

MORE THAN
WHAT YOU GOT
ON GOOGLE

K O S O V O

Muntasir Mamun

ILISH BOOKS

THE FLAGS

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Project Support
Embassy of Kosovo in Dhaka

Design & Layout
Navigators Solution Limited

Typeface
Sukhumvit Set and EB Garamond

First Edition
2026
ISBN 978-984-29671-0-8

Publisher
Ilish Books

Printed and bound in Bangladesh



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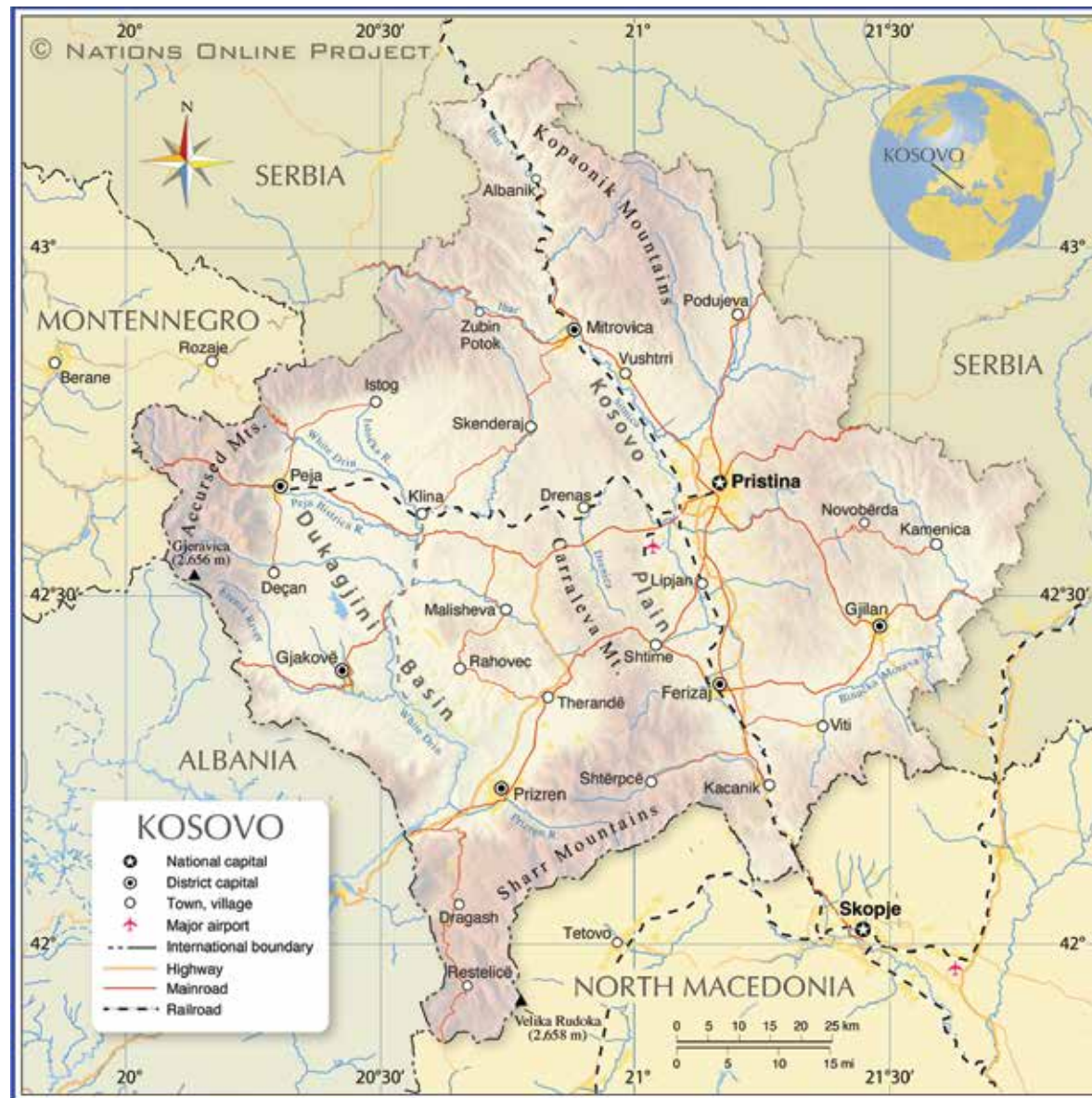
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Beyond the headlines, when you type Kosovo into Google, the algorithm spits out the usual fragments: a disputed territory, NATO's 1999 intervention, ethnic tensions, contested sovereignty. The narrative is often reduced to geopolitics, war, and unresolved recognition. But two weeks on a bicycle, moving slowly through towns, villages, hills, and valleys, told me something else. Kosovo isn't simply the news stories—it's lived texture, landscapes, hospitality, contradictions, and resilience.

