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Exploring beauties and history of southern Serbia

by Nikola Milošević? - Tuesday, September 01, 2020

<https://inspiratron.org/blog/2020/09/01/exploring-beauties-and-history-of-southern-serbia/>

Due to the whole situation with the coronavirus pandemic, it has been quite difficult to travel this year. A couple of trips this year have been cancelled or moved for me throughout April and May. I even had to move my vacation in the early August. The situation with COVID-19 was not great in Serbia, in the early August, but started to improve and I manage to come later. However, still the situation was unstable, and with parents we decided to go to the countryside in the southern Serbia.

My family from my dad's side are from the Toplica region and a village on a Radan mountain called Donji Statovac. My grandad already moved to Belgrade, but we have some land and house there. Occasionally my dad used to go there, however, I haven't been there for about 20 years. So it was a good time to revisit it.

It took us about 4 hours to get there by car. There is a highway until the city of Niš, then some local road, however, the last 2-3 km, there is only a rocky road. The area of the village has been protected a couple of years ago as a natural park (the region obtained this status in 2017.). So you can probably imagine how nice the nature is there. But that also means, that there is very little road infrastructure. Most of the mountain roads are rocky roads where only one vehicle can pass through. Also, the roads are made worse with every rain, as the corrosion and water make the roads more and more bumpy. If you talk to the villagers, there they would tell you that the region was "etnik's region" (a lot of people from the region joined this resistance movement in WW2, and because of the fact that they were opposed to communists and partisans who won the war), after the war, this region was ignored and there was no investment into the region by after-war communist governments. However, this may be true, but it also may be a self-pity and victimhood mentality, as the communism fell over 30 years ago. Regardless of all of it, it is manageable to reach the village.

The house, we have in the village, was build about 100 years ago, between two wars. Basically the village is split into a couple of smaller bits around the mountain, 5 to be exact. The one that our house is in is basically all my family. The other one, Karašići is as well my grandma's family. Most of the houses there are from that period build from mud and hay. There are a couple of houses that were modernized or that are currently going through modernization, especially in Karašići part. However, in our part, there are very few people actually living there. We needed the first day in order to put house in order, as people come there only once per year, sometimes even less.



Our house in Statovac

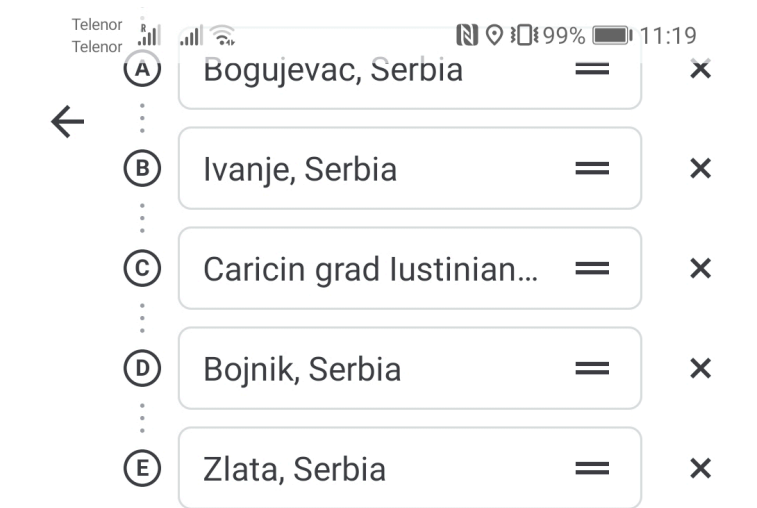
In the first day, with my dad I have gone to the graveyard that is below the village. I was interesting to hear a couple of stories about some of the people who lived in the village (mostly being in a certain way related to us). For example, there were a number of people who died during the First World War. Most of the people from Toplica region were serving in the second infantry regiment "Knez Mihajlo", that got a nickname from their enemies (Bulgarian army in the first place): Iron Regiment. This nickname was given to them because of their courage and invincibility in battles. Several people from the village served and died in the battles of this Regiment. Others were participants of [Toplica uprising](#) in 1917, which was the only uprising in occupied lands in WW1. My grandgrandad was a participant in this uprising, got captured, and the last year of the war spend as POW in Bulgaria. Also, there was one Austrian who killed officer in Austro-Hungarian army

