

# **My Trip to Croatia, Montenegro, Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (2022)**

My trip to the Balkans (to visit the countries of Croatia, Montenegro, Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina) was only the second trip I've taken since the start of the pandemic. Last April I visited Spain and Portugal; my first guided tour in nearly two and a half years. During our stay in Madrid a member of our group came down with the virus and had to be quarantined, a distressing scenario for any world traveler. But despite that incident my first travel venture under all the new international Covid protocols had gone *reasonably* well. By the time I made this trip to the Balkans in November many of the travel restrictions and medical testing requirements pertaining to the virus had been lifted, so I was feeling a little more at ease this time around.

Normally, I do not plan trips this late in the year, preferring to travel no later than October. This particular tour (conducted by Overseas Adventure Travel, or OAT) had been cancelled on me twice before due to the lingering pandemic, and as the year wore on the only single slot still available for this tour was in late November. The tourist season was over by then (with the exception of the Christmas markets) and most places we visited were devoid of large crowds...which was pretty nice, actually. The downside was that night came early. And, of course, my paper-thin Florida skin had to tolerate the cold Balkan weather. Prior to the trip I eschewed the idea of buying a well-insulated winter coat. I mean, really, what was I going to do with a winter coat in Miami? I opted instead to bring along a thick, over-sized hoodie jacket and simply layered up underneath. This method had proven sufficient in Iceland years earlier. Although, by the time we reached Slovenia I regretted not bringing a warmer coat.

I didn't need a tourist visa for any of the countries we visited, and with no medical certifications or testing necessary for the Covid virus this was an easy trip to plan for. As I usually do, I registered with the State Department's STEP program to get travel updates and notifications pertaining to the areas I would be touring. Something I always recommend

to my readers. Aside from basic petty crimes (like pickpocketing), the countries of the former Yugoslavia did not warrant any serious travel warnings from the State Department. In fact, the people were very friendly and the towns and cities we visited were lovely. So, spoiler alert, I enjoyed this tour immensely.

The only concern I had for this trip was the ongoing invasion of the Ukraine by Russia. Although the Ukrainian border was more than 1,000 miles from where I would be visiting, I had no idea how the conflict was going to affect my trip. I'd only been to the former Yugoslavia once before, when I visited Serbia, which seemed to have a decidedly pro-Russian stance in the conflict, at least in the beginning of the war. I was unaware of how the rest of the Balkans felt or what they thought of the strong role NATO was playing in helping to arm the Ukrainians. Well, I was about to find out. On Wednesday, November 16, 2022, my cousin Mike drove me to Miami International Airport where I began my 18-day adventure...

## **DAYS ONE AND TWO**

I arrived at the airport by 3:00pm and breezed through the check-in process, but clearing security took almost an hour. My Lufthansa flight was delayed nearly thirty minutes, departing at 7:00pm. The flight was uneventful; I watched the movie *Nope* and took a xanax shortly after dinner was served. Thirty minutes later I nodded off and didn't wake up until we were two hours from Munich, touching down in Germany at 10:00am on Day Two of the trip. My connecting flight to Zagreb, Croatia, left on schedule, reaching the capital city by 1:00pm. I had to wait almost two hours for my final connecting flight to Dubrovnik. During this time I met Mary from Boston, a retired schoolteacher who was also on my Balkans tour and, like me, was traveling solo. We kept each other's company and had a lovely conversation about our travels. Incidentally, there were three women on this tour named Mary. To differentiate between them the group added the city or state where they were from to their first names, so Mary from Boston became Boston Mary.

The last leg of my flight landed in Dubrovnik just after 4:00pm. Three other passengers on the plane were also in our tour group: Mary from Texas (Texas Mary), and a married couple from upstate New York, Mary and Bert (New York Mary). After clearing immigration we collected our luggage and headed for the exit. A man from our tour company greeted us and led us to an awaiting taxi van outside the terminal building. Night was already falling over the Adriatic as we drove to our hotel along a scenic coastal road. We reached the Hotel Lero, conveniently located near Dubrovnik's Old City, around 4:45pm.

Sanja, our tour director, was in the lobby to greet us and facilitate our check-in. She told us to meet in the lobby at 6:45pm for a brief walking tour around the vicinity. There were a total of fourteen people in our tour group and most had taken three flights to get to Dubrovnik, which meant we were all pretty tired and jet lagged upon arrival. I went up to my room, made a cup of instant coffee and began sorting out my luggage.

We gathered in the lobby just before 7:00pm and Sanja took us on a short 15-minute stroll around the hotel to show us where the nearest grocery store and ATM machines were located. We returned to the hotel for an included buffet dinner in the dining room. As we ate we shared stories about our flight connections and our previous travels. Almost from the get-go our small group began to bond and by the end of the tour this became one of the closest traveling groups I'd ever experienced in my years of guided touring. After dinner most of us retired to our rooms for some much needed rest. I managed to write a few notes in my journal before going to bed.

## **Day Three**

I awoke once during the night, around 1:00am. The room was so cold I had trouble getting back to sleep. I tried turning the heat up but soon discovered that hotel thermostats in Europe normally don't go above 67° Fahrenheit (19.4° Celsius) in the winter to conserve energy. I understand this is not really cold for people accustomed to harsh winters, but after 31 years

living in south Florida my body has acclimated to temperatures that usually hover above 85° Fahrenheit (or 29° Celsius) year round, so I was freezing my ass off. After toying with the thermostat setting and failing to make the room warmer...(in my defense, the room felt a lot colder than what the thermostat was reading)... I put on a pair of long johns and a long sleeve T-shirt and used an extra blanket I found in the closet to cocoon myself in bed. I was able to fall asleep until 4:30am. Fully awake by now, I did my usual stretching and exercise routine and then shaved and showered. Over several cups of instant coffee I wrote in my journal and watched the BBC International News on TV, killing time until the hotel's dining room opened for breakfast.

By 8:45am our entire tour group gathered in one of the small hotel conference rooms for an orientation meeting. Sanja formally welcomed us to her country (Croatia), and the Balkans in general, and then we went around the room introducing ourselves. The group consisted of: Ann and Ron, a married couple from California; Mary from Boston; Debra from California; Craig from Minnesota; Tim from Texas; Mary and Bert from upstate New York; Irene and Randy, a married couple from Arizona; Mary from Texas; Ute from California; Anne from New York City. And me. Fourteen seasoned travelers, a perfect group size for a guided tour.

Sanja told us a little about herself. An attractive woman in her mid-to-late thirties, she lived in Zagreb with her teenage son and had been working in the tourism business for a number of years. I believe she studied linguistics in college and was fluent in several languages. She possessed a great sense of humor and was a genuine fun-loving spirit. During the orientation meeting she went over the general protocols that govern most guided tours. She requested, for the sake of the group, that we be on time for our daily sightseeing departures and/or included meals, and went over the seat rotation on the bus. She had us download WhatsApp on our cellphones so we could stay in constant communication with one another. This, by the way, was the first time I had ever done this on a guided tour and it was an awesome experience. Sanja told us to call or text her immediately if there were any problems or complaints, and she would in turn communicate the daily itinerary and meeting times to the group via the phone app. It was great. And the group was able to instantly share photos this way, as well.

After covering all the basic things we needed to know, Sanja spoke briefly about the Balkans. She touched upon the ongoing invasion of the

Ukraine, and the parallels between *that* war and the conflicts fought in the Balkans during the 1990s. As we proceeded with the tour, she said, we might notice a dark sense of humor among the peoples of the region. This is attributed to the Balkans' long history of warfare and the general cynicism such conflicts instill in the local populations. As an example she cited her own grandmother who, in her lifetime, had lived through *five* different armed conflicts: World War I, the war of the Republic, World War II, the communist formation of Yugoslavia, and the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. When every generation before you have experienced war, she explained, people tend to develop a skewered sense of humor in order to deal with it all.

The orientation meeting ended by 10:00am and Sanja led us across the street from the hotel to a local bus stop. We were heading to the Old Town section of Dubrovnik for an official walking tour. It was drizzling when we reached the bus stop, but thankfully it wasn't very cold. In fact, this was the warmest place we visited during the tour. Dubrovnik is situated along the coast of the Adriatic Sea, which separates the Italian and Balkan peninsulas. More specifically it lies within a historical region called Dalmatia, a narrow strip along the country's southern coastline. The Adriatic Sea is the northern-most part of the Mediterranean Sea so the climate of Dubrovnik is that of a humid subtropical region, although the winters (when we visited) are rainy and cooler.

Sanja had given us a three-day bus pass and we boarded the first bus that came along, getting off in front of the Pile Gate, the main entrance on the western side of the Old Town, a short distance later. Dubrovnik is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Croatia, and the reason for this is the historic quarter known as the Old Town. Seen from Mt Srdj, a towering hill above Dubrovnik, the Old Town still resembles a well-fortified medieval city. Jutting out over the Adriatic Sea, on a promontory of bare limestone at the foot of Mt. Srdj, it is surrounded entirely by thick stone defensive walls that were constructed between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Within these walls you will be transported back to the Late Middle Ages, or, at the very least, get a really good glimpse of what life might have looked like back then. In 1979, the Old Town was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site and its popularity increased enormously. Dubrovnik is also a favorite stop of cruise ships plying the Mediterranean and we were very fortunate to visit when we did because this magnificent stone city was relatively empty at this time of the year, allowing us to fully appreciate its architecture and design without hordes of people blocking our view.

Local guide Eva met us in front of the Pile Gate. She had lived and studied in the U.S. and had an excellent command of the English language. We donned our Whisper listening devices, provided by Sanja during our orientation meeting, so we could clearly hear what Eva was saying as we wandered through the Old Town. She spoke briefly about the Homeland War (Croatia's War of Independence) as it pertained to Dubrovnik, which was shelled intermittently by Montenegrin and Serbian forces in a siege that lasted seven months (from October 1991 until May 1992). I will discuss this war in greater detail later in this journal. Eva, who is from Dubrovnik, was 7 years old during the siege and remembers hiding in a cellar because of the shelling. The artillery attacks on the Old Town killed 114 civilians and damaged nearly 60 percent of all the buildings within the historic quarter. Adhering to UNESCO guidelines regarding the preservation of historical structures, the Old Town was eventually restored following the end of the war.