Cycling across Kosovo reshaped the way I thought about the Balkans. The road curved through steep mountains, past rivers that glittered in autumn light, and into plains where farmers still worked small plots by hand. From the saddle, you see how people stitch together daily life in ways no article captures—children playing football on school breaks, man and woman selling fruits and vegetables at roadside stalls, shepherds guiding flocks across highways with a calm that halts traffic better than a red light.

Kosovo is strikingly young—half the population is under 30. In Pristina's cafés, the air hums with ambition and restlessness. It is a place caught between the heavy shadow of history and the electric desire for a different future.

On the same ride, you pedal past half-built houses funded by diaspora remittances, and Ottoman-era mosques that survived centuries. You roll through villages where cows still wander freely, and then enter Pristina, where tech start-ups are sprouting. A land labeled as "Europe's

poorest” also bursts with entrepreneurial energy, art collectives, and festivals that rarely get global coverage.

Kosovo is not simply a footnote of diplomacy or a post-war statistic. It is a living mosaic—where mountain passes meet bustling cities, where past grief exists alongside stubborn joy, and where every encounter challenges the Google summary. Cycling taught me this: Kosovo is more than what you got on Google. It’s a country that insists on being experienced, not just explained.

THE ROAD UNFOLDS

We began our journey from Pristina, heading north toward Mitrovica. The ride was pleasant, the terrain mostly gentle, giving us the perfect start to our two-week cycling adventure. At that point, we had no idea of the surprises waiting for us. Our hotel in Mitrovica didn’t have dedicated parking for bicycles, but the staff went out of their way to help us secure them safely. That small act of kindness set the tone for what we would discover about hospitality in Kosovo.

When we stepped out for lunch, we were immediately struck by the size of the portions—remarkably generous and somewhat different from what we had been eating in Pristina. Only then did we realize we were in the northern, predominantly Serbian community of the country, just a short distance from the Serbian border. The food itself was delicious, but what left a deeper impression was the attitude of the people serving it. They weren’t only attentive—they genuinely wanted to make sure the price felt fair to us. The meals were already very affordable by any standard, but their concern reflected something more: a warmth and care that went beyond the transaction.

Mitrovica, often known in the headlines for its divided communities and tense politics, greeted us with flavors, hospitality, and sincerity—an introduction to the layered Kosovo that Google never shows.

KLINA

From Mitrovica, we rode southward under the scorching sun, the road alive with the steady hum of traffic. By the time we rolled into Klina, it was lunchtime. The cafés and restaurants were packed with customers, spilling over onto sidewalks, the town buzzing with energy. Klina immediately struck us as a happening place, full of movement and life. At first, we thought of staying the night here. The idea of resting in a lively town, surrounded by its cafés and chatter, felt inviting. But to our disappointment, we quickly discovered there were no hotels in Klina itself. The only option was a few kilometers away—a solitary highway hotel standing outside town.

It was then that a young woman noticed our hesitation. Without a second thought, she approached us with a smile and offered help. Not only did she give us directions, but she actually walked with us through the busy streets, guiding us to the right road leading out of town.