and run to Serbia, started living in this village, and later helped and lead parts of Toplica uprising. After the war he adopted a Serbian name, adopted an orphan girl and spent the rest of his life in the village. Several people were participants of the Second World War. Mainly the region was loyal to the king and therefore they were joining Ravna gora movement. Some went to Bosnia and Croatia to aid allied landing, which never happened. That is still mourned as one of the betrayal of allies to this movement, when allied aid switched from Ravna gora movement to Partisans. I have also found one story interesting, where a person died in a fight with people from other village. The fight broke up next to the mountain water source. The reason for fight was actually the water, because lower villages did not have water sources and they were "stealing" water from villages higher up in the mountains. I find this as a first example of water wars, that some geopolitical analysts are warning about.

In the next day we have decided to make a road trip. The main thing we wanted to see was a Byzantine city from the 6th century called Justiniana Prima, or Empress' city. The route is in the following picture:

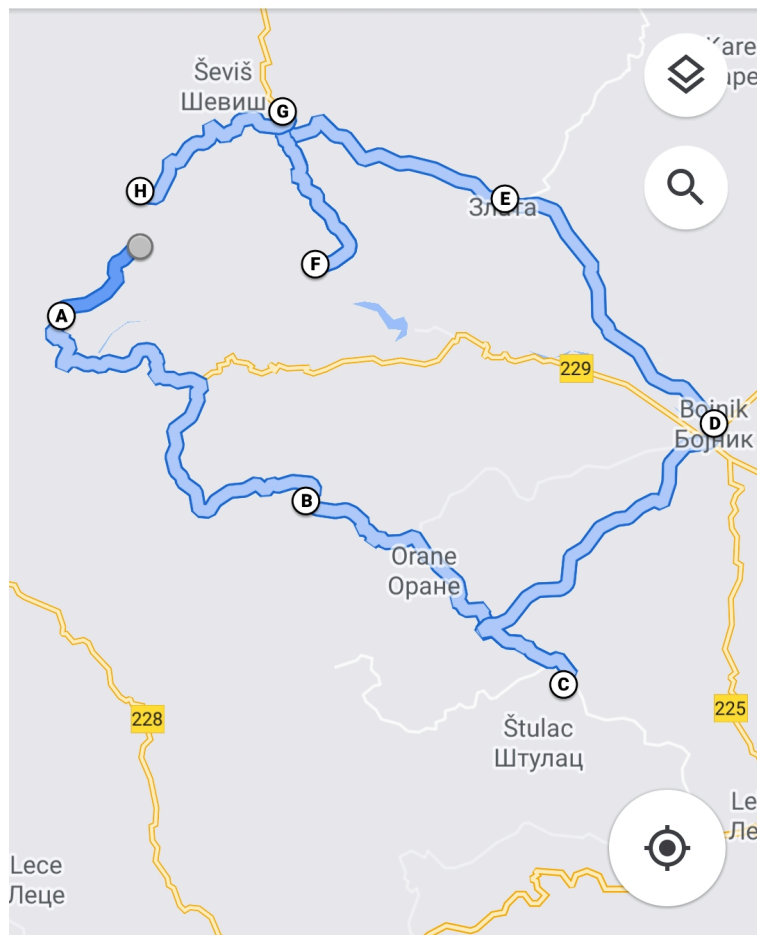
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Total trip: 2 hr 35 min (82 km)

Finished



As I have mentioned before, roads in the mountains are not great, however, we have seen a dam and quite a large waterfall that is deep in the forest and pretty much only locals know about it and visit. They call it [Ripivoda](#). It is 40m high waterfall on 935m altitude and it looks pretty amazing. At that time, I got a thought that this region has touristic jewels, but marketing of it failed and is pretty much non-existent. If such beauties were on Iceland or some other place, they would invest huge amounts into marketing and whole world would know about it.