As we entered the Old Town through the Pile Gate entrance, Eva gave us a quick history lesson on this amazing city. The origins of current-day Dubrovnik date back to the 7th century when it was known as *Ragusa*. It was one of the eight Dalmatian city-states that formed along the Adriatic coastline by survivors of the Barbarian invasions that followed the fall of the Western Roman Empire two centuries earlier. But archeological evidence suggests the city was also a port settlement going all the way back to the ancient Greeks. Either way, the Old Town is really, really *old*.

Ragusa (Dubrovnik) became a republic during the mid-1300s and was, in turn, under the Venetian suzerainty and later came under the protection of the Ottoman Empire to which it had to pay tribute. But the city-state always managed to maintain its independence through dynamic diplomacy and trade. By the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Republic of Ragusa developed into a wealthy and influential maritime trading center in the Adriatic, rivaling the powerful Republic of Venice. In fact, so far-reaching was their maritime exploits they sent trade ships to India and America. The city expanded its trading inland, as well, skillfully maneuvering between the empires of the east and west and attracting many Slavic people from the Balkan Peninsula who would eventually change the language of the city from Latin-based to Croatian. Dubrovnik would later be known as the cradle of Croatian literature. I'm not exactly certain when the city switched its name from

Ragusa to Dubrovnik, but the word is derived from ‘dubrava’, which is Croatian for *grove*.

The decline of the Republic of Ragusa began after the devastating earthquake that struck the city in 1667, which killed over 5,000 residents and destroyed most of the public buildings. Although the city was rebuilt, it never fully recovered from the event, undergoing financial hardships that were exacerbated by feuding regional empires. In the early 1800s, Napoleon’s forces took control of Ragusa and it became a vassal state of the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy (a short-lived kingdom in Northern Italy aligned with Napoleon’s French Empire). After the defeat of Napoleon, Dubrovnik came under the control of the Austrian Empire, and following WWI the city was incorporated into what would become the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which lasted until 1941. Communist partisans liberated Dubrovnik from the Axis Powers in 1944. When WWII ended, the city became a part of the new Socialist Republic of Croatia, one of the six countries – together with Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovenia and Macedonia – that made up the newly created Federated Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia (or simply, Yugoslavia).

In 1980, the death of President Josip Broz Tito – who ruled the Federated Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia since its inception – paved the way for nationalistic tendencies to reemerge, and, coupled with a downward spiraling of the economy, the separate republics within the union began clamoring for their own independence. In 1991, Slovenia and Croatia were the first to declare their independence. This led to the start of what is referred to as the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, when Serbia and her ally, Montenegro, tried to prevent the break up of Yugoslavia. I will be providing more historical background on this region as the journal unfolds, but for now this brief history lesson will have to suffice.

We walked through the Pile Gate’s stone entrance and stood at the beginning of the *Stradun*, the wide limestone-paved main street that connects the Pile Gate on the western side with the Luza Square on the eastern end of the Old Town. Encircling this entire historic quarter is a massive double-lined fortress wall measuring as high as 80 feet (25m) in certain sections. Within these walls are several towers, fortresses and historical buildings dating back to the late Renaissance Period (built or restored after the 1667 earthquake). The first thing Eva pointed out to us was the Big Onofrio's Fountain, situated just to the right as we entered the Old

Town. Designed in a round, polygonal shape with a brick cupola, this large fountain with its 16 individual water taps was constructed in the first half of the 1400s, and was an integral part of the Old Town's waterworks system. The fountain is embellished with 16 stone carved masks (one for each tap) and has the statue of a dog resting on the top of one side.

Across from the Big Onofrio's Fountain is the St. Savior Church, a small votive church built in the early 1500s. Prior to the devastating earthquake that destroyed the town in 1667, a smaller earthquake hit Dubrovnik in 1520 that caused little damage to the city. The St. Savior Church was constructed to show the town's appreciation for having been spared from the event. This unassuming single nave church has a Gothic cross-rib vault and is considered the first comprehensive Renaissance-style building in Dubrovnik. Interestingly, when the big earthquake finally hit, the St. Savior Church was one of the few structures to emerge relatively unscathed from the disaster, so it has remained remarkably intact till this day. The building is now used for exhibits and music venues.

Adjacent to the St. Savior Church is the Franciscan Monastery-Museum, consisting of a friary, church, library and pharmacy. This complex, belonging to the mendicant Catholic religious order founded by Francis of Assisi in 1209, was originally constructed between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The church was destroyed during the 1667 earthquake and much of the complex had to be rebuilt or restored. We spent some time walking through the structure. We entered through the cloister and visited the small museum with its collection of religious icons and artworks from the Renaissance Period. We also saw the Old Pharmacy, which Eva told us dates back to the year 1317 and is the oldest still-functioning pharmacy in the world. We left the Franciscan Monastery-Museum and began walking east now along the Stradun (also known as the Placa). Boston Mary and I went inside the actual Franciscan Church to take some photos before rejoining the group.

As we walked the limestone-paved boulevard that is the Stradun, Eva said the Old Town, as seen from above, resembles a fish endoskeleton with the Stradun serving as the central vertebral column and the narrow side streets extending out like tiny spines. Vehicular traffic is prohibited within the Old Town, making the historic quarter one large pedestrian walkway. We turned left onto a street called *Siroka* – which looked more like a tapering alleyway than an actual street – and headed south for one block. On



*Ulica Od Puca* (ulica means 'street' in Croatian) we made a left, walking eastward now. Along the way we passed many museums housed in centuries-old buildings. The historic quarter has over a dozen small and large museums and our bus pass allowed us access to most of them. We came upon the Church of the Holy Annunciation on one corner. This Serbian Orthodox Church was built in the 1870s and includes a 12,000-book library and a museum of religious icons. Eva told us the Old Town had both Catholic and Orthodox churches and even a Jewish temple (and quarter) within its small boundary, attesting to its tolerant nature. In fact, by today's standards, Dubrovnik could be seen as a relatively progressive city during the late Middle Ages. By the 13th century it had hospital and pharmacy services, an almshouse and orphanage for the poor, and a well-developed water supply system. The city even abolished its slave trade in the early 1400s and placed a high value on liberty (and their own independence).

We continued eastward along *Ulica od Puca* until we reached Gundulic Square, located behind Dubrovnik's Cathedral. The square has a large monumental statue of Ivan Gundulic, a well-known 18<sup>th</sup> century poet. When we arrived the area was empty, but during the early morning hours the square is bustling with the activities of a popular fruit and vegetable market. As we stood around the statue in the center of the square, Eva told us about the city's fascinating connection to the HBO series *Game of Thrones*. For seven of the show's eight seasons, Dubrovnik was portrayed as King's Landing on the hit series. Many locals were used as extras, and the filming production proved to be a financial and advertising boon for the city. Eva led us down a side street that ended at the bottom of the Jesuit Steps, a long Baroque stone staircase just to the south of Gundulic Square. At the top of these steps sits the 18<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit Church of St. Ignatius of Loyola. This particular staircase was used in the famous 'walk of shame' scene when the *Game of Thrones* character Cersei Lannister was forced to walk naked through King's Landing to atone for her sins. Diehard fans of the series come to Dubrovnik almost like a pilgrimage, and there are numerous *Game of Thrones* walking tours here that will take you to all the areas of the city used in the filming of the show.

From Gundulic Square we walked one block over to Pred Dvorom Street where several important buildings are located. On the southern end stood the magnificent Assumption of the Virgin Mary Cathedral (known also as the Cathedral-Treasury), which serves as the Diocese of the Catholic Church in Dubrovnik. When we visited, sections of the church were being restored and

the building was actually closed. Inside the Cathedral-Treasury, I read, are 138 gold and silver reliquaries, including several relics of St. Blaise, the patron saint of Dubrovnik, covered in decorative gold plating. Along the eastern side of Pred Dvorom Street you'll find the Rector's Palace (which now houses the Cultural History Museum) and the City Hall building (including the Marin Drzic's Theater). Further down the street on its northern end is Luza Square surrounded by several notable buildings, including the famous 15th century Bell Tower, a bright white structure reaching almost 102 ft in height (31m), featuring a moon dial and the original bell from 1506.

Luza Square also houses the Church of St. Blaise, a lovely Baroque church constructed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to replace an earlier one destroyed by fire. Inside the church is a silver statue of the saint holding a model of Dubrovnik, the only thing that survived the fire from the original structure. Each year, on the Day of St. Blaise (February 3<sup>rd</sup>) the statue is paraded around the town. In front of the church is one of the Old Town's most popular monuments, the Orlando's Column. This white stone column was constructed in the early 1400s and is dedicated to the legendary 8<sup>th</sup> century knight Roland, who, according to the myth, is said to have saved Dubrovnik from a Saracen attack. The monument has a sculpture (the oldest one in the city) of the knight in full armor brandishing a sword. It has become a symbol of freedom for the city and a white Libertas flag will often be raised above it during important events. Unfortunately, cracks have formed on the 600-year-old statue and the entire monument routinely goes under wraps (out of the public's view) as it is being repaired.

In another corner of Luza Square is the Sponza Palace, home now to the Old Town's Historic Archives. I had the opportunity two days later to spend an entire afternoon walking through many of these buildings and several museums within the historic quarter and will discuss them in greater detail when I get to that section of the journal. From an entrance adjacent to the Bell Tower we made our way outside the walls along the eastern side and took in the Old Port section of the city. One can only imagine the view back when the Republic of Ragusa was in its maritime heyday and large trading ships filled the harbor. Today, the port is lined with small fishing boats and yachts. It was now noon and our official walking tour of the city ended here. We re-entered the Old Town and said our 'goodbyes' to Eva and then walked almost the length of the Stradun back towards the Pile Gate, stopping for an included lunch at a restaurant called Lucin Kantun located at the far

end of *Ulica od Sigurate*, another narrow side street. I don't recall what we ate, but I do remember the meal was very tasty.