That short encounter captured something essential about traveling through Kosovo: the warmth of strangers, the instinct to look out for others, and the willingness to go beyond words to ensure you find your way. In a place where we were outsiders with little knowledge of the roads, this small act of kindness turned a hectic moment into one of connection and gratitude.

That was how we ended up at Hotel Nora, just beyond Klina. It lacked the bustle of the city center but offered what we needed most: shade, water, and a quiet corner to rest. Klina gave us the liveliness of the day, and Hotel Nora gave us the calm to recover from it.

PEJA

Today's ride to Peja was shorter in distance, but it came with a steady, consistent climb that tested us differently. For the first two days, we had been starting late—around 8 a.m.—thinking that with shorter routes, we could manage the distance easily. The crisp, chilly mornings never warned us of how fierce the midday sun could become, even for Bangladeshis like us. So today, we changed our rhythm. We set off at dawn, when the world was still quiet. Birds were already chirping in the pale light, and the few motor vehicles on the road still had their headlights on. For the first time on this trip, we felt the pre-dawn wind rushing against us—cold, sharp, but invigorating.

We pedaled with joy into the climb, our pace steady but unhurried. There was something almost meditative about that morning ride: the soft light of daybreak, the stillness of the countryside, and the steady rhythm of climbing that matched the beat of our breaths. What could have been a tough stretch became a slow, persistent ascent that we embraced rather than endured. Peja awaited us ahead, but the road itself felt like the real reward.

Not far from our steady climb, a massive industrial complex appeared with a bold sign: “Peja.” We had been seeing the brand's bottles of local soft drinks everywhere since our first day on the road. Could this be the production facility? It seemed likely—nothing else along our route matched its size or scale. If so, it was fitting that this landmark marked the gateway to Peja. A quick check on our map confirmed we were only a few kilometers from

the city center. Our target was the area around the old bazaar, where centuries of history still pulse through narrow streets. But soon after entering the city, our ride slowed to a crawl. Bumper-to-bumper traffic packed the roads, moving at a snail's pace.

For most cyclists, maneuvering through the gaps might have been manageable. But for us, on a tandem bicycle built for two, it was nearly impossible. At that pace, the long frame didn't allow us to slip through tight spots. Eventually, we gave in, dismounted, and pushed the bike along the sidewalks. Sidewalks in Peja are multipurpose: they serve as bike lanes (at least where we saw markings), pedestrian walkways, and—quite often—parking spots for cars. From the looks of it, this overlap wasn't an exception but more likely part of the local rhythm. For us, it was a new kind of urban challenge, trading pedals for patience as we walked our way into the heart of the city.

The traffic, though dense, was nothing like the chaos of Dhaka. After only a few minutes of walking, we found our hotel tucked conveniently near the center. The sun was still low, and we were pleasantly surprised to have reached our day's destination so early. Along the way, we paused a few times for what had already become our favorite ritual—coffee and baked items. If there is one thing that defines daily life in Kosovo, it is the café culture. Everywhere, small patisseries serve fresh breads, and sweets, paired with strong, aromatic coffee. Always affordable, always delicious, it quickly became the rhythm that started each of our mornings.

Once settled at the hotel, we stepped back out to explore. The Old Bazaar of Peja greeted us with its narrow cobbled lanes, wooden storefronts, and the lingering charm of the Ottoman era. The air carried the scent of coffee and grilled meat; stalls brimmed with brassware, embroidered fabrics, and hand-carved trinkets. It was a living museum of its own.

A short walk brought us to the Museum of Peja, also known as the Ethnological Museum, housed inside the 18th-century Tahir Bey Guesthouse—a beautifully preserved Ot-

toman konak with carved ceilings, creaking staircases, and a vine-covered courtyard. We were the only visitors that afternoon, and our guide, a young woman with an easy smile, seemed genuinely pleased to have someone to share the space with.

