

At the border, the young Macedonian guard asked how long we would stay in his new republic and was hurt to discover we were heading straight back into Greece.

Could we not stay longer, he implored? Skopje was beautiful, the countryside was beautiful – we could explore lakes, mountains, history. Tourists were welcome. Would we please tell the world that Macedonia exists? There was pride here, an echo of a Macedonian identity that reaches back more than 2,000 years.

This was just what we were looking for. My wife, Timberlake Wertenbaker, was interested in the shifting nature of national and individual identity; it's an element in her new play, *Credible Witness*.

But understanding Macedonia was proving quite a challenge – the country is a metaphor for complexity, with mostly its past on show.

Yet even in the days of Philip, who kick-started Macedon's rise, it was a notorious mix of peoples. Philip's son, Alexander the Great, turned that into a virtue, spinning from it an internationalism

# 'Please tell the world that Macedonia exists'

So said the border guard as John Man started his visit to this republic with its notorious mix of peoples

that embraced each culture he conquered – Greek, Persian, Egyptian, Indian.

It was the Greeks who imposed pseudo-simplicity, proclaiming Alexander as their own, fusing Macedonia and Greece. So things remained under Rome, as the retreating sea turned Pella, the capital Philip built, into swamp-land, and Thessaloniki rose to become the second city of Rome's eastern empire, Greek-speaking Byzantium.

Then a new tide swept in. Bulgaria challenged Byzantium, leading to a shocking atrocity. In 1014, the Byzantine emperor Basil II ended a long-running feud with the Bulgarian king, Samuel, by outflanking him and taking 15,000 prisoners. He blinded them, leaving just one in every 100 with a single eye to lead the others home.

When the ruined army straggled back to base, Samuel, who

had fled, fainted at the sight, and died two days later.

That was the end of the medieval Bulgarian empire; but it left a Slav admixture, and a feeling among Bulgarians that Macedonia was "really" Bulgarian.

The Ottoman Turks became the next element to be stirred in. They seized Constantinople in 1453, renamed it Istanbul and made the Balkans Turkish.

Then, after 500 years, Greece, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Serbia wanted out and new frontiers solidified.

Ancient Macedonia found itself divided between Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia. When Serbia became part of Yugoslavia, Tito named Yugoslavia's southern province the Republic of Macedonia. On the break-up of Yugoslavia, the republic suddenly became a new nation and dared name itself Macedonia.

Thessaloniki's museum



devoted to the Macedonian struggle is in the old Greek consulate. Above the secret tunnel through which Macedonian nationalists crept beneath the feet of Turkish guards, you learn the official Greek line about Macedonia. As our guide Eleni said: "When we speak about Macedonia, we never think of another country."

And its language? "They call it Macedonian. But it is really a Greek dialect."

Greece has imposed on the world its official term for the upstart nation, calling it the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", from the acronym of which they derive another name entirely – FYROM (pronounced, roughly, "fear 'em").

Officially, positions seem irreconcilable. All three nations seem to want all of Macedonia, an accusation levelled by each at the other two.

In Assiros, north of Thessaloniki, stands a stunning new church: polished marble floor, glistening chandeliers, glowing wooden pews, a bastion of Greek Orthodoxy asserting itself against the forces of Slavism and Bulgarian orthodoxy.

And entering Macedonia – or FYROM – the young border guard laughed when I tried to exchange

Bulgarian leva. What would a Macedonian want with that debased currency?

But on the ground, time erodes official antagonisms. North of Thessaloniki, we drove along a dead-end mountain road that was suspiciously grand. Once, this was a cold war frontier.

We suspected the road had been kept up for political, perhaps military reasons, for it led only to a ghost village, Mavro-rahi. An abandoned schoolhouse stands open beside a weedy basketball court. Inside, desks are scattered as if by a departing class, with a map still on the flaking wall beside faded portraits of Macedonian heroes.

We were told this had once been a summer school for the children of US service families stationed nearby, and before that a Turkish mosque. No trace of Islam now: the Americans had stripped it bare when they left

There are just five occupied houses, one restored by a family who had spent seven years as *Gastarbeiter* near Frankfurt, another a holiday-home for Dutch in love with solitude.

Along the forested flanks of the Strumitsa, we saw no sign of Samuel's defeat, no memorial to the Bulgarians blinded 1,000 years ago. Instead, the present pressed in upon us at last. It was a weekend of weddings. Three times we watched as a bride, festooned in white, joined guests circling in a slow dance to a drum, accordion and strident clarinet. This was Bulgaria, but the music and the dances were Macedonian.

A visit is no basis for conclusions. But it's enough to make an impression. It certainly did on our eight-year-old daughter, who fell in love with Macedon's most famous son. Back home, she made a little shrine to Alexander, the conqueror eager for cultural diversity. She'll learn about tyranny later.

■ Timberlake Wertenbaker's play *Credible Witness* opens at the Royal Court on February 8. John Man is the author of the Penguin *Atlas of the Year 1000* and *Alpha Beta*.

F.T.

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WEEKEND IX.