We finished lunch around 1:30pm; the rest of the day was free for us to explore Dubrovnik on our own. Sanja volunteered to lead us around the southern ramparts of the defensive walls, the side that faces the Adriatic Sea. We climbed a steep staircase to the left of the Pile Gate entrance and reached the top of the wall. It is possible to circumnavigate the entire historic quarter by walking its ramparts, but I think the most dramatic viewpoints will be rendered along its southern flank where one can get a good long view of the Dalmatian coastline. There are several fortresses built next to sections of the wall that once protected the city from invaders; each is situated in strategic positions on different sides of the old city. As we walked south on the ramparts we passed Fort Lovrijenac, the only fortification not actually connected to the Old Town. It is perched atop a 121-foot-high (37m) cliff overlooking the Adriatic Sea across from the Pile Gate. The walls of Fort Lovrijenac facing seaward are an impressive 40 feet thick (12m), while the side facing the Old Town is only 2 feet thick (60 centimeters). The reasoning behind this unusual disparity was that if an invading army succeeded in capturing the fort it could easily be destroyed by cannon fire from the ramparts of the Old Town. *Very clever.*

We slowly made our way around the ramparts while Sanja pointed out some of the more important buildings. The restoration that was done following the end of the Yugoslav Wars was clearly evident. It was easy to spot rooftops and walls that had been replaced, and there were still piles of rubble in isolated, out of the way places. Eva had earlier told us that less than a thousand people actually reside within the old city and as we walked around the wall we were able to peer inside some of their apartment windows (*Hey, if you're not going to snoop, than why travel*). How odd it must be for the inhabitants of the historic quarter, who must put up with tourists trekking through their neighborhood on a near-constant basis. *Talk about living in a fish bowl!*

We reached St. John Fort, one of the two fortresses overlooking the Old Port area along the eastern side of the walled city. Sanja announced that she would be heading back to the hotel at this point and the group split up. Several tour members decided to return to the hotel with her while a small group of us – consisting of Tim, Craig, Boston Mary, Anne, Texas Mary, Debra and myself – stayed behind to visit the Maritime Museum located

within the St. John Fort. Although not very big, the museum does showcase how the former Republic of Ragusa became a rich and powerful seafaring city between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. On display were maps, sailors' uniforms, navigational and engine room equipment and many intricately detailed small-scale models of the various ships used by the city at the time.

After touring the exhibits we exited the museum and split up again. Boston Mary, Anne and I agreed to walk back to the hotel together; the others either took the bus back or stayed in the Old Town to continue exploring. The walk took only 30-40 minutes (albeit, some of it was uphill) and we enjoyed the exercise. Back home, I regularly walk 60-90 minutes a day, five days a week. Since November of 2020 – after my cardiologist informed me I needed to lose weight – this regimen has helped me lose 45 pounds. As for my two companions, Anne lives in New York City and is accustomed to pounding pavement. But the real surprise was Boston Mary. This woman took strolling to a whole new level. If I had to guess, I'd say she was in her mid to late seventies and could walk the pants off any seasoned hiker half her age. Her mantra was "10,000 steps a day" and she met that goal every single day on this tour. She would often log 5,000 steps each morning *before* breakfast. She was thin as a rail and probably had the heart and lungs of an Olympic athlete. In fact, she inspired me to 'step up' my walking game once I returned home.

On the way back, Anne and I stopped at the local convenience store just down the road from our hotel to pick up some snacks. Dinner was on our own that evening and I decided I was still too jet-lagged (and, I'll admit, a little tired from the walking) to go out anymore that day. Boston Mary left us at the grocery store and continued her pace, telling us she wanted to log at least six miles. *God Bless her!* I purchased a baguette and some local cheese and a few munchies. I'm not sure what Anne got, but we made it back to the hotel shortly after 5:00pm. It was already dark outside. I spent the next hour and a half writing in my journal and editing photos. Afterwards, I watched the CNN International News broadcast on TV while wolfing down my bread and cheese. By 7:30pm I was totally wiped out and fell into a deep slumber.

## **Day Four**

I was wide-awake by 3:00am. *Damn*. I have stated this many times in my journals: jet lag is the bane of all travelers. And its not like I was feeling lethargic; after all, I had slept nearly eight hours. But my internal clock was completely screwed up. It would take another day or two before my body acclimated to this new time zone. I made the most of my early morning. I exercised, shaved, showered, wrote in my journal. I watched the international news on the CNN channel. I checked my emails and photos. By 6:30am, when the dining room opened for breakfast, I was the first one there.

At 8:00am, the entire group was on a large, comfortable bus heading for a daylong journey to visit the medieval city of Kotor in the small country of Montenegro. Sanja reminded us to bring our passports since we would have to cross the border during this jaunt. We left Dubrovnik and headed south on highway D8 along the Adriatic coastline. Soon the scenic coastal views were replaced by green rolling hills and forested valleys. The sky was overcast the entire day, with intermittent rainfall. But it didn't feel too cold, thank goodness. As we drove I noticed the absence of communities in this particular area of the country. We saw mostly scattered farmhouses from the roadway. It took us 45 minutes to reach the border crossing at Karasovici. Sanja told us this crossing might take up to an hour. I read online it is one of the slowest in the Balkans, although I'm not sure why. Luckily, one of the good things about traveling this late in the year is the absence of tourists, and we breezed through the first border crossing. We traversed a small hilly area (Sanja called it a buffer zone, a no man's land between the two countries) before passing another checkpoint into Montenegro.

As Sanja spoke about the country of Montenegro I got the impression Croatians are a little suspicious of Montenegrins. There is certainly no love lost between the two peoples; after all, the Montenegrins, allied with the Serbs, had invaded Croatia and were responsible for shelling Dubrovnik during the 1990s. Even though peace eventually prevailed, and the sovereignty of the nations involved preserved, the Yugoslav Wars occurred within the last three decades and that simply isn't enough time for people to forget the horrors of the wars and put everything behind them. Europeans often criticize the political, religious and social divisions within American society, but one thing I've noticed about my travels in Europe is that this continent is much more divided along those very same lines than we are, especially given all the countries, cultures, and languages living side by side,

not to mention Europe's long history of warfare. Case in point, in *each* of the 11 countries I've visited on the European continent at least one tour guide has brought up – and very nonchalantly, mind you – a negative stereotype of another nationality, jokingly referring to a group's perceived laziness or ignorance or lack of trustworthiness, and so on. Not to say this doesn't happen in America, but you'd be hard-pressed to find a *travel tour* in a major U.S. city where the tour guide talks disparagingly about a particular ethnic or racial group. In the current 'politically correct' environment we Americans now live in, sentiments like that are usually only uttered behind closed doors or in private company. Anyway, this is not a rant, just an observation.

After crossing the border into Montenegro we continued on local highway E65. The scenery hadn't changed until we reached the small town of Igalo, situated along the slopes of Mount Orjen. From this point forward, E65 hugged the coastline of the Bay of Kotor, a body of water in the southwestern region of the country. This bay is 17 miles long (28km) and beautifully framed within two large mountain systems, the Orjen mountains to the west and the Lovcen mountains to the east. The Bay of Kotor, a bay of the Adriatic Sea, is also the southernmost part of the historic region of Dalmatia. Located within its winding boundaries are several smaller broad bays connected by narrow channels. A large portion of the bay area around and including the municipality of Kotor is a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site, owing to its long history (stretching back to antiquity) of human settlement. Our purpose in entering Montenegro was to tour the medieval city of Kotor and to experience the natural beauty of this gorgeous bay.

Because we only spent one day in Montenegro I will not delve too deeply into the convoluted history of this nation except as it pertains to Kotor. Sanja gave us some basic information during the bus ride. Montenegro is a tiny Balkan country wedged into southeastern Europe with a population of just over 600,000 inhabitants. Its total land mass equals 5,333 square miles (13,812 sq km), which is slightly smaller than the state of Connecticut. The early inhabitants of the region were the *Illyrians*, an Indo-European speaking group who, together with the Thracians and Greeks, were the earliest inhabitants of the Western Balkans during ancient times. The Romans eventually conquered the Illyrians, and following the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, a succession of Slavic kingdoms would emerge to control the area. Starting around the 14<sup>th</sup> century, parts of Montenegro

were controlled by the Venetians and later the Ottomans. Montenegrin territories were run by war-like clans which managed to exert a good measure of autonomy from their foreign overlords. By the end of the 1800s, with the defeat of the Ottoman forces in the Balkans, Montenegro became an independent country, and later a kingdom prior to the outbreak of WWI. It later followed a similar trajectory as the rest of the Balkan countries that would merge to form the Federated Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia following the end of WWII.

We drove around the Bay of Kotor for 45 minutes before reaching a small bayfront town called Perast, just a few kilometers northwest of Kotor. Perast is a historic village of stone villas built around the 17th and 18th centuries, but whose human settlement origins can be traced back to Neolithic times (like most of the coastal area). We stopped at the local pier to take a one-hour private taxi boat tour of the bay. Although the sky was overcast and drizzling, the waters were calm. Our boat circled two important islets just off the coast of Perast. The first was St. George Island, a natural islet housing the St George Benedictine Monastery, its construction dating to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Sanja told us the monastery grounds contain a cemetery with the crypts of the region's old nobility. The other islet, known as Our Lady of the Rock, is a man-made one. The legend goes that in 1452 local sailors found an icon of the Virgin Mary and Child sticking out from a rock in the water and began placing stones all around it until eventually a small islet was formed. By 1630, a church (Our Lady of the Rocks) was erected on it. The original icon from 1452, I later read, is displayed on its altar.

We did not return to Perast, but rather continued westward towards Kotor, which is tucked away in the furthest most secluded point within the bay. All around us were the nearly overhanging limestone cliffs of the Orjen and Lovcen mountains. In certain areas we could see solitary churches sticking out of the forested hillsides just above the scattered coastal towns we passed along the way. It was all very picturesque. By 11:30am we disembarked in front of the Sea Gate entrance into Kotor's historic walled city, the main portal inside this wonderfully preserved medieval town. Local guide Nick was waiting for us in front of the gate to lead us on a one-hour tour of the historic quarter. Before entering the walled city, he provided us with a brief historical background on Kotor.

The town has been fortified since the time of the Romans, he said. Kotor was one of the eight original Dalmatian city-states that tried to preserve its

Roman language and customs following the fall of the Roman Empire in the West. Although its territory came to be part of other empires or kingdoms over the ensuing centuries, its unique security position within the bay – along with its influential trading center – allowed it to remain relatively independent and autonomous. The one country that had an enormous impact on the city was the Republic of Venice, which formed in northeastern Italy in the year 697AD. The Republic of Venice lasted 1,100 years and during its Golden Age had become very wealthy and powerful, acquiring many possessions within the Balkans and dominating sea trade in the Mediterranean during the Middle Ages and even into the Renaissance Period. Kotor became one of its possessions in 1420, and would remain so until the fall of the Venetian Republic in 1797. Nearly four hundred years of Venetian influence has left an indelible mark on Kotor. Most of the preserved World Heritage Sites in Kotor were actually constructed using the Venetian architecture of the time.