Room by room, she unfolded the story of Peja. She showed us traditional Albanian costumes, delicate jewelry, wool looms, and copper coffee pots that once belonged to merchant families. In another room, she pointed to Roman and Byzantine artifacts—carved stones, fragments of pottery, and old coins—evidence that this valley has been a crossroads of civilizations for over two millennia.

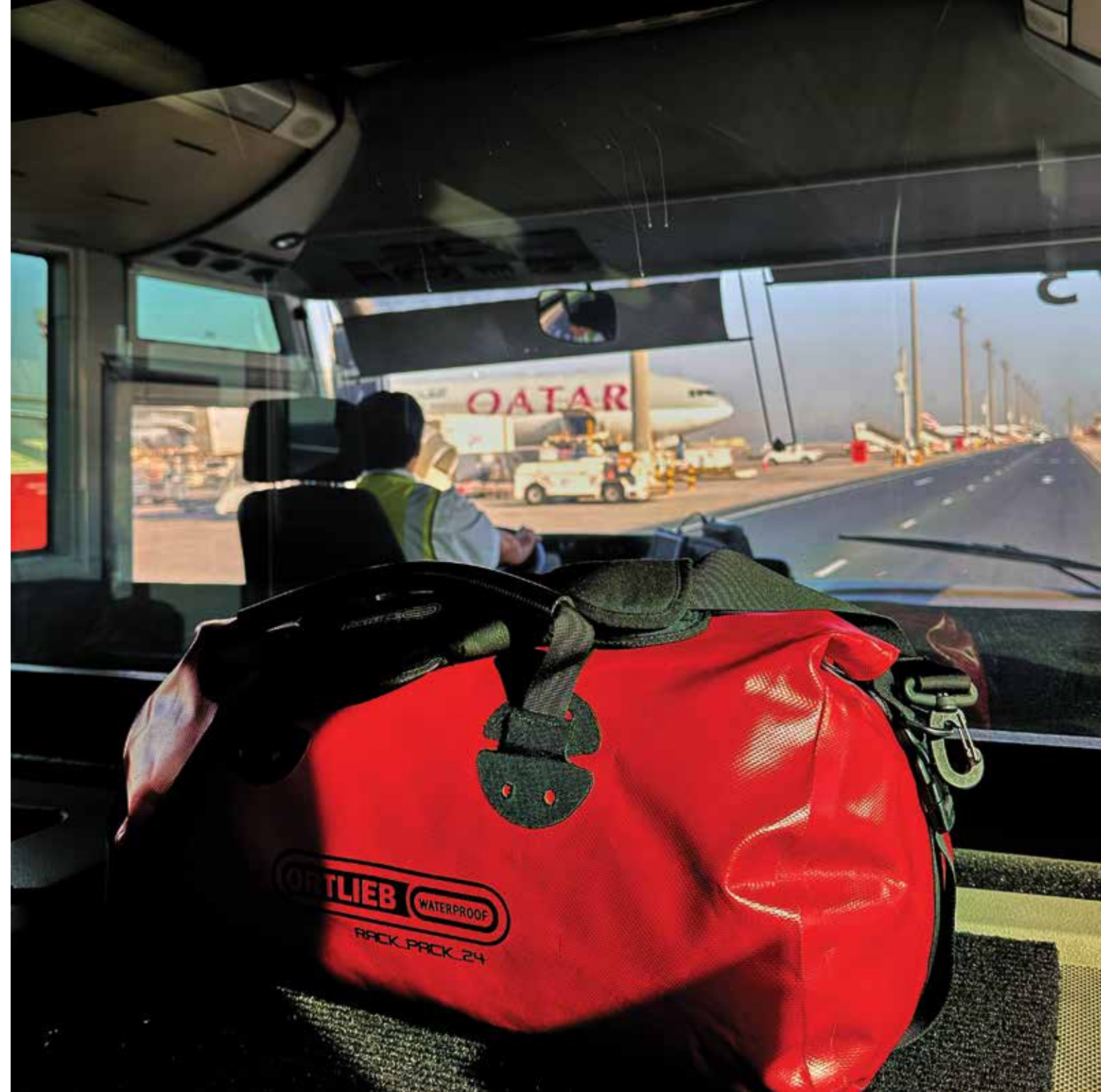
Her voice carried both pride and melancholy as she described how Peja's identity evolved: once a Christian stronghold, later shaped by centuries of Ottoman rule. The minarets, the hammams, the bazaar—all became part of the city's fabric without erasing what came before. "You see," she said softly, "Peja didn't change overnight. It layered—faith, culture, time."

