



# Visit to Albania – Tony Treasure

(October 2009)

God's love in action...



## INTRODUCTION

The time came for my annual visit, and though during the year we communicate via letter/e-mail, it was so good to be able to meet the kids face to face once again.

After an uneventful trip - Aberdeen/ Gatwick/ Tirana, Bujar the driver/ handyman for the Christian Centre & Children's Home in Tirana was at the airport to meet me. Unfortunately, because air fares to Albania are so high in the summer months it was necessary to visit the Home after the children had returned to school from their 3 month holidays. They all roll in at various junctures late in the morning, in time for lunch, having started school early in the day, and despite the 'joy' of having to do homework, I was able to spend a large amount of hours with all the kids during the afternoon/evenings. It was also good to spend part of the mornings with the staff and catch up on their news, and life in the Home generally.

One afternoon, I was able to treat the younger group to a few hours at a privately run play centre and on another occasion went out with the teenagers to a smart café in one of the new modern shopping centres. This included excursions going the wrong way up the

escalators - I have a photo of us sitting on one of them as a group as it descended. The security guards weren't bothered as there was virtually no-one in the centre and they could see we weren't jobs! (though we wouldn't have tried this in Marks & Spencer's!). Had a few days with cloud and rain but for the most part it was hot and sunny hovering around 27C.

## THE CHILDREN

Most of their current situations were covered by Paulin and Luli, (the directors of the Home) in their July newsletter. Some events in their lives are simply personal and should not be put into print, but all of them seem to be faring well and I was particularly struck by the maturity and common sense of the teenagers of whom, under God, we should be proud and encouraged.

One noticeable absentee from last time was Elona who had left to be re-united with her mother in Italy 6 months earlier. I'd spoken to Elona with her familiar croaky voice on the phone in Italy and she seemed happy to be there - they had adequate state accommodation and she was attending school. Her Mum was so surprised at how mature she was. Liz and I recall when she first arrived at the kids home in Berat when she cried so much

for the first 3 weeks which was so distressing for us all, but after that initial traumatic time, God has done a wonderful transforming work with this fun loving 18 year old. She obviously misses her sister, Dashmira, who is expected to join her when she's 18 in a couple of years time.

New legislation coming soon will require the boys and girls to be located on separate floors for which there is scope and will enable an extra room to be provided to the girls so there is only 2 as opposed to 3 sharing a room.

Sadly, because of the lack of finance, the kids did not have their annual holiday by the sea. They spent a large part of the summer with a relative in places throughout Albania. They all seemed to have been glad to have returned to Tirana and to appreciate more their situation/ ambience in comparison with the conditions of poverty and sometimes hard manual work some of them experienced, especially those emanating from the villages.

## GAZI



My visits to Albania coincide with Gazi's birthday. I had a lovely meal with him at a posh open air restaurant one night, and another at a Burger King type place the following evening. We celebrated his birthday (20th) at the children's home which he visits regularly, for he now lives independently in a room in a private house in 'Student City' which he shares with a guy from his church. It was so cramped and he has to cook on a single gas ring in the corridor, but doesn't pay much rent, so you get what you pay for! He still works with the company importing and distributing plasterboard and other building materials..



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## XHULIO

Xhulio joined the Home in Berat the same day as Gazi. I managed to speak on the phone to him at his home in Greece for a minute before being cut off which happens every time -- I believe there are reasons for this, but he obviously wants to stay in contact with those in his 'previous life' having himself visited the Home a fortnight earlier. It's hard to believe you are actually talking to him with his deep steady speaking voice contrasting to the comical, giggly 'milky bar kid' that we knew!

## TIRANA

Development continues apace throughout the capital (so does the traffic!) and on the motorway from the periphery of the airport to the centre, offices and flats now adjoin both sides of the road. What a vast change from the first, and for a long time, only, new factory (Coca Cola) -- what would Enver Hoxha have made of it all? There is a profusion of petrol stations and I observed that the price was just a little lower than in the U.K. I spent a few hours in the National History Museum---the first time since the fall of Communism - well worth a visit, although non Albanian speaking folk would find it a bit frustrating as there were few translations of the items in the museum. Unlike in Hoxha's time when so much of it contained propaganda glorifying the Communist Party, history has been re-written again and as far as W.W.2 is concerned the role of Churchill and the British military in helping to defeat the Nazi's was given proper acknowledgement via film and documents.

I had two encouragements: the first whilst on a bus to the Home, when alighted a guy I recognised as a one-time faithful member of the church from Berat, who lives with his family and attends a thriving church in Tirana. Secondly, when I first went to live in Albania in March 1992, I became friendly with a young Albanian teenager in the church I attended--we hadn't seen each other since I left for Berat in October that year. He is now married (to an M.P. in the Parliament) with a kiddie and pastors a church in Tirana. Despite a gap of 17 years, we instantly



recognised each other - it was such a joy to meet someone who had been in the 'new' Christian church and was still strong in the faith, whereby in the early years many had come to church simply out of curiosity, to meet foreigners, or to receive humanitarian aid.

For those whose drug is coffee, might be interested to know that the St Stephen's Centre in Tirana, which used to be a bolthole for missionaries, now has 26 types of latte!

## BERAT

The town had changed little, except there was a by-pass out to the villages, which obviated the need to cross (and often block) the ancient bridge into the Gorice quarter where the 'old' children's home was opened in 1994. There was a new café in Gorice the seating straddling different levels of the mountain -- very smart, but a nightmare for the waiters, who must be very fit! I stayed with a couple, the wife being on the staff in the Home and who looked after our Alastair and Lucy when we had to do 'battle' with the bureaucrats of the day. I was only in the town for one night so had no opportunity to meet others. The huge new Greek Orthodox church was open for worship, the bells of which made a pleasant contrast to the deafening noise emanating from the recorded messages in

Arabic from the mosque. A large billboard showed a poster of Berat University--it doesn't exist yet--a politician's dream perhaps!

The church we used to attend still functions and has a pastor, but I gained the impression that it was just about holding its own. Sadly, other church plants of bygone years in the region are either non-existent or struggling. Throughout Albania, depending on who you speak with, church attendance is either stable or in slow decline. It is dispiriting for pastors outside the capital, that along with the rest of the population, there continues to be a slow drain of people from the villages and towns into Tirana and overseas. Many Albanian folk we used to know are now in Italy, Greece or U.S.A.

## CONCLUSION

Thank you for your on-going support--some of you have been on this particular journey from the beginning. Please try to encourage others to come on board--it really is a joy to be with and involved with these youngsters.

Every blessing and with love from

**Tony (and Liz) Treasure**

1 School Crescent, PETERCULTER,  
ABERDEEN, AB14 0QJ

Tel: 01224-733419

e-mail: [tonyliztreasure@aol.com](mailto:tonyliztreasure@aol.com)