Besides the preserved medieval and Renaissance buildings within the historic quarter, the defensive walls are quite the marvel, too, built between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Unlike Dubrovnik, which is encircled by its protective walls at ground level, the walls of Kotor extend not just around the old city but also up into the towering mountain behind it. Nick told us the walls can reach as high as 66 feet (20m) and are *incredibly* thick. In addition, a castle fortress (St. John's Fort) was constructed on top of the mountain – at an elevation of 853 feet (260m) above sea level – for added security. No wonder this former city-state achieved a good measure of autonomy during its run; it was well defended by its fortifications and natural surroundings. And while Kotor has suffered many devastating earthquakes throughout its history, necessitating some major reconstructions over the centuries, it was spared the sort of damage that Dubrovnik sustained during the Yugoslav Wars. As a result, some might argue that Kotor has a more authentic medieval feel than Dubrovnik.

Nick led us through the Sea Gate, which serves as the principle entrance into the old city along the western wall facing the Bay of Kotor. Constructed around 1555, this is one of three gated entrances (the other two gates are located on the northern and southern ends of the walled city). The portal of the Sea Gate is embellished with Venetian Renaissance and Baroque details. Nick told us the top of the outer gate once contained a Venetian Lion sculpture. After the Communists liberated Kotor in 1944, Tito ordered the



lion relief be replaced by the cement plaque that hangs there now featuring the socialist star and the date of the city's liberation.

Prior to commencing the tour, Nick mentioned we would walk in a wide circle through historic Kotor to visit the squares and plazas where most of the important buildings are located. The first one we came upon was the Square of Arms just as you walk through the Sea Gate entrance. This looked like the main town square of medieval Kotor. Directly in front of the Sea Gate, as you enter the square, is the Clock Tower from the 1600s. Next to the tower is a unique monument entitled the 'pillar of shame' because this was where lawbreakers were publicly humiliated or flogged. Surrounding the Square of Arms are several notable structures. Running along the façade of the western wall is the three-story Duke's Palace (constructed and expanded between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18th centuries). This building once served as the residence of the Venetian governors. Today, part of the structure is a hotel. At the far end of the Square of Arms is its namesake, the Arsenal Building (circa, 1420), where the city used to store its armaments and prepare for battle. Adjacent to it is the French (or Napoleon) Theater, created from a section of a former palace following Napoleon's invasion. Nick told us this was one of the first theaters in the country.

We headed south from the Clock Tower, walking along the winding cobbled streets and soon arrived at another plaza called *Trg od Brasna*, or the Flour Square. During medieval times this area contained multiple flour warehouses, hence the name. The only way to get your flour fix these days is to eat in one of the square's cafes or restaurants. Several gray stone mansions with colorful shutters surround this small, rather simple plaza: The Bizanti Palace, the Beskuca Palace, the Pima Palace and the Buca Palace. All of them dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18th centuries with the exception of the Buca Palace, the oldest, from the 1400s. Nick told us that all of the historic palaces and mansions in Kotor – which used to belong to the nobility under Venetian times – have been restored or renovated to some extent or another.

From here we continued to another square called *Trg Sveti Tripuna*, named after the city's patron saint, St. Tryphon. Although there are a number of interesting structures here, the main attraction is undoubtedly the St. Tryphon's Cathedral, which dates back to the year 1166. Due to the city's earthquake activity, this Romanesque-style church has had to be rebuilt several times. Its twin Baroque bell towers, for example, were actually

added in the late 1600s. The backdrop for this church is the sheer forested cliff of the mountain directly in back of the city, which lends a dramatic effect to the structure. On the north side of this square, to the left of the cathedral, is the Drago Palace, its construction dating back to the 14th century. This palace is divided into two parts, a northern and southern wing. The older, northern section was designed in the typical Gothic style of that time, while the southern wing was built during the 17<sup>th</sup> century using Baroque and Renaissance architecture. The Dragos were a very influential family in Kotor for many centuries. Their coat of arms had a dragon at its center, and you'll find many dragon sculptures decorating the palace. Today, the Drago Palace houses the Regional Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Monuments.

We headed north to another square, the *Trg Bokeljske Mornarice*. The most important building in this plaza is the Grgurina Palace, a lovely Baroque structure from the 1700s that now contains one of Kotor's best museums, the Maritime Museum. This museum has interesting exhibitions explaining the seafaring skills and exploits of the peoples of the Bay of Kotor over the centuries and how it influenced their economy and culture. During the 1700s, Kotor had over 400 ships sailing the world, a remarkable achievement for such a small municipality. We walked to the next corner, continuing north, and saw the Old Fountain of Karampana, encircled by its ornate wrought iron fence. Nick told us this single piston, two-pump water fountain was constructed around the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and served as a main source of water for the townsfolk, becoming the ideal place for women in the town to congregate and gossip freely. I guess that's how 'water cooler talk' started.

From here we walked to the *Trg Sv Luke*, or the St. Luke's Square. There are two noteworthy churches in this plaza. The first one is the St. Luke's Church, a small Romanesque structure standing at a weird angle within the square, as if all the buildings around it had been turned slightly clockwise. St. Luke's Church was built in 1195. It was originally a Catholic Church but was later converted into an Orthodox one. In addition to being among the oldest structures in the city, this church also has the distinction of being the only building in Kotor to have miraculously withstood all five of its major earthquakes with minimal damage. On the northern end of the square sits St. Nicholas Church from the early 1900s, the most important Orthodox Church in the city. It was designed in a pseudo-Byzantine style and the gold used to gild its twin towers was a gift from Russia. St. Nicholas Church was

constructed over the remains of a former abandoned Dominican monastery. A section of the monastery ruins can be seen adjacent to the church.

We made our way back to the Square of Arms, stopping briefly in a small plaza to see the outside of the Kotor Cats Museum. I'm not sure what the official reason is behind this city's love affair with cats, but you'll see small statues of cats adorning gates, door entrances and balconies, not to mention the number of stray felines you'll encounter all over the historic quarter. *They are everywhere.* We made it back to the Sea Gate entrance by 12:30pm. Our group thanked Nick for a wonderful tour of Kotor.

We had almost two and a half hours of free time in the old city. Before the group could split up, though, Sanja led us to a public market near the Sea Gate entrance just outside the walled city where we were treated to a sampling of meats and cheeses from one of the local vendors. This outdoor market serves the bay community, and customers from the nearby coastal towns show up via car, ferry or water taxis to do their food shopping here. We walked the stalls of vendors selling everything from dried meats and cheeses, to fruits, vegetables and spices. Sanja had arranged for one vendor to lay out a lovely spread for us. The vendor placed on a table a large tray piled high with an assortment of sliced dried meats like prosciutto, sausages, and spicy ham, and four different types of cheeses. There was also bread and a bowl of tasty green olives. To drink, the vendor poured us a locally made dark wine. In fact, everything we tasted was made locally, and it was absolutely delicious. We really dug in, too, leaving nothing on the tray! According to Sanja, Kotor is known in the region for its prosciutto, a skill the people developed as a result of their Venetian roots.

It was now nearing 1:00pm and while the food samples definitely took the edge off our hunger pangs, most of the group decided to have lunch before we continued exploring the old city. Besides, we had a long drive back to Dubrovnik ahead of us and dinner was on our own that evening. A group of us returned to the St. Tryphon's Square where Nick had earlier pointed out a couple of good restaurants in the area specializing in seafood. Sanja mentioned on the bus trip over how Kotor is famous for its mussels, recommending wholeheartedly that we try them. Unfortunately, mussel season was over, and none of the restaurants were actually serving them because they tended to be very small that time of the year. I opted for a seafood risotto dish, instead, which was awesome but a bit skimpy in terms of the portion. Boston Mary was nice enough to share her Margherita pizza

with me. After lunch, everyone split up and went about exploring the old city. I revisited some of the grander palaces and was able to check out several of the temples like St. Luke's Church and the St. Nicholas Church. I had wanted to walk a section of the wall ramparts, but it was getting too late in the day. Boston Mary managed to climb to the top of the wall and took some photos. Our group rendezvoused at 2:45pm by the Sea Gate entrance and piled into our bus for the drive back to Dubrovnik. Kotor was a really fun outing.

In order to save time driving around the bay we took the local ferry across the water. As we waited to board the ferry, Sanja pointed out the fancy cars that were also waiting in line. Many were high-end BMWs or Mercedes-Benzes. She told us that since the break-up of Yugoslavia, many foreigners, especially Russians, have been buying property in the region. I read online that up to seventy percent of all the buildings in Kotor may be foreign-owned. Hmmmm.

I napped on and off heading back to Dubrovnik (and I wasn't the only one, either). We arrived at our hotel shortly before 6:00pm. Boston Mary and I agreed to meet in the lobby fifteen minutes later to walk the northern end of the city. It was dark already and pretty chilly. We proceeded north on *Ulica Iva Vojnovica*, the street in front of the hotel, and eventually turned left onto a promenade that led us down to Uvala Lapad Beach, a very popular resort area. We saw very few people as we walked, and many of the hotels along the beachfront were closed or deserted at that time of the year. The promenade was lined with closed shops, as well. To our credit (or Boston Mary's) we reached the end of the promenade at the northern tip of the peninsula and turned around and went back. A three and a half mile 'stroll', my friends. I was in my hotel room by 7:45pm, so tired I collapsed on the bed after twenty minutes and slept like a champion.

## **Day Five**

I awoke at 6:00am after sleeping nine glorious hours, almost certain I had put this lingering jet lag in my rearview mirror. I quickly wrote the previous day's events in my journal and then showered and dressed. After

breakfast, we gathered in the lobby at 9:00am to begin our sightseeing activities for the day. We were visiting the Homeland War Museum, which is perched atop Mt Srdj overlooking the Old Town, to learn more about the Yugoslav Wars, or, more precisely, the Croatian War of Independence aspect of the Yugoslav Wars. To reach the museum we had to climb a one-lane switchback road that could not accommodate our big tour bus, so our group was divided into two mini-vans for the trip up the hillside.

