

# THE BALKANS

## A ZOO ENTHUSIAST'S BLIND SPOT?

Words and photos by Ken Kawata

WHICH EUROPEAN cities attract the attention of North American zoo fans? Most likely Berlin, Vienna, Zurich and Prague lead the list. More recently however zoos in the Benelux region, Central Europe and the UK have visitors from all parts of the world. Other European nations have zoos, yet many would agree that for the more traditional North American zoo-goer, other regions are a blind spot.

### THE PLANNING STAGE

The global pandemic kept me in the USA for three years. But when the firm grip of lockdown began to ease, in September 2022, I took a quick glance at a region of Europe I had never visited, the Balkans. Published accounts of this destination, written in English, are not plentiful. In 1966 James Fisher listed 'Yugoslavia' as having 10 zoos, three of them aquariums in Sarajevo and Zagreb with no descriptions of them.

Even with the dearth of published accounts Zagreb is mentioned the most: The first volume of the *International Zoo Yearbook* (1959) gave basic stats including "13 hectares. 30 employees. Mammals 42 species, 230 specimens; Birds 60 species, 1,300 specimens; Reptiles & amphibians 4 species, 10 specimens. Total: 106 species, 1,540 specimens."

Kirchshofer's *The World of Zoos* (1968) also provided a brief account. Under 'Yugoslavia' she wrote that Zagreb's zoo was founded on 25th April 1925 by Mijo Filipović; tram 12 from the main railway station; staff 37; area 32 acres; as for scientific research, cooperation with Veterinary College; collection included about 220 species, some 870 specimens of mammals, birds and reptiles; specialised in southeast European fauna; representative species included Indian Elephant, Giraffe, White-bearded Gnu and other antelopes, Black Rhinoceros, Brazilian Tapir (breeding), Tiger, Leopard (breeding), Sea-lion; new houses were built in 1961 for Asiatic Black and Polar Bears and, in 1962, for rhinoceros.

Much more recently (2021) Sheridan *et al.* included a two-page description of Zoo Zagreb. It is owned by the municipality; the zoo has a guidebook and exhibit signage languages are Croatian and English; it has education programmes. Collection as of the end of 2019 included 742 mammals in 78 species, 434 birds in 78 species and 523 reptiles in 119 species. The grounds are flat and include a lake system, historic sculptures, and 150 species of indigenous and exotic plant species including several ancient oak trees that enhance a pleasant zoological garden. "This zoo has improved remarkably during the past five years," they comment: "During the period 2016 to 2019 many new species were added and improvements made including a fine new walkthrough aviary with 10 bird species (and dik-diks), a new Madagascar House including a walk-through lemur area, the addition of Giant Anteaters, pelicans, Emus and wallabies, Komodo Dragons and

new restaurant, shop and education centre". As star attractions they list "Lions, coatis and Brown Capuchins, Chinese Leopards, Reeves' Muntjacs, Small-clawed Otters, Ring-tailed Lemurs, kookaburras, Cuban Rock Iguanas, Rock Hyrax, caimans, Channel-billed Toucans".

When planning a visit overseas you may wonder if the language barrier will be a concern. Slovenia has Slovene. Bosnia and Herzegovina is multi-lingual with Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian (officially) while Croats speak Croatian. Fortunately English does not appear so unfamiliar in these countries. Irena Furlan answered my question: "In Slovenia nowadays the second language is English. Most people in Slovenia understand and speak English, at least basic English, so I don't think communication will be a problem".

### DUBROVNIK AQUARIUM, CROATIA

Towering palm trees greet visitors, indicating that the city is blessed with a mild climate. At the aquarium entrance I asked my standard questions: Is there a gift shop? Are printed materials such as picture postcards or a brochure available? The answer was no.

The admission fee was 60 kuna for adults (about \$7.8) and 20 kuna for children (about \$2.6). Euros were not accepted then so I used my credit card. The aquarium is run by the University of Dubrovnik's

The rather inconspicuous entrance to Dubrovnik Aquarium







An impressive seahorse sculpture just inside the entrance hall in Dubrovnik Aquarium

Institute for Marine and Coastal Research, focusing on the Adriatic Sea's flora and fauna. As for the aquarium's life support system, sea water is continuously pumped into the tanks and returned to the sea.

