

First Person

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Road Rage Abroad

Sometimes the language barrier is only half the problem

By Michael Stuhleyer

The friend I had been visiting in Albania offered to accompany me on the 15-hour ride from Tirana to Athens, where I would catch my flight home. I assured her I would be fine, but she asked an old Albanian couple boarding the same bus to watch out for me. They agreed.

The bus was half full. My guardians sat six rows away and didn't know a lick of English, so there was no pressure to communicate beyond smiling shrugs that said, "I don't know what you're saying, but I'm sure it's nice." There was one uncomfortable interlude when the wife, Marguerite, patted the seat next to her while her husband was up stretching his legs. I sat with her. She offered an apple. I said, "Falemenderit" (Thank you). I bit into it, marshalled all the eloquence the situation demanded and proclaimed, "Apple good." She shrugged and smiled. I went back to my seat and looked out the window.

Albania could be a tourism hotspot if not for the blunt-force trauma inflicted on it by a half-century of totalitarian oppression. The area south of Tirana is lush countryside, with 4,000-foot peaks providing a backdrop to the east. But ubiquitous amid this authentic beauty are blandly depressing government housing units and beaten people walking along crumbling roads leading nowhere. A boy, not more than 10, hunching under a heavy bag of potatoes, high stepped through deep mud in the cold rain.

Hazy hours passed.

For dinner, I offered Marguerite, her husband and an Italian man some crackers I'd bought from a guy wearing a "Don't Mess With Texas" sweatshirt. Marguerite looked pale. The long ride had taken its toll. The Italian attempted conversation. I shrugged and smiled because I didn't understand, but I was sure what he was saying was nice. Marguerite tried explaining what the Italian meant. I turned away. *Learn English, you well-meaning bastards.*

Time dragged from day to night. When I saw the endless snake of stalled taillights up ahead, time stopped completely. A merging truck blocked our view. We weren't moving and I couldn't see. I moaned. We all moaned. Moaning sounds and means the same in any language. We'd transcended all cultural barriers. After 30 minutes at a dead standstill my road-worn temper spiked, *what compels these "you're-not-even-allowed-to-throw-toilet-paper-in-the-toilet" countries to make life such complete misery?*

I opted for blessed unconsciousness and closed my eyes, resting my foot on the seat in front of me. Instantly, it seemed, I woke to a raging face pulsing inches from mine, barking in Albanian. Meaty hands clutched my jacket and yanked me out of my seat. I braced myself. This absolutely uncontrolled force wanted to take me somewhere. *Don't let him get you off the bus.*

He let go, screaming and pounding his fist against the seat. *I don't have any drugs. My passport is in order. What did I do?* He slapped the back of the seat again. Then I knew. This was the bus driver, mightily pissed that I'd had my shoe on his seat.

Others on the bus were yelling. I understood only one word: "Americane." They were either yelling, "Lay off the American, you bully!" or "Kill the American and we'll share his money!"

My mind flashed to the young boy carrying the potatoes. *That's this guy. He's a by-product of a bleak life spent in perpetual servitude to an unforgiving state.* And there I was, carelessly slouched, with my dirty shoe soiling his bus.




He finally stalked back to his seat. The passengers stole glances at me, managing compassionate smiles, which said, "Alas, the damage is done, my American friend."

My attitude evolved from apologetic (*I provoked him. After all, he is from a destitute country and America is rich*), to indignant (*I don't care where my foot was; you don't choke a paying customer*).

I was determined to have my say, but my Albanian vocabulary was limited to a few innocuous phrases. Armed with "Shqiperia eshte bukar" (Albania is beautiful), "Me falni" (I'm sorry) and "Ku eshte banja" (Where is the bathroom?), I walked to the driver's window when we finally arrived at the station. "Me falni" I said, pointing to my foot. He stared at me blankly. "Me falni," I repeated. Still blank. I pantomimed a tap on my shoulder while nodding, trying to say, "This would have sufficed, but"—I grabbed my collar roughly and slashed the air with my hand—"this is unacceptable!"

A reaction! He yelled and smacked his forehead. I knew he was saying mean things, so I didn't smile or shrug. I pantomimed the shoulder-tap/collar-grab again with increased vigor. He shot from his seat and circled the bus. Face-to-face, he screamed and I gestured, people urging us apart. In a moment of clarity, I noted the rage in his eyes, the thickness of his torso and arms under his too-small coat and his lack of anything to lose. "Me falni" I said one last time, deflated. He glared a moment longer before walking away. With a few smiles, some pats on the back and one surprising, "Good to meet you" in heavily accented English, my fellow travelers dissolved into the darkness.

Alone in a light rain in Athens near midnight, I shook with adrenaline and relief. Marguerite's husband flagged a taxi for me. "Falemenderit," I said. I smiled, shrugged and was gone.

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