

IS THERE CRIME IN ALBANIA?

Mugging is Unknown

The prize for the most isolated country in the world must surely go to a European one, which is one only 2 miles from the hedonistic playground of Corfu. Albania is the size and shape of Wales (28,748 square kilometres) with a population of 3 million small, dark, smiling people and wild, romantic scenery.

In the 1930s, it was pure Ruritania and ruled over by King Zog, a Salvador Dali look-alike. Feudal, warmongering and tribal, it had been part of the old Ottoman empire. Since 1945, it has been fundamentalist Marxist. Independence was proclaimed in 1912 and the republic was founded in 1920.

How does a country where the inhabitants who are caught in a time warp - having never seen a supermarket or an advert, having never owned a car, written a cheque, or travelled on a motorway, and having never heard of Salman Rushdie, Marilyn Monroe, tipping, Pepsi Cola or American Express - cope with law and order?

What one has to realise is how backward Albania was before the Second World War. 90% of the population was illiterate, and there was virtually no industry. Life expectancy was 38 years. In some areas, polygamy was practised, and no university existed until 1957. Although the Albanians have a simple life style, they are justifiably proud of what they have done since the War. Although education, housing and health have improved, it is undoubtedly Europe's poorest country.

Like us before the 1950s, they have no teenagers. There is no separate youth culture with its own clothes, music and style, although there are youth cafes where table tennis and table football is played. Young people are just younger editions of their parents, the boys wearing similar suits with flared trousers.

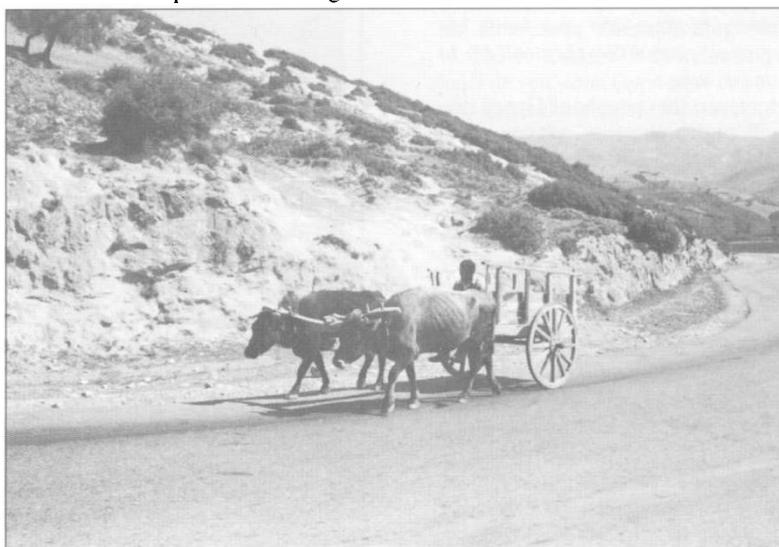
Very few Albanians travel abroad, reading matter is limited, and it is tightly insulated from outside influences - no Americans or journalists are admitted! Amnesty International is concerned because of its policy of outlawing all forms of religion.

So what of crime and delinquency? Statistics (as elsewhere in eastern Europe) are difficult to come by. Albanians have heard of AIDS and drug abuse from their newspapers, but claim they have no cases. It could be true given their remoteness. Alcoholism doesn't seem much of a problem. Petty pilfering and murders, where the victims are known to each other, do exist; traffic offences don't because of the dearth of cars and mugging is unknown.

All women who are fit have to work and get six months' paid leave after childbirth. Contraception is discouraged

two naval boats crossing the bay all day. These were to deter any local fishermen from venturing too far out into the Straits of Corfu and heading for Greece. If one had tried, they would have immediately been fired on.

During my visit two years ago, I could learn nothing of the prison system except that it did exist. There was said to be a repertoire of warnings and fines and a form of probation. However, the main deterrent seemed to be an emphasis on 're-education through labour'. Indeed everyone, unless ill, must do a month of such work to avoid 'bureaucratization'.



John Dossett-Davies

The road to Saranda, no private cars are allowed

and abortion is illegal. The average family has four children and divorce is infrequent. Because of the pressures to conform in this tightly monitored society, and because of the general innocence of the people, there is probably not much child abuse. But who knows for sure?

There is another darker side to xenophobic Albania. Homosexuals get 10 years in prison. But the really serious crimes, some of which are punishable by death or long terms of imprisonment, tend to be crimes against the state. Currency offences are very seriously dealt with, as are attempts to leave the country. In the very pleasant town of Saranda, which looks for all the world like Weston-super-Mare in the 1920s with no traffic or amusements and wrapped-up people walking on the promenade, there were

The process is called 'cadres, engaged in productive physical work'. A friend who has been to Albania on another visit claimed to have seen a party of women, believed to be political prisoners, labouring in the fields late at night, guarded by armed men.

Yet there is a strange dichotomy about the place. It doesn't feel oppressive. The Albanians are a sunny, languid, innocent, Mediterranean people, keen to talk to visitors.

John Dossett-Davies, who is a social worker adviser, writer on social service topics and a member of the Anglo-Albanian Society, last visited the country in 1989. Readers will be aware that there is considerable turmoil in Albania now, and the scene has undoubtedly changed since he was last there.