

Outgoing Journey to Kosovo

September 4– September 14, 2024

By Connie Williams

Our journey to Kosovo began on September 4, when our group met in Pristina. It included Cedar Rapids-Iowa City club members Nancy York, Tom Hess, Connie Williams, Laura Booth, Stephanie and George Schulte and Ottawa, Canada club member, Ian Wilson. During the next week, we were reacquainted with Open World friends, toured the area sites and made new friends. Luljeta Gjonbalaj, Rozafa Ukimeraj and Majlinda Kelmendi welcomed our group with a dinner at the Renaissance Restaurant. After our long day of travel, it was wonderful to relax with our friends and their co-workers. We truly appreciated their hospitality.



Kosovo is a blending of cultures, we hope they come to appreciate each other by flying the Kosovo flag everywhere. The Kosovo flag has six stars meant to symbolize Kosovo's six major ethnic groups: Albanians, Serbs, Bosniaks, Turks, Romani and Gorani,



Over the next few days, we toured the Pecka Patrijarsija Monastery, had lunch in Peja after touring the natural beauty of Peja Canyon and Gadimes Cave and visited the historic old city of Prizren. We went to the festival

grounds for Hardh Wine Fest and were served a picnic lunch near a waterfall by Luljeta, Arlinda, Rozafa and her father. We were happy to see Bajram Jasaraj, who had been with the December 2022 Open World group in Cedar Rapids. And Ana Saric, Open World facilitator in 2024 and US Embassy connection, treated us to Sunday lunch before we traveled to Gjilan.

One evening, we were hosted by Qazim Doda, his relatives and friends for our first Friendship Force informational meeting at his office for Albanian American Vision. Qazim, who had been our 2022 Open World interpreter, hosted a dinner for us afterward. We were able to meet his brother, nephews and business friends, and be greeted by General Xhavit Gashi, who had been the first Consulate General at the Des Moines Kosovo Consulate. We also reconnected with Agim Sylejmani, a journalist who works for Qazim and had escorted our group in 2023, and met his wife.

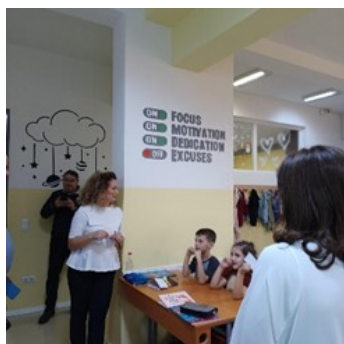
During the week, we became acquainted with the religions of the area. We attended mass at the Cathedral of Mother Teresa in celebration of her 100th birthday while in Pristina. Hosts Jovica Maksimovic and Fadil Osmani took us to Orthodox churches and Islamic mosques.



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While in Gjilan and surrounding area, we toured Don Bosco school, the RC Cola plant, Novo Brdo Castle (UNESCO site), and met with mayors. Jovica Maksimovic, aka Maks, Fadil Osmani and Zoran Cvetkovic organized this portion of the week and did an excellent job of working together.



We had dinners with Fadil's family and with Zoran's family. Zoran's mother-in-law, Zorika, showed us her collections of traditional costumes, stored in their original homestead.



Our journey to Kosovo took place at a very good time. Students had just started school, the weather was warm and harvest had begun. It was time to process red peppers into ajvar, pickle fresh vegetables, pick grapes, make rakia. Rakia is a fruit brandy popular in the Balkans and often served as an aperitif before meals.

We truly enjoyed our time in Kosovo and hope to return. The time spent with friends and families was the best part of the trip. This journey was a success because of how the Kosovo groups worked together. As Maks said, "If we can work together on this project, we hope to work together on other projects." Hope, tolerance and cooperation may bring our worlds together.

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