Exhibits were all indoors and tanks were located in two halls, consisting of about 20 medium to small tanks (the size, of course, was arbitrarily described). Signs were bilingual with the local names, English and scientific names. On exhibit were fish such as groupers, sea horses, sea robins and invertebrates such as lobsters, sea urchins, sea anemones and sea sponges; I noted no mammals. Half an hour would be enough time for an adequate visit.

After my tour, a question occurred to me. What was the highlight and character of this institution? It may not be fair to apply global evaluations in this small town. But, that aside, you do not necessarily need dozens of rare or endangered species to build a top-notch aquarium. Presentation often holds the key, which, unfortunately this aquarium didn't seem to have a clue about. Anyhow, the collection consisted of an all-too-familiar line-up of marine life. The Holy Grail, such as a large shark tank – a standard feature in other aquariums – stood out by its absence. What this institution offers was non-descript and its character rather anonymous. In short this aquarium needs a personality.

It turned out that in this region of Europe, tourism peaks in September. It was sunny and warm and waves of tourists filled the popular beach area. Some were in escorted groups, large and small. Also crowded were the Walls of Dubrovnik, the medieval defensive fortifications. In clear contrast the aquarium, isolated so quietly in a tiny corner within these walls, was sparsely visited. It was so close to the big crowd physically, yet so far away psychologically. What this traveller recognised was that it was missing an opportunity to appeal to the public efficiently, and to serve the local community. The poor attendance is a shame whether the higher echelons of this institute realise it or not. This aquarium is

missing the boat. Locally the aquarium should develop attractive exhibits and initiate marketing. I wondered, was there any framework for education and conservation programmes?

On a wider scope, it is a member of EAZA but not WAZA. So if it does develop its potential it needs to assert itself internationally – an exceedingly ambitious goal. Anyway, let's 'shoot from the hip' (as they say in American cowboy films). In my (admittedly wild) guess, the aquarium has got to free itself from an invisible harness which is restricting its growth. Of course it needs a large amount of funding too. The point is to dream big, to shoot for the moon. Role models abound throughout the world. In Europe there's Oceanario de Lisboa in Portugal.

### CAT MUSEUM, KOTOR, MONTENEGRO

Palm trees also welcome visitors to this town. In a busy section, off a crowded street, sat a museum dedicated to domestic cats. I took a break from wild species for a quick look at it. Kotor is known as 'the city of cats' and they have certainly found their voice here. The admission fee was two euros for adults, with free entry for children. There was a gift shop selling fridge magnets and suchlike but no printed material about the museum was available. Postage stamps, posters, paintings, cartoons, or anything related to cats were exhibited in three small halls. Some pro-cat expressions were so uproarious they would make an introverted cat lover blush. A 20-minute visit would cover most exhibits.

### SARAJEVO ZOO, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

No palm trees, which indicated real winters here. A taxi took me to the zoo and a friendly ticket booth attendant met me with a smile. Only local currency was accepted and admission was three marks (\$1.53). We communicated in just enough English for me to learn that there were no maps, brochures or postcards and that the zoo closed at 6pm. The grounds were well maintained and had attractive flower beds. and it was sunny and mild (21°C), but children in screaming go-karts were hard to



Inside the Cat Museum



The entrance to Sarajevo Zoo

ignore. I saw a Jackdaw, something quite exotic to me, and a more familiar magpie.

Much of the zoo was shaded by deciduous trees and a stream flowed through the grounds that had steep, tree-covered hillsides on one side. This limited the space for exhibits. There were no English directional signs. Some of the hoofstock yards were terraced to accommodate animals and the public. Also, a city street partially sandwiched animal areas and hills. On the other side of the stream, level land provided more flexibility for housing a wider variety of species. I started my visit on the hilly side.

One large male Eland with four Alpacas in a large yard, then another for Alpaca (albeit vacant) and then 20 plus domestic goats appeared behind a chain-link fence. There was no guardrail so visitors were petting an adult Barbary Sheep here. Other yards with animal labels were also vacant, an example being an empty zebra enclosure. The animals might have been in their shelters, voluntarily or otherwise, but not on display on such a nice day? After all, visitors didn't pay to see 'hidden' animals. The labels were posted

unevenly and inconsistently. A Donkey was enjoying the sunny weather but with no label to explain what it was. An impressive male bison also had no label to tell you whether he was European or American. Also noticeable were the high numbers of domestic animals in comparison to wild species. I saw five or so rabbits, two ponies, and six Llamas in another large yard.