The Homeland War Museum is housed in Fort Imperial, a fortification built in 1806 by Napoleon's forces after their invasion. Following the defeat of Napoleon, the Austrians took over, commanding Fort Imperial and strengthening its defenses (initially to protect themselves from the nearby Ottomans). By 1882, when the Austrians occupied Bosnia and Herzegovina, the fortress lost its military significance. But in 1991, at the start of the Yugoslav Wars, Fort Imperial became a crucial factor in the defense of Dubrovnik. A brave group of Croatian defenders holed up inside the fortress were able to hold back the Serbian-Montenegrin forces, sparing the city from what could have been *total* destruction. Following the end of hostilities, Fort Imperial's corridors and rooms were turned into a museum commemorating the defense of Dubrovnik during the Homeland War (1991-1995). There are plenty of photographs, maps, documents, memoirs and military artifacts inside the museum, providing a very good accounting of the Siege of Dubrovnik.

Before I continue, let me clarify the term 'Yugoslav Wars'. Since its inception in 1945, the six-nation union that made up the former Yugoslavia was controlled by strongman Josip Broz Tito. He was an absolute ruler who kept the peace between the various ethnic groups inside the country by stifling nationalistic tendencies within the separate republics. Despite this, Tito was reasonably well liked. Under his rule, Yugoslavia experienced a better economy and standard of living compared to the countries of the former Soviet Bloc. Tito was an independent communist, who stood up to the Kremlin when he had to, and became a respected world leader among non-aligned 'third world countries'. His death in 1980 created a political void too large to fill, and with the country's economy faltering during the eighties and the re-emergence of regional ethnic strife and grievances, several of the republics within the union began clamoring for more autonomy from the central government in Belgrade, which was controlled by the Serbs. In 1991, the same year the Soviet Union broke apart, Slovenia and Croatia became the first two republics within Yugoslavia to declare their

independence. This action led to the start of the Yugoslav Wars, as Serbia and her ally, Montenegro, immediately invaded both countries to prevent the breakup of the Yugoslavian union.

The fighting in Slovenia was very short-lived, lasting only ten days. A treaty was signed and eventually Slovenia gained its independence with relatively little bloodshed. But for Croatia, the war raged for four more years, this is known as the Croatian War of Independence (or the Homeland War). In 1992, Bosnia-Herzegovina became embroiled in their own war of independence with Serbian forces, which ended in 1995 with NATO's help, leading to the formation of two separate entities within Bosnia-Herzegovina: the ethnically Serbian-controlled Republic of Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (made up primarily of Bosnian Muslims). And towards the end of the 1990s, insurgencies arose in Muslim Kosovo, a tiny land-locked country in the southern region of Serbia, which gained its autonomy in 1999 after a prolonged bombing campaign against Serbia by NATO. In addition, there were Albanian insurgencies in what is now North Macedonia (the former Republic of Macedonia), who fought for greater autonomy for ethnic Albanians. All of these separate, but ethnically related wars of independence and insurgencies (that lasted between 1991 and 2001) are now collectively referred to as the Yugoslav Wars. The cumulative affect of these conflicts was the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

We pulled up to an empty parking lot near the entrance of the museum, on the side of the fortress facing the mountains to the northeast of Dubrovnik. A solitary cow was grazing along the edges of this forested valley, the serene mountain scenery before us belying the threat this area posed for the city back in 1991. It was from these mountains, Sanja told us, that the Serbian-Montenegrin forces shelled Dubrovnik. I took some photographs of Fort Imperial before we entered the museum. The building looked like it had just seen battle, its ramparts crumbling in sections, parts of the defensive walls missing or broken into piles of stone blocks, large wooden boards covered open windows. One can only imagine what this poor fortress endured to keep the city safe, for if it had fallen, the Serbian-Montenegrin armies would have been able to shell Dubrovnik directly from the fort, leveling the city below.

Before our free time in the museum, we were led to one of the galleries where we met a 37-year-old woman by the name of Matina for a one-hour

discussion on the events leading to the Homeland War and the Siege of Dubrovnik. Matina was only 7-year-old when the siege began, and survived the ordeal with her younger sister and her mother. She told us that Croatians, before the start of the conflict, didn't think their country would be attacked so they were unprepared militarily for war. And surely *nobody* thought that Dubrovnik, which was a UNESCO World Heritage site, would be bombed. But war, as we all know, rarely brings out the best intentions of its aggressors. On December 6, 1991, the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) – made up of Serbian and Montenegrin forces – brutally attacked the city, launching an intense all-day bombing campaign from air, land and sea that saw an estimated 6,000 artillery rounds hit Dubrovnik. On that one day, according to Matina, the worse day of the siege, the city lost all its water, electricity and communications systems. All eligible fighting men, she said, had gone off to defend the country, and once the hostilities began, 90 percent of the city's residents fled to safer ground. Those who remained, like Matina's family, were comprised mostly of women, children and the elderly who had no place else to go.

Matina spent a good portion of the meeting recounting the horrors of the siege, and how she, her mother and 5-year-old sister would take shelter from the bombings with fifteen other people in a neighbor's basement. International condemnation following the attack on this historic UNESCO World Heritage Site was so strong that the JNA had to scale back the scope of the bombardment, and by May they began retreating from the area altogether after strong resistance from the Croatian army (HV). During the siege, two Croatian army personnel came to their home in Dubrovnik to inform them her father, a major in the army, had been killed in battle. It was the first time she ever saw her mother cry, a terrible moment that reflected the overall sadness, misery and grief that had washed over Dubrovnik in such a short period of time.

Matina said everyone slept with their clothes on, ready to evacuate their homes or places of shelter in case of a late-night or early morning artillery barrage. Life was exceptionally hard those first three months, with water and food scarcities and no electricity. In her neighborhood, 100 people had to share a solitary toilet. Matina's family had to move in with their uncle whose house had a stronger foundation. Everyone was given one liter of water daily; women risked going to the sea to gather salt water for bathing. Chickens and homegrown gardens, together with some smuggled in

supplies, helped feed the survivors during the worst part of the siege. The churches provided candles to illuminate their homes at night.

Eventually, aid reached the city, at first through clandestine means, but as the siege eased and the JNA forces inland were pushed back, the government set up refugee centers in area hotels that had not been too heavily damaged, providing water, food and medical supplies. Matina told us they spent the remainder of the war in one of these hotels, usually eating stale bread for breakfast and pasta, mixed with whatever vegetables or protein they could get their hands on, for lunch and dinner. But despite the misery, she said they tried to make the best of it. The hotel swimming pool was devoid of water, but the children would play in the pool, pretending to swim. She recalled how the mothers would set up social gatherings, improvised 'parties' with music in order to alleviate some of the stress and anxiety caused by the siege. When the war finally ended, the people who had fled Dubrovnik in the early part of the conflict returned to the city to find that while many of their homes and buildings had been damaged, incredibly most were still standing. And thus began the great reconstruction period.

Following the Homeland War, she continued, many people suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and many soldiers needed counseling. Martina and her sister couldn't sleep for three years after the conflict ended because of their fears of being bombed in the middle of the night and having to escape on a moment's notice. Donations and foreign aid came pouring in, which helped to transition the country back to some kind of normalcy. I almost shed a tear when she told us a girl in France had sent her and her sister stuffed animals to play with, and that, 27 years later, the two siblings still had them in their possession. She credits her mother, who only recently passed away from COVID, for getting them through this ordeal. In fact, she hypothesized that most people who go through such horrors will find themselves to be emotionally tougher and more resilient afterwards. How can they not be? Matina lost her father, her home, and had to endure nearly four years of hardships to survive the war, and she experienced all this as a little girl. Today, she said, she tends to focus on the positive because the negative doesn't scare her anymore. When people talk about the economy, inflation or their mundane problems, Matina's daily philosophy makes her shrug and think, "So what?" Nothing she has encountered in life since the siege is worse than what her family had to go through back then. *Nothing*. So she prefers to see the good in everything, not the bad. Words to live by, folks.



We had a Q&A session afterwards. Many in the group wanted to know how she felt about the current situation in the Ukraine (following Russia's invasion). While her heart and prayers go out to the Ukrainians, she said, she does not watch the war coverage on the news because it brings back horrible memories from the siege, especially the images of the bombed out buildings. Another question focused on the attitude of Croatians today towards Serbs and Montenegrins. Matina said that older Croatians, who remember the war vividly – with its indiscriminate bombings and ethnic cleansing campaigns – probably still cling to some form of animosity or hold grudges. But young people seem to want to move on from the past (even if this *past* was only thirty years ago). Both Serbs and Montenegrins live and work in Dubrovnik (most are younger people born after the war or too young to remember it). This actually gave me hope that once the war in the Ukraine concludes, perhaps a lasting peace can be forged between everyone involved. It was a very informative session and when it ended our group applauded Matina and thanked her for sharing with us her personal experiences.

We were given almost an hour to wander through the museum, but most of us actually headed out to the observation points along the western edges of the fort to photograph the panoramic views of not only the Old Town, which lay directly below us, but also of the rest of the city to the north and its beautiful coastline. The view alone was worth visiting the museum. Visitors can also take a cable car to the fortress, which must offer even more stunning views of the area as one ascends. By 11:15am we boarded our mini-vans and were dropped off by the Ploce Gate entrance on the eastern side of the Old Town facing the port. We had almost five hours of free time to explore Dubrovnik on our own and the group quickly dispersed once we were inside the historic quarter.

Boston Mary and I teamed up and visited the Sponza Palace situated in front of Luza Square. This rectangular building was designed in a mix of Gothic and Renaissance styles during the early half of the 1500s, and was one of the few buildings to survive the devastating 1667 Earthquake without any serious damage. Over its lifetime, the palace has served numerous public functions and today is home to the Historic Archives of the Old Town. When we visited, there was a photo exhibition on the main floor showcasing black and white photographs taken by Jakov Perucic, a Croatian photographer who moved to Chile in 1892 and returned to Croatia twenty years later. A collection of 1200 negative plates was discovered in a trunk at

his former house decades after he died. These photographs depict life in his hometown in Croatia during the early 1900s and also portray what life was like among the Croatian community in Chile.

From here, Boston Mary and I walked across Luza Square to tour the inside of the Rector's Palace, which houses the city's Cultural Museum. This is another of Dubrovnik's famous historical buildings, originally built in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but later reconstructed three times following damages from fire and earthquakes. The building was designed in a Gothic style with Renaissance and Baroque elements. From the 14<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the palace was the seat of the city's *rector*, the executive head of the government of the former Republic of Ragusa. In addition to being the seat of power, the building served a number of other purposes throughout its lifetime, such as an armory, watchtower and prison. Since 1872 a popular museum has existed within its walls. We walked through the palace-museum, which gives one a glimpse of what life was like back then as the rooms are set up with period furniture and contain an impressive collection of paintings on the walls, including some works by Italian Renaissance painter Pietro da Cortona (and a few other notable artists). One interesting exhibit was a display of lottery tickets from 1873. Another room contained safes and trunks with bizarre locking mechanisms dating back to the late Renaissance period.

