Break for the border; Long waits at snowbound railway stations, the steely scrutiny of trigger-happy guards: veteran East European correspondent Adam LeBor loves the danger and romance of a difficult border crossing;

The Independent, January 2001

I'm all for European integration: opening the borders, swapping the pound for the Euro, even trading in our burgundy passports for a blue and yellow EU version. But all these welcome and progressive developments are exacting a high price. Not in the reduction of political or economic sovereignty - but the fading thrill of proper border crossings, with national flags, uniformed border guards, and suspicious customs officials. Those resonant moments of leaving one country's territory for another, held in officialdom's limbo before being given the nod to proceed, are now but rarely experienced, at least in the West.

"You cannot leave Germany," a passport control officer at Berlin airport once told me. Mildly alarmed at this, I asked why not. "Because your passport is dirty," he said, holding it between two fingers, like a policeman at a crime scene handling a particularly sticky piece of evidence. It was a well-used document and in fact it began to fall apart, paper peeling away from cardboard cover, even as he spoke. Still, even in hygiene-conscious Germany there were no regulations governing document cleanliness, and eventually he let me leave. Such incidents are now the exception. Post-Schengen, with borders between EU member states now open and usually unpatrolled, we forget how complicated international travel once was: a cumbersome and slow process of processing, through one bureaucracy into the clutches of another.

Open borders make for faster travelling, but can also be confusing. Sometimes it's hard to know what country you are in, especially when travelling through the smaller states. Once, driving from London to Budapest, navigating on a Filofax map that only had major international highways marked on it, we were lost in Luxembourg. Which in itself is quite an achievement. But it does border Belgium, Germany and France, all of which we seemed to be driving in and out of in a vain attempt to go east. No flags, no frontier guards, or customs officers marked the transition from one land to another. Round and round we drove, feeling

condemned to an eternity of leaving Luxembourg, only to find ourselves once more looking at the same stretch of the Ardennes. I admit that this was partly my fault, for attempting to traverse the Continent equipped with a map six inches square. Throw open the borders, but the occasional sign indicating which country I'm in would also be appreciated.

And who really knows where one country ends and the other begins? Crossing the no-man's land between two nations, that short strip that is neither here nor there, one country nor the other, always has a special air of excitement. Somewhere in the middle lies an arbitrary and often invisible line, that divides one sovereign territory from its neighbour. This line can be, and often is, moved around with bizarre and anomalous results. Countries still go to war over such squiggles on the map. Consider, for example, the shape of Jordan. One side follows the banks of the Jordan river, dividing it from Israel. Reasonable enough, and the water forms a natural frontier. But instead of keeping to this elongated shape, a huge triangle of Jordanian soil juts down into Saudi Arabia, before switching back, lurching northwards where it becomes a narrow length of territory poking out at a sharp angle, stretching for hundreds of kilometres across the desert before forming a border with Iraq. Without wishing to trigger a debate over the rights and wrongs of Jordanian sovereignty over these empty plains, clearly there is neither rhyme nor reason here.

Some have explained the odd shape of Jordan by attributing it to Churchill's digestion. Meaning that when the new frontiers were drawn after the abolition of the Ottoman Empire, Churchill, then an official in the Colonial Office, burped after a particularly enjoyable dinner, causing his pen to slip rightwards, thus awarding Jordan a huge and unexpected tranche of desert. Perhaps someone had just served Churchill a huge and unexpected tranche of dessert.

Whatever the real reason, such anomalies have persisted through the decades. In pre-1989 Berlin a few stretches of the Western side of the wall were set so far back they were technically a few metres inside East Germany. What this meant in practice was that what appeared to be West Berlin - ie, the side of the wall in the West - was legally East Germany. So when squatters took over a building in West Berlin that was actually part of East Berlin the police were powerless to evict them. Through the front door lay, according to international law, another country. Until the thoughtless East Berlin officials swapped that tiny finger of land for another they coveted elsewhere in West Berlin, when the building was signed over and the police finally got the go-ahead for their raid. At which point

the squatters fled ... into East Berlin. All of which illuminates nothing so much as the inherent absurdity of arbitrary frontiers.

