Why was the village silent?

In this much-travelled world, there are still thousands of places which are inaccessible to tourists.

We always assume that villagers in remote places are friendly and hospitable.

But people who are cut off not only from foreign tourists, but even from their own countrymen, can be hostile to travellers.

Visits to really remote villages are seldom enjoyable, as my wife and I discovered during a tour through the Balkans.

We had spent several days in a small town and visited a number of old churches in the vicinity.

These attracted many visitors, for they were not only of great architectural interest, but contained a large number of beautifully preserved frescoes as well.

On the day before our departure, several busloads of tourists descended on the town.

This was more than we could bear, so we decided to spend our last day exploring the countryside.

Taking a path which led out of the town, we crossed.

a few fields until we came to a dense wood.

We expected the path to end abruptly, but we found that it traced its way through the trees.

We tramped through the wood for over two hours until we arrived at a deep stream.

We could see that the path continued on the other side, but we had no idea how we could get across the stream.

Suddenly, my wife spotted a boat moored to the bank.

In it, there was a boatman fast asleep.

We gently woke him up and asked him to ferry us to the other side.

Though he was reluctant to do so at first, we eventually persuaded him to take us.

The path led to a tiny village perched on the steep sides of a mountain.

The place consisted of a straggling, unmade road which was lined on either side by small houses.

Even under a clear blue sky, the village looked forbidding, as all the houses were built of grey mud bricks.

The village seemed deserted, the only sign of life being an ugly-looking black goat on a short length of rope tied to a tree in a field nearby.

Sitting down on a dilapidated wooden fence near the field, we opened a couple of tins of sardines and had a picnic lunch.

All at once, I noticed that my wife seemed to be filled with alarm.

Looking up, I saw that we were surrounded by children in rags who were looking at us silently as we ate.

We offered them food and spoke to them kindly, but they remained motionless.

I concluded that they were simply shy of strangers.

When we later walked down the main street of the village, we were followed by a silent procession of children.

The village, which had seemed deserted, immediately came to life.

Faces appeared at windows.

Men in shirt sleeves stood outside their houses and glared at us.

Old women in black shawls peered at us from doorways.

The most frightening thing of all was that not a sound could be heard.

There was no doubt that we were unwelcome visitors.

We needed no further warning.

Turning back down the main street, we quickened our pace and made our way rapidly towards the stream where we hoped the boatman was waiting.

The village contained one street and looked forbidding.

Apart from a goat, it seemed deserted, SO they sat down and had a picnic.

Looking up, they suddenly found themselves surrounded by children in rags.

The children were silent and motionless.

As they walked down the street, followed by the children, the village came alive with faces in windows and people watching them silently from doorways.

The visitors were clearly unwelcome.

They hurried back down to the stream and the boatman.

When we reached the stream where we had stepped out of the ferry and where the boatman said he would wait, there was no one.

There was no boat and no boatman.

At first, we were surprised and thought that we had perhaps mistaken the place where he said he would wait.

We walked along the bank of the stream for a few hundred yards in one direction, and then in the other.

He was definitely not there.

I was worried that the villagers would be coming down the mountain after us, but we couldn't see anybody, and the only noise was the noise of the running stream.

We called across the stream to attract the attention of anyone on the other side, but nothing happened.

It seemed that we were stranded.

We sat down on the bank of the stream and just looked at each other.

“Come on,” I said. “We've been in worse situations than this.”

What about that time we got lost in the forest in Germany, and the time the car broke down in Australia?

“You're right,” she said, cheering up. “There is something we can do.”

And, since I certainly couldn't think of anything better, we did just what she suggested.

We both took off our shirts, tied our personal belongings in them (purse, money, passport, keys, and so on), tied the shirts around our waists, and waded into the water until we had to swim.

And we swam to the other side, where we squeezed out our shirts and put them on again, wet.

Then we walked back to our small hotel in the town.

Perhaps the most surprising thing was that when we walked into the hotel, still wet from our swim across the stream, no one said a word!

On the last day of their visit to a Balkan town, the writer and his wife followed a path which they found to their surprise led them into a wood.

The village looked forbidding in that it had a deserted and gloomy appearance.

What made the writer and his wife feel they were unwelcome visitors? Nobody said a single word as they watched them walk down the street.

Seeing that the path continued on the other side, we wondered how we could get across the stream.

What frightened us most of all was that not a sound could be heard.

In it, there was a boatman sound asleep.

All at once, I noticed that my wife appeared to be filled with alarm.

Men stood outside their houses and stared angrily at us.