Next was a small pond with two Mute Swans with two cygnets and domestic geese. But, back to the labels: to be fair some animals were well labelled, such as two Patagonian Cavies and two European Foxes. So were four Common Raccoons exhibited behind a glass barrier, and a Grey Wolf (albeit no subspecies mentioned) and a Bennett's Wallaby and four or so Fallow Deer on a hillside. But two coatis appeared to be White-nosed, the label didn't say. Then a surprising find; an adult male Yellow-cheeked Gibbon (*Nomascus gabriellae*) in a glass-fronted cage, clearly labelled including the scientific name. There was a large moated island adjacent to his building but at the time of my visit, he had no access to it.

I then moved to the other side of the stream. Two spacious, glass-fronted yards held a pair of lions enjoying the sunny weather and a Tiger (the sign said it was a Bengal). I moved on. In a large chainlink-fenced, grassy yard was a brown bear, rather small in size and it may have been the Syrian subspecies. A run of outdoor exhibits was soon replaced with one of the few buildings that the public had access to. Five playful Ring-tailed Lemurs came into view behind more glass. It was here that another pleasant surprise was waiting, three Pig-tailed Monkeys. Some four decades or so ago we used to see a variety of macaques in the USA such as Crab-eating, Formosan Rock and the then dime-a-dozen Rhesus but we hardly see more than a couple of macaques in American zoos now. Also in this building was a lone Meerkat (a social species!) and a small representative group of commonly seen zoo reptiles, a Ball Python, a leucistic Burmese Python, a Green Iguana and a pond slider with unknown geographic origin.

At this point it was close to lunch time. Conveniently a snack bar was around the corner so I sat down to eat. and review what I had seen: the animals appeared to be well cared for, but be reminded that they were time-tested common zoo species. An unavoidable





**Right:** To the left is one of the hoofstock enclosures at Sarajevo Zoo – on the right is the stream that bisects the zoo.  
**Below:** Lions enjoying the sunshine



Families enjoying one of Sarajevo Zoo's primate exhibits

impression, to be honest, was that the zoo was a hodge-podge with a lack of diversity – a taxonomically skewed representation of the animal kingdom. In short, this zoo was a reminder of municipal menageries of yore. Mega-herbivores; elephants, rhinos, giraffes and hippos are not here. This is not to say that lack of such popular stock would make me write-off a zoo as inferior. Yet in the public eye these are the meat-and-potato animals in a zoo. Another noticeable absence were the avian groups. There were psittacines (macaw), ratites (rhea, Emu and ostrich) and raptors such as Andean Condor, Golden Eagle and a European vulture species – all easily maintained. Also lacking was the largest group of birds in the world, the passerines. Thankfully many other zoos attempt to add a touch of specialisation such as several crane or flamingo species, but there was no trace of this in Sarajevo.

Digging into administrative and managerial aspects, harder questions arise. Are there enforceable work rules and binding labour contracts? Women in the work force? Any measure for job accountability or a manual for front-line workers? Furthermore, are there zoo-keeper training sessions? (An email from Keon Brouwer in November 2022 told me there are no keeper schools in this part of the world). How about volunteers, i.e. a docent council? Or summer classes for children? These are important elements for building a zoo's education and conservation endeavors, they should go hand in hand with a solid animal collection.

Beyond species and specimen counts, does the zoo have a notable animal 'personality'? An historic view of zoos in the US points out that one of the approaches to develop the 'face' of a zoo is to portray an animal as the zoo's representative. It is a useful marketing tool. Yet in the mind of critical activists, putting an animal on a pedestal may lead to controversy. It could symbolise anthropomorphism and commercialising an animal. However, regardless of these criticisms it is often needed to attract attention. Examples abound: in Chicago a Gorilla named 'Bushman' was the star animal at Lincoln Park Zoo. He was awarded a citation from the

United Service Organizations Inc. for his contribution to the morale of visiting servicemen. (Mark Rosenthal *et al.*, 2003). Earlier, in 1916, an African Elephant named 'Daisy', arrived at the growing zoo in Kapiolani Park, Honolulu. Many small contributions to buy her had come from school children. Raising that money was the beginning of a strong emotional bond between the city's residents and *their* elephant. (Paul Breese *et al.*, 2015). Of course, both gorillas and elephants are expensive to maintain but a focal specimen does not

