Hoofbeats Across ALBANIA

WORDS: ASHLEY PARSONS // PHOTOGRAPHY: QUENTIN BOËHM
LOCATION: ALBANIA

It's 6.30am, and my shirt is already sticking to my chest. This riverside meadow was a happy find last night, offering water for the horses and a much-needed bath for us. But this morning, the air is heavy and humid. My fingers fumble with the leather straps that hold Düldül's bags in place. They must be perfectly balanced to avoid causing an injury to our packhorse's back. Quentin barks at me to focus, and I snap. 'Hold on! I'm working on it!' He's impatient, so he quips back in French, *'Ne commence pas!'*

Built-up tensions are unleashed. Weeks of trekking with three horses through inner Albania have pushed us to the limits of fatigue. Small disagreements spark big, fiery arguments.

I shout back, 'I'm not commencing anything! You're pushing me to go fast when I'm trying to make sure Düldül doesn't get injured! I'm not going to hurry and hurt my horse, and ruin my trip because you're hot!'

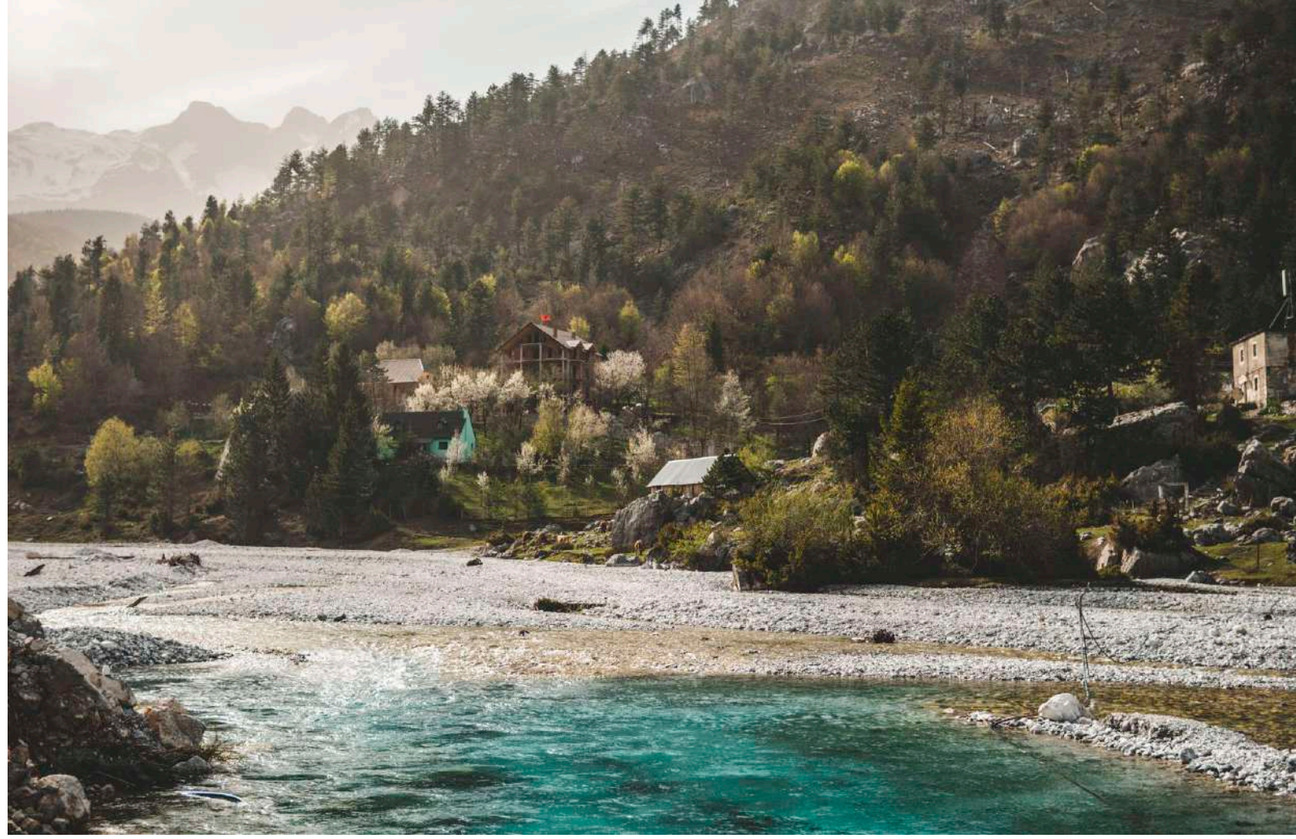
Now it's his turn to snap. 'Ah, I am so sick of you! This is our trip! We are both here! I'm doing what? Taking up space? You know what – when we get to Librazhd, I'm out. I'm going to hole up in a hotel and you can sort yourself out with your horses and your trip!' He stares at me, gauging what effect his threat will have.

