

## **Travelling through the Balkans: beware the bathrooms!**

Travelling through Ethiopia in 2013 was accompanied by the inevitable quest to avoid drop toilets and an obsessive use of hand sanitiser together with great delight when we encountered showers with hot water. Choosing to visit South East Europe (Slovenia gets annoyed when referred to as part of the Balkans so South East Europe it is) in 2014 I assumed I'd have a fairly ordinary ablution experiences this year. Oh how wrong I was!

My trip started in Sofia. Entering my hotel room, everything seemed as expected. Nice double bed, fridge and an ensuite bathroom. Nothing to alert my about what was to come. Moving onto Macedonia and beyond things got a bit more interesting over the next three weeks. The result being my 3 step guide to surviving bathrooms in the Balkans (sounds better than South East Europe and it's unlikely a Slovenian will read this):

1. They like hand held showers so don't expect to stand under luxurious hot running water like in the shampoo adverts. Hosing yourself down is a more appropriate description. And take note that you may not even get a shower cubicle to do this in as I discovered in Lake Ohrid. In their tiny 'bathrooms' they had a toilet and a basin with an extending cable with a shower head. Despite the small drain in the floor, this resulted in the 'hosing down' process (remember there would be no hook to hold the shower head) causing a flood into the corridor and, on one occasion, a stream down the staircase. A visit to their rooms really needed you to wear your wellies!
2. They don't seem to understand the concept of a shower curtain even when there is a shower base. Where present (and in Tirana they had obviously forgotten to add this rather useful addition to a bathroom), they rarely close and are often a good few inches too short (in Ljubljana the shower curtain rail was a good two inches wider than the base anyway so the length was irrelevant) resulting in yet more bathroom flooding. You soon become expert at hosing yourself down to get maximum water on the floor. Even when there is a fully functional shower screen, the floor flooding cannot be avoided; like in Skopje when the drain for the shower was in the middle of the bathroom floor requiring a hole to have been cut out of the side of the shower base to allow a stream to flow across the floor to the drain. But beware, floor flooding is not the only issue. The lack of shower curtains and window coverings in Tirana did mean that I had to shower sitting down to avoid becoming entertainment for the 6 construction workers outside my window. A problem repeated in Dubrovnik when the elderly couple on their balcony were in direct eyeline of me in the shower. Another sitting down shower required!
3. Lastly, beware the location of the toilet roll dispenser. In most places this will not be a problem if you have long arms as they often place these above the toilet (probably to avoid the flood waters) but in Mostar you would have needed to be the bionic man with extendable arms! Despite there being a perfectly acceptable wall to screw the holder to next to the toilet, the designer of this bathroom had decided to place it two metres away on the other side of the basin and shower! I forgave them though as this was one of the few bathrooms with a hook for the shower head. However, the prize for the best location of toilet roll has to go to whoever designed the bathroom in Ljubljana – underneath the sops dispenser resulting in wet toilet roll every time!

Yet these bathroom quirks added even more fun and laughter to an amazing three week trip. Next time I might just travel with a mop and bucket!