**'Sarajevo is the capital and the largest city of Bosnia and Herzegovina, its citizens deserve a zoo that they can be proud of'**

have to be a 'high-ticket' species. Lufkin in east Texas is home to Ellen Trout Zoo and Director Gordon Henley tells the story of a hippo who established himself as a local celebrity. Friends of the founder, Walter Trout, surprised him with a hippo as a Christmas present in 1965. 'Hippy' the hippo "was the catalyst that got the whole thing moving." (Gordon Henley, email, 6 October 2022). Such an approach is within reach in Sarajevo with skilled leadership and a bit of imagination and support from the local media.

Sarajevo is the capital and the largest city of Bosnia and Herzegovina, its citizens deserve a zoo that they can be proud of, a prominent zoo within the global zoo community. Currently it is not yet a full member of EAZA or WAZA. After my quick tour I painfully realised that an injection of professionalism was needed. Can this be done at grass-roots level? That would help. but essentially the zoo requires not only funds, but a firm commitment from the powers-that-be.

#### VISITS THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

On my itinerary the last two days were set for visiting more zoos. But my luck ran out as unusually heavy downpours began and would not let up. I contacted Irena Furlan of Ljubljana Zoo (Slovenia), she said that the zoo was flooded and many animals were sheltering. Regrettably the appointment was cancelled. On the final day the rain kept coming. So I left a message for Andrea Bracko of Zagreb Zoo (Croatia) that we had to cancel, thus I missed the best two zoos of the region. Ironically, on my way to depart from Franjo Tudman Airport in Zagreb the sky cleared and sunshine returned.

#### ENVOI

For a visitor to this segment of Europe, it is advisable to recognise its history in order to appreciate the zoos. The recent past is hard to comprehend for us looking in from the outside. The area of the Balkans is slightly smaller than that of Greece yet diverse historical events have been jam-packed into it, even limiting the scope to the last century. In former Yugoslavia, Croatia lies in the crossroads of central and southeast Europe. People in Croatia suffered heavily during the Second World War under the Nazis and Italian fascists and trouble continued post-war. As the communist state of Yugoslavia fell apart in the early 1990s, half a dozen nations plunged into inner conflict. Wars erupted, destroying tens of thousands of people and displacing about two

#### Notes from Nayer



Nayer Youakim, a seasoned zoo enthusiast, took a trip to the less publicised areas and reports:

**Skopje Zoo, North Macedonia:** Average-to-poor; some decent exhibits, but some very poor bits. Top rarities were a couple of squirrels in the children's zoo (I suspect Persian Squirrels mixed with Balkan Red Squirrels).

**Pristina Bear Sanctuary, Kosovo:** Stunning. Twenty bears (and a Lion) in great enclosures across a valley with wonderful views. The entrance complex is high-end, with two cafés and a gift shop. A couple of hours is plenty of time to visit, but the visitor route is circular and hilly, and about a mile long, so I guess it depends on the weather, and how you feel.

**Sofra e Ariut, Tirana, Albania:** A small but pleasant restaurant with a messy 'mini-zoo' in the grounds. Pretty poor, despite recent renovations. Denizens include a bear and Grivet Monkey (both in need of rescuing) and several pheasants and exotic birds. Don't go out of your way for this one.

**Tirana Zoo, Albania:** Reopened in early June 2022, this is the city's 'new' zoo. The same site as the poor 'old' zoo but almost entirely rebuilt afresh. There aren't many enclosures here, and it still feels new. Lots of potential but not as good as it could/should be even at this stage.

million more. More than seven per cent of the Croatian population lost their lives according to one estimate. Concerning individual cities, thousands were executed in Zagreb during World War II turmoil, regime of terror and resistance movement. Earlier in the century, Sarajevo sparked World War I when Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated there in 1914. The city also encountered the long surge: Bosnian War from 1992 to 1996 resulted in the death toll of more than 11,000.

In historical perspective world's zoos have often appeared to be so fragile, their existence totally dependent upon the whim of those in the nations' driver's seat. Zoos can only thrive and prosper during the peaceful periods. With all the atrocious periods behind them, men, women and children of the communities continue to carry on daily lives today. Resilience of the peoples is impressive. ■

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