We exited the Rector's Palace and headed west along the main street (the Stradun), turning left onto Siroka Street. At this point, Boston Mary and I split up to pursue separate interests. I wanted to visit the Rupe Ethnographic Museum located at the top of a series of staircases near the southern wall. I ran into Anne on the way up the stairs. She told me the museum had many interesting exhibits and showed me how to get there. I spent thirty minutes admiring the museum's heritage collection, which includes over 6,000 items representing the culture and customs of not only Croatia, but also the region, in general. There were many handiworks on display, including lace and fabrics, looms, traditional costumes, tools, fishing and farming equipment and even a cooking stove from the late 1800s. The building that houses the Rupe Ethnographic Museum was actually the city's former granary. The word *Rupe* means "holes" and refers to the large underground pits beneath the building that once stored vast amounts of grain. Upon entering the museum, visitors can watch an animated video of how the granary was constructed and operated.

I left the museum and headed back down the long public staircase, stopping to do a brief tour of the House of Marin Drzic, which is adjacent to the 15<sup>th</sup> century Domino Church. Marin Drzic was born in Dubrovnik in 1508. By the time he died in Venice in 1567 he had become the country's greatest playwright, a key author of European Renaissance comedy. His work and interests led him to live in other areas of Europe (particularly, Italy) but he maintained a home in the Old Town, which is now a museum and cultural center dedicated to the study of his works. The house has two floors and is not very large. Mostly, you'll see paintings, sculptures of the writer, plus books, documents and some period furniture (although I'm not sure if the latter is authentic). Unless you're a literary fan, I would skip this museum. But, having said that, it is a small museum (like many in the Old Town) and will not take up much of your time. Incidentally, my city bus pass allowed me free access to all of the museums I visited while in Dubrovnik.

I continued on to Gundulic Square and climbed the monumental Baroque staircase to the St. Ignatius Church in back of the square for a look inside. The 1667 Earthquake interrupted the church's construction and it wasn't completed until 1725. It is a fairly large, single nave affair with side chapels and a semicircular, divided apse containing magnificent frescoes depicting the life of St. Ignatius de Loyola. Interesting to note that this structure is regarded as one of the best examples of Baroque architecture in the region. Next to the church stands the former Jesuit College, at one time considered one of the best learning institutions along the Dalmatian coastline, but today the building is somewhat dilapidated, as if the structure was leaning against the church for support.

I went back down the Baroque staircase (the one used in the famous 'walk of shame' scene in Game of Thrones) and headed over to the Assumption Cathedral (also referred to as the Cathedral-Treasury) located one street over. The cathedral was undergoing restorations and I was disappointed I couldn't go inside for a look around. But even from the outside the church was pretty impressive. It was largely reconstructed after the 1667 Earthquake in a Baroque style, on a site that had several previous cathedrals on it, all of them destroyed by fires or earthquake activity, including one whose financing had been funded by England's King Richard the Lion Hearted. He paid for the church as a votive for having survived a shipwreck off a nearby island as he returned home from the Third Crusades in 1192. The façade of the cathedral has four Corinthian columns. Above it

is a large Baroque window and a balustrade with statues of saints. The façade also contains two niches, one with the statue of St Blaise (the patron saint of Dubrovnik) and the other with a statue of Joseph with Child. From here I walked back to Luza Square and visited the St Blaise Church, which I had seen two days earlier when we first visited the Old Town.

I concluded my personal tour of the historic quarter by 1:45pm and decided to walk back to the Hotel Lero instead of taking the bus, stopping at a local bakery to have a tasty ham and cheese turnover. Back in my hotel room by 2:30pm, I washed up and put on a clean shirt for our dinner outing. At 3:30pm the group gathered in the lobby and we boarded our bus for a 45-minute drive to Konalve, a region outside of Dubrovnik located between the Sniježnica Mountains and the Adriatic Sea, to visit a family owned farmstead and winery.

When we arrived, we sat around a large stone mill while the owner of the farmstead – a very funny, charismatic middle-aged man named Dario – gave us an informative lecture on olive oil, which his family also produces on the farmstead. I have visited quite a number of small town wineries and olive oil producers on my travels, and much of what he said I'd heard before, but his amusing delivery and joking manner made it all sound entertainingly new. The family used the mill, he said, to produce their own olive oil, wine and brandy. Dario told us that Croatia has roughly 5,000 small olive oil producers like himself who only sell their products locally or to tourists. As our trip unfolded, I was surprised to discover that many people in the region also make their own wine and brandy, and they're quite fond (or proud) of offering it to their guests (which I think is probably a local custom or tradition). After his presentation at the stone mill, Dario led us into a large rustic wooden dining hall that he and his father had to reconstruct after the Croatian War of Independence. Many of the farmsteads and homes in Konalve were damaged during the four-year war, he said. There was a bar running along one side of the hall where they had bottles of their own wines, brandies and olive oil for sale. He shared a little of his family history (turns out the farmstead is 500 years old) and told us about the different types of wines and brandies they make, offering us samples of homemade grappa, prosecco and red and white wines.

At 5:30pm we took our seats around a long table and were treated to a delicious dinner. In addition to the salads and appetizers of prosciutto, dried sausages and cow and goat cheeses (all made on the farmstead), we enjoyed

a main course of veal, lamb and potatoes slow-cooked in a *peka* style, underneath a bell-shaped iron lid that is covered in embers on a grill. This is a very traditional style of cooking in Croatia, dating back to ancient times when clay pots were utilized for this purpose. Today, metal (usually iron) bell-shaped lids are used. We had homemade apple pie (which was layered with apple jam) for dessert. During the meal and afterwards, two local musicians performed folk music numbers while Dario and Sanja kept encouraging us to get up and dance. After dinner, our group participated in a *lindo* dance, a popular folk dance of the region that is accompanied by a three-string instrument called a *lijerica*. Basically, it's a traditional party favorite in Konalve, with a lot of foot stomping, dancing in circles and playfulness. We had a lot of fun that night; it was a wonderful way to end our stay in Dubrovnik. By 7:00pm we were on the bus heading back to our hotel. I spent the rest of the evening repacking, writing in my journal and watching the International BBC News broadcast on TV before going to bed.

## Day Six

I was up by 4:30am, but feeling quite rested. I did some stretching exercises before shaving and showering and then finished repacking my luggage. At 6:30am I was downstairs for breakfast. I returned to my room to brush my teeth and place my luggage in the hallway for the bellhop. Sanja sent us a text message reminding us to have our passports handy since we were crossing the border into Bosnia-Herzegovina. By 8:00am we were on the bus driving north on Highway 8, which runs along the Adriatic coastline.

It was a clear, sunny morning, with wonderful scenic views of the Croatian islands just off the coast. At one point we crossed the Bay of Mali Ston, located between the Peljesac peninsula and the mainland, passing a collection of oyster farms inside the bay. These oyster farms, I read online, are mostly family-owned, the trade being handed down through generations. By 9:00am we reached the border crossing near the town of Neum, located within a tiny strip of coastal territory that connects the country of Bosnia-Herzegovina to the Adriatic Sea. We stopped in Neum for a 20-minute bathroom break next to an observation point offering a very nice view of the

Peljesac Bridge in the distance. This recently completed white, cable-stayed bridge, Sanja told us, is very important because it forms a fixed link between the Peljesac Peninsula (and the smaller islands around it) and mainland Croatia, bypassing the short coastal strip of land controlled by Bosnia-Herzegovina.

From Neum we turned inland on Highway M17.3 and continued our journey northward towards Mostar, a city established under the Ottomans during the 1400s. As we drove through the small villages and towns in the area, Sanja pointed out the sturdy stone construction and small windows and doors of the local homes. She told us this was due to the Bura winds, a dry, bitterly cold and heavy wind that blows downward from the mountains towards the Adriatic Sea with great force. These strong winds affect the natural environment, especially the mountainous areas inland which do not produce a lot of water, limiting the growth of vegetation. Tree species here tend to be skinnier and not good for lumber, so concrete and stone are used to build most of the dwellings. Windows and doors are kept small to keep the wind and cold out.

On the drive, Sanja gave us a brief history of Bosnia-Herzegovina. She told us that permanent human settlements in the region began appearing during the Neolithic Age. Several Indo-European tribes (the Illyrians and the Celts) established themselves here in ancient times. As for the ancestors of the current population, these were South Slavic peoples who migrated into the area between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. During the Middle Ages, the Kingdom of Bosnia (1377 - 1463) was created out of a former medieval state called the Banate of Bosnia. The Ottomans conquered this kingdom during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and replaced it with administrative districts called *sanjaks*. Several centuries of Ottoman rule left an indelible mark on Bosnia-Herzegovina. In addition to Islam, the Ottomans introduced many social and cultural changes to the country that have endured till this day.

When the Ottomans were expelled in the late 1800s, Bosnia-Herzegovina fell under the jurisdiction of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire until *their* collapse at the end of WWI. Bosnia-Herzegovina was then incorporated into the newly created Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which was formed in 1918 and lasted until 1941. Following WWII, the country became one of the six republics established under the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In 1992, Bosnia-Herzegovina declared its independence from

Yugoslavia, setting off a brutal conflict known as the Bosnian War that ended in 1995. I will delve deeper into this war later in the journal.

Sanja also talked about the bizarre political and administrative make up of the country. When Bosnia-Herzegovina declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1992, the country was divided into three main ethnic groups: Bosniaks (Muslims), Serbs (Orthodox) and Croats (Catholics). Immediately, leaders of the Serbian and Croatian minorities within the country formed their own separate republics. These ethnic divisions and opposing political entities made the Bosnian War one of the most brutal conflicts of all the Yugoslav Wars – with ethnic cleansing campaigns and other war atrocities – claiming more than 100,000 lives. In 1995, when the war ended, the Dayton Peace Accords led to the formation of the current State of Bosnia and Herzegovina. To achieve lasting peace, though, two separate entities were created within the borders of this new country: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (made up of Bosniaks and Croats) and a sub-entity called the Republika Srpska, located in the northern and eastern parts of the country, made up of Serbs. Under the Dayton Peace Accords, the Republika Srpska cannot secede from the rest of Bosnia-Herzegovina. So essentially, this is a nation with two separate governments. How they pull this off (or get along) is beyond me, but they've managed to keep the peace until now, despite having two sets of presidents, prime ministers and parliaments. Sanja told us you could always tell what part of the country you're in by the lettering on the street signs. The Republika Srpska uses the Cyrillic alphabet, while the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina uses the Latin alphabet.

