

ШОПСКА САЛАТА

Text & Pictures – Jenni Kirkinen

Dreaming of Balkan food.... Too bad I'm a vegetarian

As a veteran vegetarian, I have faced many hardships regarding my choice of diet while traveling. I have been offered chicken stew where I could just pick out the meat pieces, canned corn and veggie sticks as dinner. Since not eating meat is my personal choice, I have adopted some strategies to survive in places where vegetarian food

can be challenging. However, last December I commenced on a journey through some of the Balkan countries and was challenged by my poor preparation, stinginess to buy a data package, and non-existent language skills. A great combination to have a successful holiday with!

My tips to not starve

- 1) Google ahead and save places where you know you can eat just in case
- 2) Ordering multiple appetizers and side dishes to make a meal
- 3) Girl dinner <3

Ingredients for *shopska salad*

- 1 large cucumber
- 2 tomatoes
- 1 onion
- 1 bell pepper
- Sirene cheese (grated and to taste, you can find this in Bulgarian Supermarkets)
- Sunflower oil
- A pinch of sea salt

During my travels around the Balkans in December and before, I have found some gems which are highlighted in the map. However, there is one shining star specifically I need to spotlight. The very little preparation I actually managed to make for my trip was to watch a YouTube video of the must visit places in Skopje. In this video, *shopska salad* was mentioned as a must try dish in a restaurant. I could not remember the name of the place on the video, but I did find the salad. I went to a random kebab restaurant and ordered the salad with fries and a glass of wine. The server gave me a funny look when I ordered but so would I if someone ordered only a salad at a meat restaurant. When the salad was brought to me, oh boy was I impressed, surprised, and over the moon. I was a bit confused at first since

I received a plate of cheese but considering that I was a mouse in my previous life, I really was just delighted. Underneath the delicious *sirene* cheese, there were equal amounts of cucumber, tomato, and onion smothered with oil and a dash of salt. I swear I could eat that dish for the rest of my life and die happy.

After my trip I decided to educate myself in the delights of *shopska* and it turns out that it is the national dish of Bulgaria... and apparently a few other countries as usual in the Balkans. Good old Wikipedia has told me, and now I tell you, that the colors of the salad represent the flag of Bulgaria. Very similarly the origin story of Margarita pizza including the colors that represent



the Italian flag. The story of the salad includes a Bulgarian state owned tourist company from the late 1940s which wanted to highlight the good life of socialist society by rebranding regional dishes. The adaptation of Greek salad became the *shopska* and at the same time, it conjured national sentiments within the People's Republic of Bulgaria. Whilst my first touch with this magnificent salad was in North Macedonia, I am sure that one day I will be having it in Bulgaria. As I have many unusual travel bucket lists, I consider adding a *shopska* tasting tour around the Balkans as a high priority. 🇪🇺