

Danube River Cruise

June-July 2012

We'd heard that a river cruise is a nice way to see places in Europe without the discomfort of living out of a suitcase. The riverboat (ship?) is smaller than ocean-going cruise ships because of the limitations of river depth and lock width. Our ship carried only 157 tourists (capacity of 170) and of its 25 feet in height, only 5 feet is underwater.

We liked the idea of traveling on the Danube from the Black Sea to Budapest because it covers territory we hadn't seen before. The ships go either direction, of course, but we luckily picked the right direction to go. The river is not especially scenic at its eastern end, and things are much more interesting as you approach Budapest from the east. It was exciting to come into Budapest at sunset. The rest of the trip would have been a letdown if we had started in Budapest and traveled east.

Since we elected to take a 3-day extension to see Vienna, we were actually in 7 countries: Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria. We only went through Holland because we had to go through the airport there, but the chaotic lines at immigration and customs made it seem like we'd entered another country. So the basic tour was from Bucharest to Budapest, with an extension to Vienna. We made it to the capitol cities of five of the seven countries, only missing Sofia, Bulgaria and Zagreb, Croatia because of distance from the river. There seems to be a preference for cities starting with "B" – Bucharest, Belgrade, Budapest, and Bratislava.

On the first day, we lost 8 hours to time zone changes. We arrived in Bucharest, Romania on June 20th. They remember Nicolae Ceausescu, who was overthrown and executed in 1989. The Romanian revolution came in the same year as the breakaway from the Soviet Union in Poland and a few other countries and was two years before the Soviet Union collapsed. The city has memorials to that revolution, such as these.



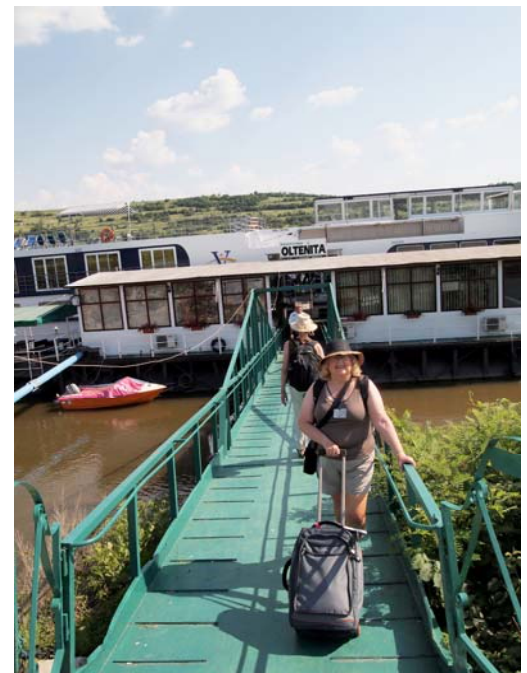
Causescu started construction on the Parliament Palace, the second-largest building in the world, in 1983. Most of it was completed in 1994, but parts remain uncompleted.



We went by bus to the Black Sea.



Although the Danube feeds into the Black Sea, the last miles through the delta are not navigable by ships as large as ours, so we returned by bus to Svistov, Bulgaria to start our Danube cruise.





Most of the eastern Danube is not especially scenic. Romania is flat, and the riverbank is densely lined by trees. Bulgaria is the start of the Balkan mountains, but not much is visible from the river until you get to the Iron Gates region. There, the scenery makes the cruise worthwhile.

After coming through the Iron Gates, we left Bulgaria on our left side and entered Serbia. There was no boundary marking or even a channel marker. In the first Serbian town where we stopped, Veliko Gradiste,

what we noticed most was the care that European people take with cleanliness and flowers. The Yugoslavian civil war was not that long ago, and we saw evidences of it, but we saw obvious points of beauty as well.