Forty minutes into our drive inside Bosnia-Herzegovina we drove through the ancient city of Stolac, located within the mountainous hinterlands of the country. Our bus driver, Sasha, made a good accounting of himself as he maneuvered the coach gingerly through the city, sometimes coming within inches of the cars parked along the very narrow streets here. Sanja told us that Stolac is considered one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world. Resembling a large town rather than a city, Stolac is surrounded by a favorable natural environment – good climate and hydrography, fertile lands and rich hunting grounds – which has attracted humans since pre-historic times. Case in point, carvings found in the Badanj Cave near Stolac date back nearly 15,000 years. As we continued northward from Stolac towards Mostar, we came upon the *Radimlja stecak* necropolis (roughly 3 kilometers west of Stolac). This cemetery, protected by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, has over 130 tombstones dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> to

the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and is regarded as one of the most valuable medieval monuments in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

By 11:15am we arrived in Mostar, parking near the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, a Franciscan church and monastery just walking distance from the center of the Old Town (historical quarter). The original church from the 1800s was destroyed during the Bosnian War and was rebuilt. The church's white bell tower (symbolically called the Mostar Peace Tower) is 351 feet tall (107 meters) – the tallest church tower in southeastern Europe, I read – and can be seen from just about anywhere in the city. It has a large cross resting on its top. Sanja told us this would be our meeting point and if we should happen to get lost during our free time all we had to do was walk towards the direction of the bell tower. I found it somewhat ironic that in a city punctuated by so many historic mosques, the guiding beacon would be this towering Christian symbol. But then again, almost half of Mostar's population nowadays is made up of Croats. In fact, this city has the largest concentration of Croats in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Mostar is the fifth largest city in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It lies along the meandering Neretya River, which flows out to the Adriatic Sea and provides life to this mountainous area. Although humans have been settling along this river valley for thousands of years, little is really known about the history of Mostar prior to the arrival of the Ottomans in the 1400s. Basically, a small settlement developed here around a bridge that crossed the Neretva River, serving as part of an important trade route connecting the Adriatic with the mineral-rich regions of central Bosnia. The Ottoman Empire took control of the region in 1468 and they began immediately to expand this settlement. In 1557, the Ottoman emperor, Suleiman the Magnificent, commissioned the building of a large stone bridge over the Neretva River known as the Old Bridge (or *Stari most*). This single arch bridge, a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site, is considered an exemplary example of Balkan Islamic architecture. Sadly, in November of 1993, during the end of the Croat-Bosniak War (which was a separate conflict within the larger Bosnian War), the bridge was bombed, causing it to collapse into the Neretva River. After the war, the Old Bridge was reconstructed using UNESCO guidelines. It reopened in 2004. Today, this historical landmark is one of the most visited sites in all of Bosnia-Herzegovina and one of the primary reasons why we visited the city.



From the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, Sanja led us down Onescukova Street, a twisting cobbled-stone pathway that cuts through the historic quarter. She pointed out the restaurant we would be rendezvousing for lunch and then took us through the 'Turkish Bazaar' market area, a section lined with tourist shops and cafes, most were either empty or closed at that time of the year. We reached the observation point along the Neretva River – just below the Old Bridge – to get a good long view of the structure. As bridges go, it was not large, looking more like a hump-backed pedestrian walkway over the river. It measures only 13.1 feet (4m) wide and 98.5 feet (30m) long, and has a height of 78.9 feet (24m). But back during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, this was considered an architectural marvel. The bridge is anchored to the cliffs on each side of the river by limestone abutments that are linked to winged walls. Protecting the bridge on both sides are two fortified towers, the Tara Tower on its eastern side and the Halebija Tower on its western end. These towers were called *mostari*, or "bridge keepers", which gave rise to the city's name, Mostar.

It was drizzling lightly when we crossed the bridge, which made the limestone pavement *very* slippery. It didn't help that the structure is arched in the middle, making the downward climb a little treacherous even when slightly wet. From the bridge one can look up and down the Neretva River and see some of the city's historic mosques, their long, slim minarets piercing the skyline. Mostar has about half a dozen mosques dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, many of which sustained damage during the war and had to be restored. Just to the south of the bridge is the Cejvan-Cehaja Mosque, the oldest mosque in the city, constructed in the mid-1500s and originally covered in lead. Looking northward, I could see the Koski Mehmed Pasha Mosque from the 17<sup>th</sup> century; beyond it was the Karadoz Beg Mosque, a large, classical Ottoman structure from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Although the majority of the administrative buildings and residential homes one sees today were built from the time of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire to the present, Mostar still features many wonderful architectural designs from the Ottoman era.

We continued for a little while through the market area near the eastern bank of the Neretva River before returning to the other side of the Old Bridge. A group of us took a stroll down Jusovina Street to see the oldest stone bridge in the city – the Crooked Bridge (*Kriva Cuprija*) – that lies over the Radobolja Creek, a gushing narrow waterway that snakes its way through Mostar from Mikuljaca Hill in the suburban neighborhood of Ilica

before emptying into the Neretva River. This single arch stone bridge resembles a miniature version of the Old Bridge. Its construction during the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century suggests it may have been a test model for the larger bridge, but that is only an assumption. Unlike the Old Bridge, though, the footpath of the Crooked Bridge is paved with cobblestones. In 2000, heavy flooding in the area washed this bridge away and it had to be reconstructed. We began walking back towards our lunch rendezvous point, passing the Nezir-aga Mosque on our way. This mosque dates to the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and is located on top of a hill to the south of Radobolja Creek. In the early part of the 1900s the mosque was abandoned, and later demolished, but archeological excavations on the site in 1998 prompted its reconstruction.

By 12:30pm our group had assembled at the Restaurant Sadrvan on Onescukova Street for an included lunch. I sat with Tim, Craig and Anne. I do not recall what we ate, but I remember it was very tasty and capped with Turkish coffee and delicious pastries. After lunch, we returned to our bus and proceeded to our final destination, the city of Sarajevo. We left Mostar around 2:00pm, traveling northeast on Highway E73. As we followed the Neretva River, which was to our right, we entered a system of canyons offering wonderful views of the unique geological rock formations of the surrounding mountainsides. Further on we passed through the town of Jablanica, which played a critical role in the Battle of Neretva during WWII. A successful raid was carried out here by Yugoslavian partisans (led by Josep Tito) against the Axis powers. Sanja pointed out one of the bridges destroyed during the battle. This former railroad bridge is now part of a war memorial. The town is situated next to Lake Jablanica, an artificial lake formed after the construction of the Jablanica Dam in the mid-1950s. The dam's hydroelectric power plant provides electricity to the region.

At one point during the drive, not far from Sarajevo, we stopped at a Gazprom gasoline station for a much needed bathroom break. Gazprom, an energy giant, is the largest corporation in Russia (think Exxon or Mobil). Sanja shared with us a running joke concerning Gazprom service stations in the Balkans: if you use their bathroom facilities you can (figuratively) piss or shit on the Russians! That invoked quite a few chuckles. We reached the Sarajevo city limits just before 5:00pm but didn't arrive at our hotel, the Hotel President Sarajevo, until forty minutes later due to the insane rush hour traffic. It was already dark when we checked in. I was pleasantly surprised to discover how big my room was. In fact, almost all of my

lodging accommodations were pretty big, which is usually not the case when you travel solo on a guided tour, especially in Europe.

At 6:00pm I joined Boston Mary and Anne for a walk around the vicinity of the hotel. The Hotel President Sarajevo is conveniently situated in the historic quarter of the city, directly across the Miljacka River from the Emperor's Mosque, a stone mosque built in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. Because it was dark, and we were new to the area, we didn't venture too far, walking along *Ferhadija*, a pedestrian shopping street just a few blocks from the hotel. When we reached the Sacred Heart Cathedral, Anne and I decided to turn back. Boston Mary, though, continued on without us, wanting to log in her 10,000 steps for the day. Dinner was on our own that evening, but Sanja volunteered to take us to one of her favorite local eateries. By 7:00pm, twelve of us met with her in the lobby and we proceeded to a popular nearby restaurant. We had a great time; the food was plentiful and relatively inexpensive by American standards. On Sanja's recommendation, I ordered the Bosnian pot, a delicious traditional beef stew that was perfect for such a cold night. We made it back to the hotel by 8:30pm. I was going to write in my journal but quickly became distracted by the World Cup soccer match on TV. The USA played Wales to a tie. I ended up going to bed shortly after 10:00pm.

## Day Seven

I was wide-awake by 4:30am. The room felt so cold I donned an extra T-shirt and immediately performed my exercise/stretching routine just to warm up. After showering I finished writing the previous day's activities in my journal, intermittingly watching the BBC International News on TV. I headed downstairs for breakfast at 7:15am, sitting with Anne, Texas Mary and Debra. By 9:00am we gathered in the lobby for a 2.5-hour walking tour of the historic quarter of Sarajevo. Our guide was a young woman named Leyla, who instantly became my favorite local guide on this tour. In addition to her excellent English skills, she had the ability to cut right to the chase on every topic – explaining the history of the city, the sites we saw, and any

questions we had – in a concise manner that was easy to follow without the need to ramble on. But what made Leyla my favorite was her deadpan sense of humor; she reminded me of comedian Tig Notaro.

Before leaving the hotel grounds, Leyla gave us a brief history of Bosnia-Herzegovina, focusing more on Sarajevo. Since I've already touched upon the country's history in Day Six, I will basically go over what Leyla said concerning the city itself. Sarajevo is the capital and largest city of Bosnia-Herzegovina with a combined 550,000 people living within its larger metropolitan area (the city and the surrounding suburbs and towns). Situated in the very heart of the Balkans, Sarajevo lies along the Miljacka River inside the Sarajevo Valley of Bosnia. The city is surrounded by the Dinaric Alps, a mountain range in Southern Europe that separates the continental Balkan Peninsula from the Adriatic Sea.

