, unspoiled beauty of the Rakitnica Canyon but also in the restoration of cities and communities once shattered by war. Perhaps our efforts were not entirely in vain?



Rock pool - Chris Green



'Jus' chillin" - Chris Green