We continued and got to the normal roads after riding several kilometers through rocky roads. The next what we have seen is what locals call *uzbrdna nizbrdnica*, or in my free translation something like uphill downhill. Well, that is probably not the luckiest translation, but I will go with it for now. Basically, it is a place where things go up-hill. We have tested our car. I made my dad totally stop, go for a hand break, turn off motor, and then lower the handbreak. And indeed, the car start going into the slight uphill. The uphill is really slight, so it is hardly visible from the photos, but I took the photo with the sign-board.

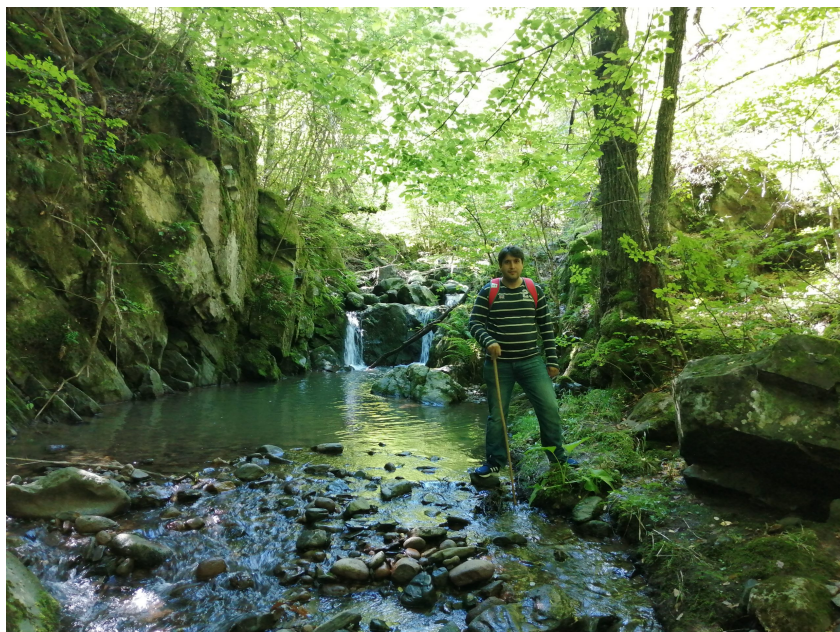


The next stop on our way was Justiniana Prima, which is an ancient city, founded by Byzantine emperor Justinian in 535 A.D. and was inhabited until 615 A.D., when Slavs and Avars destroyed the aqueduct that connected city with water sources on Radan mountain. After that, city had no water and it was abandoned. The remainings of the city features 2 rings of quite impressive fortifications (one for the outer city, while the other around acropolis). Also, city has 9 churches and basilicas and it was the seat of Archbishopric of Justiniana Prima, that had jurisdiction over the provinces of the Diocese of Dacia, who had a palace in the acropolis. Justiniana Prima is the only ancient city with acropolis outside Greece and Italy. About 20 000 people used to live in the city.



In the Justiniana Prima, we were greeted by the keeper of the location - Dragan Spasic, who briefly told us the history of the city, showed us some images from dron-shots and some pictures of the mosaics that because of the preservation are kept below the ground. The city is quite amazing, as it is placed on a hill side, it has terrace-like structures for buildings and circular main square. After we talked quite a bit with Dragan, who told us that very few people know about the place. That some other ancient cities are much more marketed such as Viminacium or Romuliana, but that they contain much less preserved and original remainings. However, that they don't have a website and that local government is holding back some investments (some corruption issues). However, the city is really worth seeing. From here, we went to Bojnik and back to our village where we were staying.