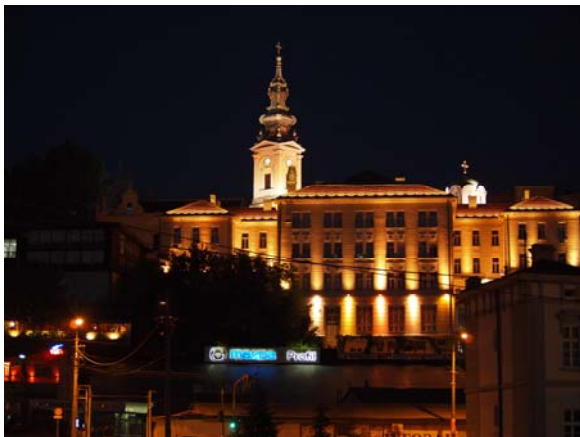


Most countries put a lot of resources into their capitol cities, and Belgrade is well cared for. Josip Broz Tito took care to keep his capitol looking as it should. Some Serbians consider Tito a benevolent dictator, and his independence from the Soviet leaders did give Yugoslavia a freedom that most satellite countries didn't have. His headquarters, Belgrade, was the capitol of Yugoslavia and is now the capitol of Serbia.



Parliament of Serbia. Looks very interesting on the outside, but we didn't find a way to look inside.

The Belgrade Fortress. From its origin as a Roman fort in the 1st Century through the Ottoman occupation and later control by Austria, the history of Belgrade is influenced by the history of this fortress.



We had lunch at a Croatian private home and had the opportunity to talk with the couple who own it. They built the house before the civil war and were forced to leave while the war was going on. When the war ended, their property was restored to them, but they first had to get rid of the squatters in it, who stole everything they could get ahold of, including all the roofing tiles.





We didn't really understand the causes of the war between Serbia and Croatia, except that it was partially based on religion. Serbia is Serbian Orthodox, and Croatia is Roman Catholic. For some reason, that made the people want to kill each other. Vukovar, Croatia was at the center of heavy fighting in the war which started in 1991, and the scars are still very visible. Ninety percent of the town was destroyed, but eighty percent of that has been restored. Someone has planted and tended

flowers in this building as a reminder that, even in war's desolation, someone still cares.

We drove by fields in Croatia and noticed some that were overgrown with weeds. Our guide explained that some fields can't be cultivated because they're filled with land mines.

The last time we were in Hungary, the country was trying to recover from decades of Soviet domination. There was much less of that visible on this visit.



First we visited Pecs, Hungary and toured the

Necropolis, which is an excavated very early Christian burial site. OK, kind of a different thing to visit, but at least it was one thing that wasn't Roman or even more ancient.



One claim to fame of Pecs is their porcelain production, prominently including “pyro-granite,” used for roofing tiles and for shimmering decoration like on this fountain and, of course, on roofs in this town and others.



Hungary has a couple of traditional things they're proud of besides roofing tiles: paprika and cowboys. Paprika is needed for goulash, of course, but cowboys might be a surprise. It all goes back to the Magyar roots of the people, and one of the things they do is ride a team of horses by standing on the two rear horses.

The cruise was planned so that we could come into Budapest at sunset, and that was

absolutely the high point of the cruise. Budapest was a traditional headquarters of the Hapsburg rulers of the Austro-Hungarian empire, and the city appears at its best in the evening with lights. The Hungarian Parliament building is one of the most awe-inspiring sights in the world, and it's most impressive at night.



In Budapest we went to the usual places, like the Fishermen's Bastion for outstanding views of the city, Heroes' Square, a great tour of the Opera House, and a number of other interesting places, and then we had an afternoon for our own wandering.



The afternoon was extremely hot. The thermometer registered only 41°, but in Fahrenheit, that's 106°. We started walking just to see what we could see, went to the market, which we knew was closed, and peered inside. We crossed the 1896 Liberty Bridge and figured we'd walk along the river to

see if we could see anything of the Gellert Hill cave and monastery. We didn't want to pay an admission fee (we had no Forints anyway), and we kept walking upstream along the river until we came to the next bridge. Seeing some walking paths leading up the hill, we naturally wanted to explore for a better vantage point (pictures are always on my mind because I can't remember without them). Well, one path led to another, and we wound around until we were tired and hot, and it seemed like we would have



to give up and come back down. But the GPS told us that we were actually getting close to the Liberation Monument and Citadel at the top of the hill – just a few more switchbacks and we'd be there. We even asked one young man with "Czech" on the back of his shirt if he knew where he was going, figuring he might know how far it was. He said, "No, where am I going?"

Perseverance furthers, and we reached the top of the hill, for a close view of the monument and more outstanding views of the city.



Budapest is a delight, and we would be glad to spend more time there and see the castle, visit St. Stephen's church (this Stephen was the King of Hungary, not the early Christian martyr), see more of the Parliament and find out if I'd get invited not to come in, like in Belgrade, check into concerts, etc. But sometimes it's good to leave wanting more. We were scheduled to spend a few days in Vienna.



