

Patrice Koerper serves as a Peace Corps volunteer in Macedonia



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Caption: Patrice Koerper, who is a Peace Corps volunteer currently serving in Macedonia, pauses for a moment at Sveti Naum (St. Naum Monastery) near Ohrid with two girls in traditional Macedonian costumes

SOUTH TAMPA - Patrice Koerper was general manager for public relations and partnerships for the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System when she decided to join the Peace Corps.

She has been serving in the Republic of Macedonia since September 2006. Working in the

Economic Development Department of the Municipality of Bitola (with a population of slightly more than 100,000), Koerper is helping develop a film commission in the area. She hosts workshops on adapting to change and project development and organizes an English Conversation Hour.

Koerper, whose service ends in December, communicated with The Tampa Tribune via e-mail.

Why did you join the Peace Corps?

After I turned 50, I spent about two years looking at what I wanted to do next in my life. I took time to lay back a bit and see what rose to the surface. My two sons were grown, finished with college and had good jobs. I had worked at a job that was interesting and challenging and supported my beliefs, and I wanted to expand on that. Peace Corps allows me to work directly with a variety of people, support the goal of peace on a world-wide basis and live within a different culture. All of those things were important to me.

What's your favorite memory?

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What's the best thing about Macedonia?

The people; they are friendly, open, engaging, generous, interesting, well-educated and fun. I also love living in a walk-able city. Everything from shops to theaters is within walking distance.

What's the weirdest food you have eaten there?

All the food here is wonderful; nothing weird. They have the best fresh vegetables I have ever tasted. The food is very similar to the foods I ate growing up in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio. My ethnic background is Polish and German. We ate lots of stuffed cabbage (here they call it sarma), smoked meats, soups and stews.

What is the hardest thing about living in another country?

Missing family and friends back in the United States. Really, the hardest thing was deciding to leave - adapting here has been pretty easy.

What is the best thing about living in another country?

Every day is an adventure. I never know what is going to happen, who I will meet, where I will go.

What do you miss most about Tampa?

Air-conditioning in the summer. The climate here is very similar to Cleveland, Ohio, but the winter of 2006 was warm and the summer of 2007 was unbearably hot.

Has Peace Corps service changed you?

Peace Corps is one of the best things I have ever done, second only to having children and my first grandson. At first, it really is like being a kid again; you do not know the language, and you are dependent on others for everything. You live with a host family for the first three months, and with their help and that of Peace Corps staff you progress to being on your own - in a new city, with a new job, new home and you don't know anyone and have just learned the basics of the language. The process is exciting and scary all at the same time, but living through it is fun and really life-enhancing. I love it. I have learned a great deal about myself and the kindness of strangers. In addition, I have met people who will be life-long friends.

What parts of Peace Corps life will you incorporate into your life in America?

Being more of a 'be-er' than a 'do-er.'

by Jamie Pilarczyk

<http://southtampa2.tbo.com/content/2008/jan/12/101734/st-50th-year-was-a-turning-point/>