'Fine then,' I shout. 'Me too. We're done! My trip ends right now. I'm staying right here. At the bottom of this canyon.'

I step back from Düldül, cross my arms and eye Quentin. We stand fuming at each other for a few seconds, then we crack smiles. The tension evaporates. This is a ridiculous argument. We're on the same team. Relief floods us, and we return to securing Düldül's bags. Once his pack is stable, we leave him to graze a few minutes longer while we prepare our riding horses, Griva and Johnny.

Two hours after sunrise, two hours of non-stop movement to break camp and prepare the horses, we're ready to go. We begin the hike back up the canyon to the road. The climb is steep, so we walk instead of ride. Ashley, Griva, Düldül, Quentin, and Johnny. This order leads to the most cooperation between our horses and us. This is the same order as the first 350km up to this point, and it will be the same order for the next 350km to our finish line. We are halfway through our six-week independent horse trek across Albania. To our knowledge, no other riders have completed such a trek without significant help from guides and backup vehicles. We have neither of these; just the satellite maps we plotted before departure, and Düldül, who diligently carries our bags each day.

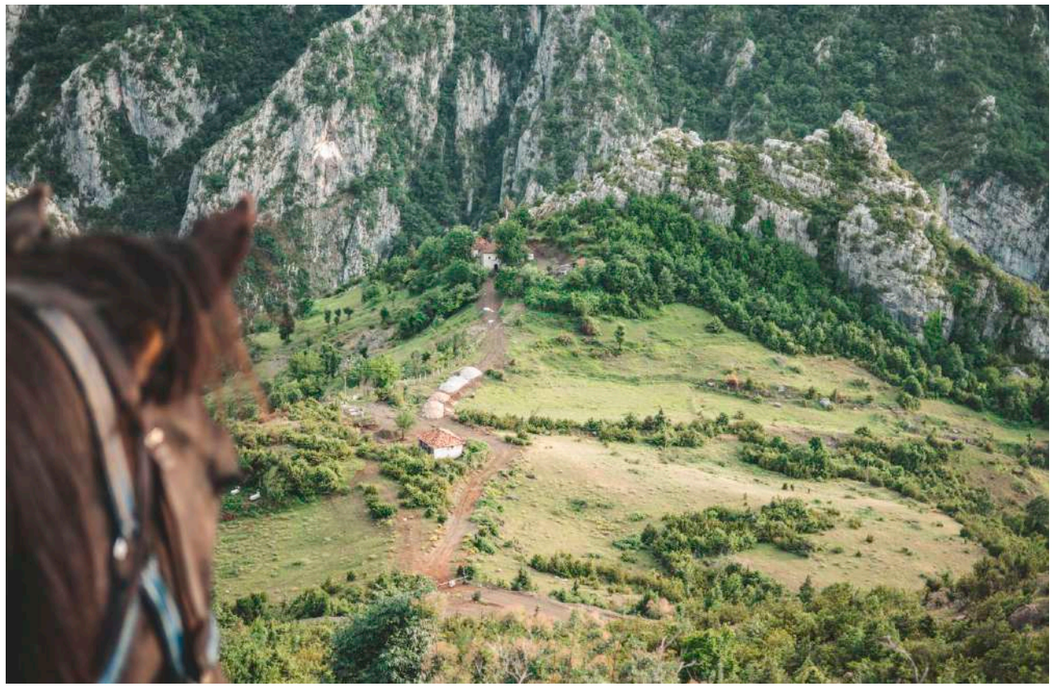
We reach the Via Egnatia, an ancient trading road connecting Istanbul to Durrës. The path is rough with gravel and hard with cooked, red clay. We've followed it for about 125km. We will continue on this road until Librazhd, the small city where we plan to rest for two days before turning north. I double-check Griva and Düldül's tack and keep Johnny still while Quentin tightens his saddle bags. We swing up in the saddles. Griva is eager to start the day and begins to trot off. The familiar soundtrack of our days begins to play: hoofbeats, clip-clopping down the road. In exploring Albania, we have discovered an outdoor playground. We inhale the rich odours released by the evaporating dew. Far away, the shouts of shepherds reach our ears, somewhere high in the folds of the mountains. ▸▸