On the next day, my father decided that we can walk to the old family mill. The path was through forest, a bit up hill and then down to the river. On the way, we got to the place where wild pigs are bathing. Around us on the way were a lot of wild blackberries and mushrooms. Some people in the villages are making money out of collecting and drying mushrooms (they are much more expensive than fresh ones). In about 40-50 minutes of walk we started hearing river and its small waterfalls in rocky terrain. We have seen the mill, that is as well over 100 years old and where my grandgrandparents used to make flour. There were still these big stones for making it and some a bit rusted mechanism that was moving them in the river. It was quite interesting to see. On the way there and back we were collecting some blackberries and ate quite a good amount of them.



On the next day, we have decided to go to Leskovac, to see some relatives there. One relative took us to Vu?je hydroelectric power plant, that is operating from 1903 until now. It was currently under reconstruction, but it is the longest serving power plant in the country and wider region that was continuously operating from 1903-2019 and will continue operating at the end of the year once the reconstruction is finished. It was made on the principles of Nikola Tesla, containing some of his portraits inside. Also, it is interesting that it is being run by a single family for 4 generations and we managed to have a discussion with a current member of a family that is running the power plant.

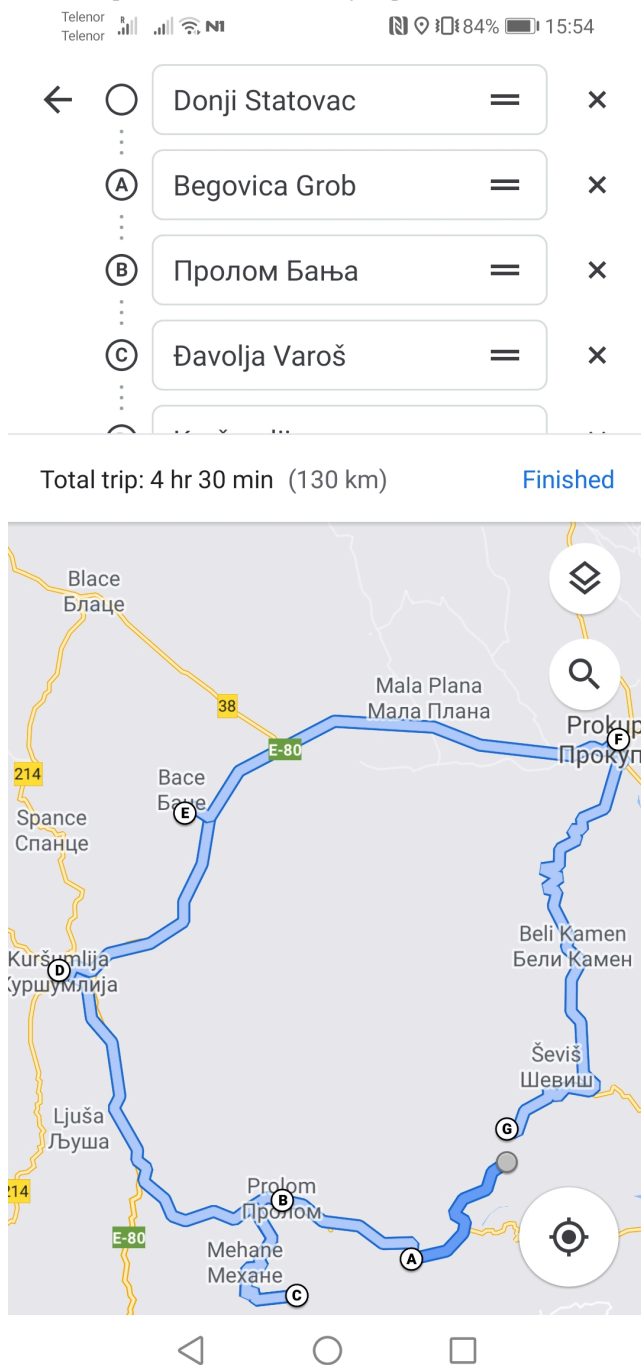


Vucje power-plant

Next to the power-plant is as well one waterfall that we managed to see. Also, we have discussed a bit Nikola Skobajic, who was local nobleman from 15th century and who was last relatively successful resistance for some time to the Ottoman invasion. Remainings of his city (Zelen grad) are on the hill above the Leskovac. Also, we managed to see the first factory of the textile in Leskovac, which dates back to 1896. Later, we went for lunch with our family to the traditional Leskovac barbecue.



Our last road trip was to see Prolom Banja (spa), Devil's town, Kuršumljija, Pločnik and Prokuplje. The path can be seen on the following



map:

Our first stop, was Begovič's grave. It is quite high in the mountains, where there is only a rocky road. Begovič was one of the leaders of Toplica uprising in 1917, who kept fighting after huge Bulgarian and Austrian forces started crushing the rebellion. At some point, he and a couple of his men got surrounded by Bulgarians who kept women and children in front of them, so the rebels won't fire on them. When they were close and Begovič remained one of the last, he pretended to be surrendering. Bulgarian officers run towards him in hope that capturing him will bring them glory and promotion. When a number of them got close, Begovič activated several bombs and granades and blew himself up with a number of Bulgarian officers on the very place the grave is today in the mountains.