Down in the Balkans, I discovered, crossing a border - like everything else there - is an all-or-nothing experience.

"Have you got any heroin?" enquired the rotund, jolly guard on the Bulgarian side of the frontier with Serbia. "Here in Bulgaria we have excellent heroin," he continued, chortling merrily. I half expected him to murmur, in the manner of an old-style barber "something for the weekend, sir?" Perhaps it was just the weather that put our border official in such a good mood. It was a bright July afternoon in the mid-Nineties, and there was little traffic at the frontier. Serbia, just a few yards away, was creaking under sanctions. The sun shone on the mountain range that gives the Balkans its name, its stark peaks stretching away into the distance. We assured him that certainly, we had no heroin, and he waved us through. We had only driven a few yards across the same stretch of concrete, but we had entered another world. The very air itself felt different, closed and oppressive. The armed Serbian border guards, dressed in paramilitary boiler suits, did not crack any jokes, but ordered us out of the car. Four scruffy Westerners, in a car they had driven from Istanbul. We were unshaven, we had pierced ears, Turkish visas, our governments had imposed sanctions that were crippling the Yugoslav economy. It was showtime!

More men with AK 47s appeared, and as the owner of the car, I was ordered to drive it into a nearby garage. There it was raised up on a giant jack, while the man in charge began to poke about underneath. I was not allowed to leave the room, while my friends waited outside. Parts of the car began to be removed. The man produced a long wire, which he inserted into the car's floor and moved from side to side. Every few minutes he would suddenly turn and stare into my eyes. This is a customs officer technique for dealing with suspicious travellers. Stare hard and if the punter looks shifty, then investigate further. Not surprisingly, held at gunpoint on the Serbian frontier, with my car hoisted 10ft in the air, while a Serb border guard looked for heroin he believed was concealed in the floor, and men with AK 47s prevented me from leaving, I did begin to feel slightly twitchy. Still, I knew I hadn't done anything illegal, so I managed to maintain a level gaze each time the wire-wielder did his sudden-stare routine. More or less.

Eventually he gave up, because there was nothing to find. Here, too, was a border, between suspicion and de facto arrest, and his growing, if reluctant,

belief in our innocence, and freedom. Quite how or when we had crossed the line and could head for Belgrade instead of further interrogation, I don't know, for we had been detained for several hours by then. The car came down, the removed parts were put back in, and somehow I just knew we would be leaving soon, and so did he. Nearby our bags were spread out on a table. He looked at them, and looked at me. Would we now have to empty them, one by one? Our eyes met. A moment of pure communication passed between us. I almost liked him. Perhaps the Stockholm syndrome - when a captive comes to identify with his captors - had already set in. He gestured at our bags, told us to pack them into the car and go.

It was the Soviet border that was once seen as the entry point to not just a new nation, but a whole new world. Back in the Twenties and Thirties Western travellers believed that they were passing into the workers' paradise, where poverty and injustice had been eradicated. Once they crossed into Soviet territory, one group of British Fabians gaily tossed out of the train window the canned food they had brought with them, believing that such supplies were no longer needed. For privileged foreign visitors, perhaps not. Soviet citizens had a less cavalier attitude to food. But even after the collapse of the Communist empire, much of the panoply of the frontier, the sense that you were entering another, Eastern world, away from the safe certainties of Europe, remained.

I experienced the most vivid illustration of this transition between two continents on the train from Budapest to Kiev in the early Nineties. Even though Hungary and the former Soviet Union - by then independent Ukraine - were supposedly once fraternal socialist neighbours, the border was defined by rows of impenetrable barbed wire and dense fencing. But it was the border guard himself who signalled that we were leaving one part of the world and entering another. His face, under his flat, Soviet- era cap, was perhaps the most Slavic I have ever seen; like that of an Orthodox saint painted on an icon. An elongated triangle, with cheekbones that sloped inwards like two wedges and eyes that slanted downwards with all the force of his Tartar ancestry. The actuality of the journey only reinforced the impression that the train was passing not so much into another country as into another universe.