Since it was on the way, we had the opportunity to stop in Bratislava, Slovakia for a brief visit. The Old Town of Bratislava is similar to other major European cities, with massive old buildings and statues, and it has a very pleasant pedestrian walk with trees, flowers, souvenir booths, and art works, some of questionable merit. Like so many cities, one of its prominent landmarks is the church, and an admission fee is charged to look inside.

Finally we made it to Vienna and tried to remember what we'd seen one afternoon in the '90s. As the primary headquarters of the Hapsburgs, Vienna is a major showpiece of Europe. We've been to both royal palaces in the United States, the Iolani Palace in Honolulu and Graceland in Memphis, but they are both poor comparisons to the palaces

in Vienna. The Hapsburgs had a winter palace, Hofburg, in Vienna, and a summer palace just a short drive out of town.



The Hofburg, the winter palace.

Schoenbrunn Palace, the summer palace of the Hapsburgs. These folks all seemed to understand the meaning of opulence and its importance in keeping all the other rulers in Europe impressed with their position and power.

Vienna has another beautiful and opulent palace, called Belvedere, which wasn't owned by the Hapsburg family. It was owned by someone called "Prince Eugene," who wasn't actually a prince because he wasn't of the royal family, but his military



victories made him very popular with the Hapsburgs, and they were happy to reward him richly.

Belvedere Palace.

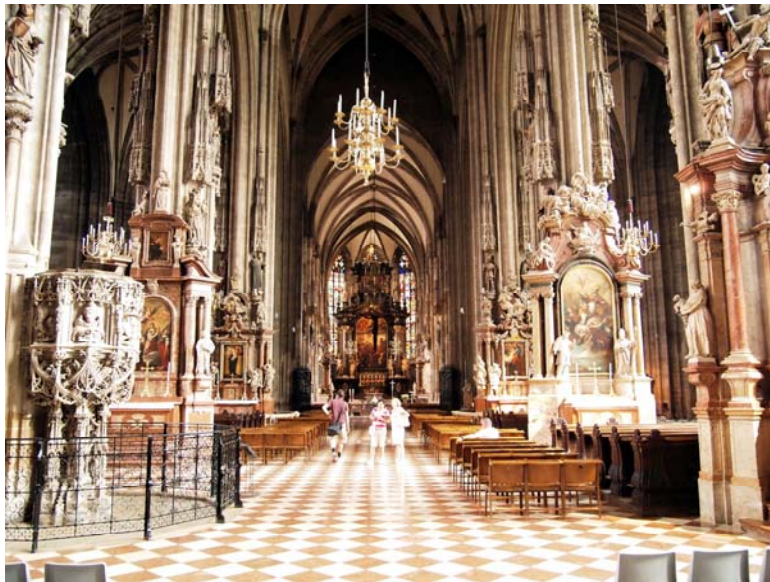
There are tours of all three of the major palaces, and we did see the inside of Schoenbrunn – which did not disappoint in any way. We just wandered around the grounds of the



other palaces and figured we were suitably impressed with the power and glory of the Austro-Hungarian empire. In the United States, we couldn't get in the Presidential Palace, even to walk around the gardens.

We went to a wonderful concert in the Kursalon, with a small orchestra, a couple of singers, and a couple of dancers. This group's concerts have been featured by Rick Steves in his guidebooks and travelogues. It was a delightful performance of the music of Mozart and a couple of Strausses, in a beautiful concert hall with terrific acoustics. Unfortunately, they're trying to collect money to upgrade the air conditioning, and the temperature inside was somewhere around 85° to 90°, hardly appropriate for formal attire. All the coats were on the backs of chairs before the concert started, and ties were loosened before it was over.

Vienna's major church inside the Ringstrasse, the roads built where the old city wall once stood, is also



St. Stephen's. Unlike the one in Budapest, this one is named after the early Christian martyr. And unlike the one in Budapest, we were able to go inside.

On our last day, we had to get up at 2:30 a.m. to be taken to the airport for a 6:30 flight. We arrived back in Wichita at about 5:30 p.m. on a day lengthened by crossing seven time zones. After a couple of weeks of recovery, I'm not as determined as I was to never travel again.