The next stop was a small spa called Prolom Banja. Here we took some spa water from the source and have seen quite lovely church on the hill.

The most important stop on this trip was [Devil's town, or Đavolja Varoš](#). The Devil's town is a set of peculiar structures made over thousands of years by erosion. However, the whole area is quite interesting. Initially, when you enter the area you go through the forest with wooden statues of forest creatures. The area is full of iron ore, so the ground is red, because of oxidation of iron. The area contains 3 medieval iron

ores where German miners were mining the iron ore for Serbian kings as mercenaries in 13-15th century. After a while of uphill walk, you arrive to the structures. There are wooden stairs, so one can get closer and get a look from different perspectives. In Devil's town there are 202 stone structures.



Devil's town



One of the medieval iron mines

Our next stop was Kuršumlija. Here we wanted to see the church of St. Nikolas, which was built in early 1160s by Stefan Nemanja, the first Serbian ruler from Nemanjić dynasty. Also, the church had people who were copying books in 12th century and the first person was baptized in the church by St. Sava after Serbian church got autonomy from the Byzantine. The church looks quite nice from the outside, however, inside is going through reconstruction and no icons can be seen there.



Monastery of St Nikola

Further we went towards Pločnik. In Pločnik was one battle in 1385 with Ottomans and Serbian army won here. Also, in Pločnik was found a Neolithic village with quite interesting technology for melting metals. Unfortunately, noone was on the sight, so we just walked around and took a couple of pictures.



Pločnik - neolithic village

The last stop on our trip was Prokuplje. We went to the museum of Toplica in Prokuplje, where they showed us the exhibition of Toplica uprising and Neolithic and early medieval findings in the area. My dad got into quite deep conversation with the guide, in which we found out that it is very likely that the guide was sent by the museum to my grandgrandad funeral with the flag of Iron Regiment, which part my grandgrandad was. Also, he complained about corruption and disorganization of local authorities especially regarding preserving historical sites. There are a bunch of Roman thermas, basilicas and other buildings laying around the region, that they know about, but they don't have resources to research and excavate. And even if some of the politicians on the republic level approve some money or resources, they are often redirected and somehow misused. This seemed to be quite sad but repetitive note that we got from several people working in cultural institutions and museums in that region. I wish that will improve in some near future.

For the end we went to Prokuplje to visit some relatives and have again some barbecue dinner. This region is famous and it really has probably the best barbecue meat you can get.

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