When we finally stepped out into the quiet courtyard, she waved from the doorway, her voice still echoing gently through the hall. Peja lingered with us as a place where history isn't trapped behind glass—it breathes through people like her, through stories told in calm voices on slow afternoons.



Things are improving at Dhaka airport. Once, taking a bicycle was a hassle, but now it's much easier. What many don't know is that most airlines carry bicycles for free as checked luggage. So, why not take one?

[Right]
Traveling with a bike means carrying a lot of gear. To keep things light, use your bike bags as your carry-on luggage. It saves weight — and a few stares at the check-in counter.





The easiest way to reach Pristina was via Istanbul. We expected plenty of hurdles, but the journey turned out surprisingly smooth — at least on the way there. The way back to Dhaka? Not so much. Murphy's law, perhaps.

[Right] Everyone else looks for luggage; we look for bike boxes. Big, bulky, impossible to miss — until you do. Then it's a sprint. Sometimes they roll out on the belt, sometimes they wait near the oversized counter, and sometimes they simply vanish into airport mystery.





Our friend Basnik was waiting with his big van. “Why spend money when I have a van?” he said. Why not! That’s how Kosovars are — open, generous, and kind. That’s how our journey began. Even before we started, it already felt like home — a home we had never been to before.



The rooms were large but not for two bicycles and a dream of reassembly. The balcony, though, opened toward the football stadium of Pristina. We skipped the match, watched the traffic move instead, and fixed our bikes under the morning light.



My friend David is a wizard when it comes to folding bikes. He told me, “You’ve got to babysit this Bike Friday Tandem. It’s made for leisure rides, not rough pedaling. And check it before every start. If it’s not doing well — you know my number.” Well, he’s from Manhattan, and he means it.



Our first rest — just outside Pristina, on a lazy weekend morning. That’s our **Chariot of Fire** — Bangladesh on the road to the world.



Maybe it was the road's own gift of the gab — stopping the cars, but somehow letting three cyclists slip through.



We didn't know what the crops were — maize? wheat? grapes? We couldn't tell. But the field looked pristine, almost unreal, as if painted behind a veil of light. The wind brushed over it gently, making the colors shift like waves on silk. For a moment, we stopped talking, stopped guessing — and just watched. Sometimes beauty doesn't need to be understood to be felt.



We've seen such scenes on film before — a picture-perfect landscape, the mountains resting on the horizon, and under the scorching sun, an old tractor rolls steadily down the empty road.

[Right] In Klina, she appeared out of nowhere and offered to help us. It wasn't a big thing, but in that moment it meant a lot. Small gestures like this often define a journey more than the destinations themselves.





Even if the sky falls,
the minaret rises — its
shadow still offering a
place to rest.

[Right] Looking back,
it was that kind of
noon — the kind
you'd expect from *The
Bicycle Thief*, but this
one lived only in our
imagination.





Kosovo isn't big in size, but once you're on the road, it stretches toward the horizon as if searching for its own destination. Villages appear along the velvet roads — calm, distant, and beautifully ordinary.



We had coffee in front of a small barber shop in Peja Bazaar. The place was full of elderly men, almost like a quiet congregation gathered around the afternoon. But by evening, when we returned for another walk, it had fallen completely silent. Age, perhaps, keeps its own timetable.