We halted at the border station. It was night and our breath steamed white in the winter cold. Harsh lights threw shadows on the ground, while a staccato voice rang out in Ukrainian. There was an immense noise, of banging and clanging. So fearful and paranoid had the rulers of the Russian empire been of foreign invasion that the railway was on another gauge to that used in the West. The

train wheels had to be adjusted for the width of the Soviet- era tracks before we could proceed. We could almost feel the East enveloping us in its mournful and snow-covered embrace. In the morning we woke in our sleeper carriage while outside, in the freezing dawn, distant stick figures, bundled up in uncountable layers, trudged through the thick snow. Wherever we were, we had left Europe.

But the border of borders, the true connoisseur's frontier, was the wall that divided West and East Berlin. (At least for those who could freely cross back and forth - Easterners took a less romantic view.) Checkpoint Charlie, with its multi-lingual sign proclaiming "You are leaving the American sector" was for tourists. The cognoscenti took public transport into Friedrichstrasse and changed trains, taking the S-Bahn to Communism. The S-Bahn ran overground, alongside the wall, the watchtowers and minefields, the guard-dogs and the sharpshooters. At Friedrichstrasse station, site of the actual crossing point between the two sides, things got a bit complicated. It was a functioning train station, but also an international frontier. Imagine border guards at Baker Street station, demanding to see not just your Three Zone travelcard, but your passport before allowing you to board the Metropolitan line. There was even a duty free shop before the passport control, catering to West Berlin drunks who would stock up on cheap schnapps without the hassle of actually crossing into East Berlin.

Quite where the border itself ran seemed immensely complicated. The platforms were marked by white lines running back and forth, while high in the roof sharpshooters patrolled, ready to open fire on any errant East German trying to make a run for it. Long lines stretched back from the passport control booths, modelled on the Soviet version. Travellers entered a narrow wooden corridor, and a door promptly closed shut behind them. Needless to say, the door in front was already closed. Enclosed in this narrow space, with nothing to look at apart from the steely glare of the border guard, you felt trapped and nervous. Which was the intention. But to step through that door was to enter another world. The air itself smelt completely different: a pungent mix of fumes of burning lignite, the brown coal that heated East Germany; acrid tobacco and Trabant exhaust. How did it happen, I used to wonder, that even the air over the same city, in the same country, could be divided so sharply?

Even more bizarre was the West Berlin U-bahn. It rattled its way around under Berlin, hurtling through several stations that were in the East. These stations had been abandoned and unused for decades. This was the frontier principle reduced to its ultimate absurdity. For a few seconds we were whisked through these abandoned stations, several metres under the German workers' state. There were

no passengers on the ghostly platforms, only armed East German border guards patrolling, ready to shoot any compatriot desperate enough to try and jump on the train to freedom. Such a surreal situation triggered any number of excuses for delays: "border guards on the line"; "the wrong kind of government"

The sharpest territorial divides are caused by war. Wars are fought to reshape borders, but often start with the imposition of a local frontier: the checkpoint controlling access in and out of an area. Beyond that tangle of logs or tank traps, evil unfolds.

For most of the Bosnian war there were no international border posts. The Croatian-Bosnian border was staffed by Croat police and customs officials who checked travellers out, but no Bosnians controlled access in. It was easy to get to the front line. A few hours drive inland from Croatia - from the splendours and comforts of the port of Split, where Diocletian built a palace and restaurants served the finest seafood - were the mountains of Herzegovina. As journalists we had relative freedom of movement across the front lines, the frontiers of war. Somehow the small, plastic-covered slip of cardboard embossed with the UN logo, marked "Press" gave us the power to cross back and forth from one side to the other. Logically, there was no particular reason for this. Why should some ink and compressed paper allow us to cross frontiers unbreachable for others?