Photos: Will Saunders





Abruptly, there is no more trail. A landslide has taken out the path, though we can see further ahead it picks back up. I yell back to Quentin, 'Are we on the path?'

'Do you see a different one?' he asks back.

'Well,' I say, 'there is no more path.'

Ahead is a shale goat trail. About 50m below, the track seems to pick up again. It is safer to negotiate this on foot. I walk across the thin trail as fast as I can, Griva tiptoeing behind me. No rocks shake loose, so Düldül follows, losing his footing a little and scrambling to stay behind Griva. Looking over my shoulder, I see Quentin and Johnny eyeing up the hairy passage. Quentin is a novice rider, having ridden only 10 times before we began this trek. I would have liked to buy him a horse with lots of experience, to take care of him. This was not possible: Albanian horses are quite small, and Quentin measures 185cm. The only horse for Quentin was a flashy green-broke (meaning 'hardly trained') five-year-old named Johnny. Johnny doesn't have the experience to know he should tiptoe across the rocks, and he stomps across like a freight train. The stones start to crumble away, startling him. Instead of scrambling like Düldül, Johnny leaps away from the danger, shoving Quentin forward and knocking him off balance.

'Ah, this horse! What is he thinking? He is going to kill me!' Quentin turns back to Johnny, who is staring at him from underneath his thick forelock with puppy dog eyes.

'He's a baby,' I say soothingly. 'Give him time.' My mind wanders to this morning's argument. I put myself in Quentin's shoes. I've ridden since I could walk. I knew how difficult this trek would be, but I've thrown Quentin into an adventure not for the faint of heart, nor those lacking in patience. He is more than rising to the challenge. I resolve to be less strict and more understanding.

Crossing the rest of the landslide is more manageable. Quentin was right about the heat. It seems to radiate up from the ground and down from the sun. It's like being in an oven with both boilers on. Since we left camp this morning, we have crossed several dry sources, but found no water. In heat like this, the horses need to drink at least 35L of water each day. The odds are in our favour – inner Albania is flowing with rivers and tributaries. Within the hour, Quentin shouts, 'Look in the middle there!' Straight ahead, we see at the crux of the bend a crystal-clear stream. As we approach, the horses' ears prick forward at the sound of water, their energy renewed. At the river's edge, we're just as sloppy as our equine companions, slurping and splashing around in the cold water.

The edge of the heat softened, our spirits improve. An hour or two more down the path, a village comes into view. We hear livestock; it isn't abandoned. Two generations of communism veiled Albania from the outside world. Under the regime, Albanians were restricted from moving house, even within the country. With freedom in 1991, a massive urban migration took place, leaving villages to wither on the vine. Quentin comments that the mountains here are as beautiful as the French Alps, but without so many people. He's right about the people; more than once we've approached a village only to find it crumbling and empty. Those who remain eke out an almost autonomous existence, producing meat, milk, cheese, and vegetables. Speaking of empty, our food sacks are getting light. We make a beeline to a single-storey concrete building. From the six chairs outside, we have a strong hunch there is a shop. As we enter, disappointment hits when we inspect the walls: only dry goods.

