By the end of the summer, thanks to Queen Mary Expedition Fund, I travelled to Kosovo. I picked that country to see reality of the region that I am going to focus on in my dissertation.

The Republic of Kosovo is only partially recognised state in Southeastern Europe with capital in Pristina, the city I have visited. Majority of citizens have Albanian roots, but Serbian is also one of the official languages.

I have landed in Pristina with the flight from Geneva and the first thing that has surprised me was lack of any public transport connection to the town. Instead of that there was loads of yellow, New York style taxis. Conversation with my taxi driver was run in German and later on I found this language really helpful, while most of middle age citizens speak rather German than English.

My hostel was located 5 min walk from the main square called after Mother Theresa and was “a place to be” for most of backpackers from all over the world. In the beginning we have been informed that there is no running water between 10 pm and 6 am and basically everything that is mentioned in Pristina travel guides is within a walking distance.

The first afternoon me and few just met travellers decided to try some local specialties. We have been warmly welcomed by the owner of the restaurant (cousin of our hosts) and tried local food, mainly based on incredible amounts of meat, peppers and sour cheese.

Next few days I have spent with Sara, younger sister of my Kosovian friend from London. I have seen all the important spots, like National Library known as “the ugliest building in Europe”, statue of Newborn, symbolising the recent birth of the country and statue of Bill Clinton. The last one explains why all the taxis were yellow. Before Kosovo started to be recognised as a country by most of the world, in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, according to US government, nationalist Serbs were making “ethnic cleansing” of Albanians. To stop that Clinton authorized the use of American troops in a NATO campaign against Yugoslavia and then placed Kosovo under UN administration. Just over 10 years has past from these events and most of citizens of Kosovo are really grateful for what has been done for them and apart from the statue you can notice taxis, hotel with a huge copy of Statue of Liberty on the roof and generally love for the US. You can also feel that UN is still there. Their big headquarter is just in the middle of the city and you will also frequently see white UN cars driving around the town.

Couple of days before I came back to London, me and my fellow backpackers decided to travel together to Skopje, Macedonia as the drive takes just about 1,5 h. Skopje was a big surprise
for us, as major of its great buildings like The National Museum, the main square with massive monuments or the Contemporary Art Museum are all brand new, but designed in ancient Greek style. The are two reasons behind it, a. the city has been completely ruined by the earthquake and then many of the European countries funded its reconstruction (after that, Skopje was named “The City of International Solidarity”) and b. in 2010 the Macedonian government started “Skopje 2014” project, which aims to make the city more monumental. Beautiful idea, but the final outcome is a bit over the top. The statue of Alexander the Great is almost 25 m tall and it plays music and is accompanied by fountain with colourful lights and generally wherever you go there are numbers of marble or bronze warriors, horses and politicians looking at your every step.

When we passed the main square though, we found a beautiful area just in the centre, which surprisingly looked really unique and truly old. It was a small market with tiny shops on both sides of the street. Small side streets created an illusion of labirynth. In the back of the market we found one street, which had only rakija bars on it and looked like a meeting point for all the locals.

To sum up, the trip was definitely unforgettable. I know that in the report there is not as many monuments or museums that I have seen or went to, but in Kosovo and generally Balkans it is all about people and attitude towards life. I have to admit that I have never seen as many people on Wednesday lunch time seating outside in the sun having their perfect, delicious macchiato. And this is exactly what I have been told by my friend before I left. He said that because of the recent war everyone understands and appreciates how fragile is our life and that we should enjoy it as fully as we can. It is all about socializing and sharing together ordinary and extraordinary moments. We, even that we were complete strangers, felt like we know each other for months and locals were incredibly warm and helpful. Of course my lovely guide, Sara is the best example of that. The girl that has never met me, spent her whole spare time outside of work to show me around and talk me through Kosovian life philosophy.

I am really glad that I chose Kosovo as my destination and I am grateful to Queen Mary to allow me that. I have just found one of those places, that I am surely going to visit again.