Each morning we would venture forth from our guest house in Kiseljak, just outside Sarajevo, and drive up the Lasva valley. In the distance the rumble of Serb artillery bombarding Sarajevo echoed around the valley, but nothing could detract from Bosnia's natural beauty. The Lasva flowed crystal clear, and the morning sunlight cut through the white mist that floated over the killing fields. High in the mountains we looked down into turquoise lakes that lay deep in the valley, still and tranquil.

Yet this pastoral idyll could be deceptive, as we learnt one afternoon. We had talked our way through one checkpoint after another, despite the warnings and reluctance of the Bosnian Muslim soldiers to let us through. Tension was rising as the HVO, the Bosnian Croat army, prepared to attack their former Muslim allies. Soldiers were dug in a few hundred yards apart, their machine guns pointing at each other, and at us as we slowly approached each checkpoint. We drove down a narrow road that led to the base of a hill, a Union Jack jammed into the window as a hopeful totem of protection. But we had crossed the border from the war zone to the killing zone. The scene that greeted us as we entered the valley was like something from a Second World War partisan film: high up on a

hill Muslim fighters were strung out along a ridge. They trekked down in single file to see who we were.

Instead of turning back, as any sensible person might have, we drove further on, persuading the next handful of troops to drag back the tank traps they had erected across the road to block any HVO advance, ignoring their warnings of trouble ahead. We drove down a mountain path from where more camouflaged and curious Muslim soldiers, carrying ancient bolt-action rifles, appeared out of trees and bushes. The tension was so thick it was almost palpable. A few hundred yards away we saw a bus full of Muslim refugees in a valley, stuck between checkpoints, also trying to reach Travnik. We stopped at a tiny hamlet, where government troops milled about. The first mortar landed a few second later, perhaps 50 yards away. We ran to hide in the basement of a nearby house, clunking along in our flak- jackets and bullet-proof helmets like medieval knights in armour. The cellar was full of women and children, who looked at us wearily as the mortars landed around us. When the bombardment stopped we ventured outside, and a Muslim fighter with green worry beads draped from his army belt chatted with us about football.

But when we tried to leave there was a problem. The soldier told us that we had to take the bus-load of Muslim refugees out of the valley with us. How could we do this, we asked, for there were HVO forces in the area as well. They weren't sure, but unless we took the refugees, we could not leave the area. As a French colleague said, "I think we have gone through one checkpoint too many," and she was right. A note was written in Bosnian to take to the HVO soldiers up the road asking for safe conduct out. Somebody would have to drive back up that path. Two colleagues volunteered to parley with the HVO. They went slowly back up the hill, while we waited on a ridge to which we had retreated, feeling nervous and trapped. A few hundred yards up the road two Bosnian Croat soldiers - if soldiers was the word, for in truth they were two peasants with rifles - emerged from the bushes. The note was read, and accepted. Our colleagues came back to relay the good news, looking white and nervous.

So we waited while the bus lurched up the road behind us, and we set off in our white VW Golf, the Union Jack once again jammed in the window, fluttering bravely in the breeze. We, the carload of journalists who had, as the saying goes, "got too close to the story" - almost terminally - were now part of it. We drove back up the mountain roads, still tense but somehow less menacing. I looked behind, at the valley spread out beneath us, and the woods that stretched high into the hills at the side of the road, and the bus which was following slowly. The

brief negotiations had worked. There was no shooting as we drove past the Croats' hide-out, back to the Muslim checkpoint with the tank traps. The soldiers there seemed pleased to see us, and readily cleared the obstacles from the road. Behind us was the bus-load of refugees. We had made it, back across the border from the killing zone. @

COPYRIGHT 2001 Independent Newspapers (UK) Ltd.