'Do you have any *büke*?' I ask, hoping the grocer has some bread stashed behind the counter. He motions to a pre-packaged chocolate croissant. 'No, I mean, büke, real bread.' He shakes his head up and down, which, perhaps strangely to us, in Albania means no.

'Djath, domate, speca?' I am naively hopeful he sells cheese, tomatoes, or peppers. He moves his head again. No luck there either.

I have another idea. 'Can you call home?' I make a telephone motion, hoping he'll get the gist and let us buy some food from his household. He shouts at a young boy hanging out in the back, who disappears down the lane. ▸▸









The owner makes a questioning expression with his entire body and points to our horses and us. This launches a familiar conversation. Using our pidgin Albanian, it goes something like this:

'Gjirokaster to Tropojë, with horses.'

His hand flies to his forehead. 'Oh, oh, oh! What? No guide?'

'No guide.'

'Your horses?'

'Our horses. Buy in Konispol.'

'Expensive?'

'Not really.'

And so on. Albanians are a curious people, quick to ask questions about us, and eager to share their world. This afternoon our new friend is named Ulti. 'Where do you sleep?' he asks.

'Tent.'

Another big grimace, hands turned into claws by his face. 'Bears!'

'No, no bears!'

'Wolves!' he says next.

'No, no wolves!'

He is very concerned. Before we can scare him further by telling him about the bear tracks we saw last week, his son reappears with a bag in his arms. Ulti reacts double-time to pull out a paper tablecloth. Our stomachs growling, we try to remain composed as we unpack the bag's contents. There's a loaf of home-made bread, four tomatoes, a cucumber, and a block of cheese. At the bottom is a real treat: a dozen olives, folded in tinfoil. We thank him and dig in. When it comes time to leave, we wrap up the leftovers and prepare to pay. He won't accept any money. 'It's nothing,' he says. We know it isn't nothing. Learning to graciously accept gifts from locals has been humbling. Each day we receive gifts from people who still till their earth by hand, who milk their sheep and goats twice a day, and who slaughter one cow a year. We wonder if villagers in Western Europe would be so generous to two vagabond horseback riders.

At least today we can reciprocate by buying some pasta and tinned sardines from Ulti's shop. We leave and he shouts *'Rrugë të mbarë'* after us. Bon voyage.

Leaving the village behind, I'm fantasising about an early campsite and taking a swim. We decide to dismount and climb up to the ridge to get a better view of the valley. At the top, we are greeted by the ringing of bells, and we find a grassy hollow. What we thought would be an alpine lake is in fact a watering hole, giving off the reek of stale livestock. Two shepherds greet us, grinning. On learning we intend to camp here tonight, one shepherd hauls Quentin off to show him where we can find drinking water. Then they call their flocks and disappear down a path to the west.

We untack and let the horses loose for half an hour. They won't stray too far; they'll hover around waiting for grain. The cool of the evening tempts us to lie outside and read, but as soon as we've wrapped up chores, we admit that we're exhausted. I flop onto my mattress next to Quentin and start teasing him about quitting. 'So, still over when we get to Librazhd? We could just sell them and be finished. Over. No more horse trek.'

Things are serious for a moment. He doesn't miss a beat: 'And then we could go to any hotel we want and sleep for days!'

We're quiet as a shared vision passes in front of our eyes: a big, plush bed, a long, hot shower, scrubbing all the crud from our skin, putting on clean clothes, and sleeping. A satisfied sigh from outside the tent breaks the vision. Griva snorts, and we hear her lie down to sleep – something horses only do when they feel at home. Even though her location changes each night, she feels at home in our herd. Her fate is intertwined with ours. These horses are our connection to the wild Albanian mountains, and our entry into life with the locals. We don't have to discuss quitting any further. In the end, we'll sleep another 26 nights in the tent, just metres from our mounts. At each sunrise, we'll learn more about our horses, Albania, and each other.

@enselle.voyage