The rise of Sarajevo began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the Ottomans converted the city into one of their Balkan strongholds. Centuries later, in the aftermath of the Ottomans defeat by a Russian led coalition during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, Europe's major powers restructured the map of the Balkans. The Ottomans lost almost all their holdings in Europe after the Treaty of Berlin in 1878 and Bosnia-Herzegovina came under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Austrian-Hungarian period in Sarajevo was actually a time of great improvement and innovation for the city, according to Leyla. Its new masters wanted to quickly bring Sarajevo up to the standards of the Victorian Age. European architects and engineers flocked to the city to create new buildings in a plethora of classical and new architectural styles. Sarajevo's institutions were also modernized along a Western model. Factories were built, leading to a great expansion of the city and its economy.

Despite the benefits and growth the city experienced under its new rulers, nothing could stem the rise of nationalistic tendencies in the Balkans. On June 28, 1914, a Bosnian Serb assassinated the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his wife as they drove through Sarajevo. This event would trigger the start of World War I as Austria-Hungary declared war on the Kingdom of Serbia with the rest of Europe eventually taking sides in the conflict. When this devastating war concluded, Bosnia-Herzegovina was incorporated into the newly established multi-cultural Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which lasted until 1941. Following the end of WWII, Sarajevo became the capital of the newly created Socialist

Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the six countries within the greater Socialist Federated Republic of Yugoslavia. In 1992, the country declared its independence from Yugoslavia, and the ensuing Bosnian War resulted in the city being surrounded by the Serbian forces of the Republika Srpska, which laid siege to Sarajevo for 1425 days, the longest siege of a city in modern warfare. In addition to the 8,300 combatants who died on both sides of this siege, more than 5,400 civilians in Sarajevo also perished. I will write more about the *Siege of Sarajevo* on Day Eight.

After the country's independence the city continued to be the political, financial, social and cultural center of the country, and is widely regarded in the region for its influence in media, entertainment, fashion and arts. Another thing Sarajevo is famous for is its religious diversity. It is one of the few European cities where you can find a mosque, a synagogue, a Catholic Church and an Orthodox church all within the same neighborhood. A fact made even more impressive considering the horrific religious and ethnic fighting that went on during the Bosnian War. Throughout its more modern history, Leyla said, Sarajevo has also been a highly renowned city. In 1885, for instance, it became the first European city to introduce full-time electric tramlines. As part of the former Yugoslavia, it hosted the 1984 Winter Olympics. And today, Sarajevo is home to annual international events and festivals in the fields of art, film and fashion, and is the fastest-growing city in the country.

We proceeded to walk to *Obala Kulina Bana*, the busy street running along the north side of the Miljacka River in the historic quarter. We stopped at a corner building housing the Museum of Sarajevo. It was just outside this building on *Zelenih Beretki* Street where Archduke Ferdinand and his wife Sofia were gunned down in 1914. Inside is a permanent museum showcasing in chronological order the period of Austro-Hungarian rule in Bosnia-Herzegovina, including a section detailing the assassination. From here we crossed the Latin Bridge, one of the many small pedestrian and vehicular bridges spanning the length of the Miljacka River within the city, and gathered in front of the Emperor's Mosque on the other side of the water. At this point, Leyla explained to us the events and timelines leading up to the Archduke's assassination. The gunman was a teenager named Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian Serb anarchist who was assisted in his attack by the Black Hand, a Serbian secret society with ties to the military of the former Kingdom of Serbia.

She then turned our attention to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Emperor's Mosque. Leyla told us an earlier wooden mosque was built on this very site in 1457, shortly after the Ottoman conquest of Bosnia. It was the first mosque in the city, dedicated to the Sultan Mehmed (the Conqueror) who ended the Byzantine Empire by capturing Constantinople. But the original wooden structure was totally destroyed by the end of the 1400s and this much larger mosque was constructed in its place in 1565, this time dedicated to the Sultan Sulieman (the Magnificent). The first settlements in Ottoman-controlled Sarajevo were established around this mosque, which was built in a classical Ottoman style. It is the largest single-subdome mosque in the country, according to Leyla. Near the Emperor's Mosque is the reconstructed Isa Begov Hamam, the oldest (and I believe the only) Turkish bath house still in use in Sarajevo today. The original hamam dated back to the 15th century and was destroyed and rebuilt several times. It was heavily damaged during the Bosnia War and only recently reconstructed and is now part of a small 4-star hotel that offers public bath facilities to the public for a fee. Several of the women in our group booked a spa treatment there for the following day.

We walked west long the river towards the historic Seher-Cehaja Bridge, a beautiful, narrow stone structure. The Ottomans constructed 13 bridges over the Miljacka River during their reign and this one is considered one of the most impressive. On the opposite side of the river from this bridge stands the magnificent City Hall building (which also houses the National Library). Before crossing the bridge, Leyla pointed to a structure just down the street from us dubbed the House of Spite, a two-story dwelling now serving as a popular restaurant. She told us that in 1892, Austro-Hungarian city officials wanted to build the City Hall building to showcase the power and strength of their empire. The building would also become an integral part of the city's new modern tram system. They went about purchasing the properties around where the City Hall would be built, but soon ran into a snag. An elderly Bosnian homeowner named Benderija refused to sell his property, despite being offered much more money than it was worth. Eventually, this steadfast Bosnian agreed to sell his home under two conditions. He asked for a sack of gold ducats, which, according to Leyla, was an extravagant sum in those days. His second request was that his home be transferred, brick by brick, to a spot across the river from the future City Hall building. Supposedly, the old man would sit near the bridge everyday, smoking cigarettes and watching the workmen as they carefully took apart his home and then rebuilt it on the other side of the river. When it was completed, his home earned the

nickname the House of Spite. Regardless of its mean moniker, though, this house has come to symbolize (I think in a good way) the stubbornness of Bosnian pride.

From here we crossed the Seher-Cehaja Bridge and stopped momentarily in front of the City Hall Building. Known as *Vijecnica*, this beautiful edifice was constructed in the late 1800s in a pseudo-Moorish architecture style, blending concepts of Islamic art more commonly found in Spain and North Africa. The building was heavily damaged during the Bosnian War and underwent years of restorations before reopening in 2014. It is now a designated national monument and the seat of Sarajevo's mayor and city council, in addition to housing the country's National Library.

From the City Hall building we proceeded into the historic quarter, or the Old Town, along Bravadziluk Street. Leyla pointed out the row of restaurants along this pedestrian street, telling us this was a good place to come and sample a wide array of Bosnian cuisine, such as: *cevapi*, small, oblong-shaped kebabs of lamb or beef served in a *somun* (Bosnian pita bread) with raw onions; *burek*, a pastry filled with cheese, meat or spinach introduced by the Ottomans; *begova corba*, another Ottoman favorite consisting of a thick, creamy stew of slow-cooked chicken and vegetables often served with a side of sour cream; *klepe*, the traditional Bosnian dumpling made of cheese or meat that comes with yogurt or garlic sauce. These are just a few of the dishes she mentioned. I'll stop here because my stomach is already growling.

We continued walking through a market area called the *Bascarsija*, the oldest Turkish bazaar in Sarajevo. Because the tourist season was over, this normally busy marketplace was relatively empty. One section featured shops specializing in copper and tin crafts, and there were plenty of jewelry stores, coffee shops (where one can also indulge in a shisha, or hookah, pipe) and souvenir stores to choose from. In the center of the Bascarsija Square is a famous landmark known as the *Sebilg* fountain built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and resembling an ornate wooden kiosk. According to Lelya, the Bascarsija bazaar has been around since the 1400s, and is considered the historical and cultural center of the city.

A few blocks from the square we stopped to take a group photo in front of a famous rug store located within a former caravanserai (or funduq). A caravanserai was a well-guarded inn situated along major trade routes in

Southeastern Europe, North Africa and Asia that came into existence during the Islamic Period (after the 7th century AD). The typical caravanserai consisted of an open square surrounded by buildings that formed a defensive wall. They were like the motels of their day, providing traveling merchants a safe place to rest as they went from city to city plying their trade. Our group photo in front of the rug shop was the first of what I called our 'goofy photo ops'. Sanja enjoyed taking the group's picture at different locations, and for at least one of the photos she insisted we pose in a funny way, making weird faces or hand gestures. As a result, I have a collection of amusing group photos taken throughout the trip...um, most are *too* embarrassing to post.

From here we visited the Gazi Husrev-beg Mosque along *Saraci Street*. Built in 1530, this is the largest *historical* mosque in all of Bosnia-Herzegovina and is considered to be one of the most representative examples of Ottoman architecture in the Balkans. It is the main congregational mosque of Bosnian Muslims and also serves as one of the biggest tourism draws in the Old Town. The central part of the structure is framed by high walls and topped by a large dome, while lower extensions expand the interior outward. Adjacent to the main structure is a simple yet towering minaret. The courtyard in front of the mosque (known as a *sahn*) has a beautiful covered fountain. The complex was constructed under the rule of Gazi Husrev-beg, who served as governor (or *sanjak-bey*) of the Ottoman administered Sanjak of Bosnia. He is credited with the early development of the city and his mausoleum is situated just on the eastern side of the mosque. In the 1990s, during the Siege of Sarajevo, the city's cultural centers were targeted by Serbian artillery and the mosque was heavily damaged. Following the Bosnian War it was reconstructed largely from funds donated by Saudi Arabia. The inside of the mosque, which we visited, had to be completely redesigned, so I'm not certain if the interior looked exactly like the original.

Next to the mosque is a 30-meter high Clock Tower, also built by Gazi Husrev-beg, which shows lunar time, in which the gilded hands of the tower's four clocks indicate 12 o'clock at the moment of sunset, the time of the Muslim Maghrib prayer. A caretaker has to reset the clocks' time manually every week to accommodate this. The tower was destroyed twice throughout its history and was rebuilt. It is now a national monument. We continued walking west along Saraci Street and came upon an inlaid sidewalk marker called "Sarajevo Meeting of Cultures" that delineates the city, if you will, between old and new. East of this marker is primarily the



Old Town built by the Ottomans; to the west lies mostly the ‘newer’ Sarajevo that has emerged since the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As we continued along Saraci Street it soon merged into a widened pedestrian walkway called Ferhadija Street. The European styles and neat formation of the buildings lining this section of the city contrasted sharply with the areas of the Old Town we had just come from.

We continued west along Ferhadija Street, passing the Ferhat Pasha Mosque (also called the Ferhadija Mosque), a 16<sup>th</sup> century structure built by a descendent of one of Bosnia’s oldest medieval noble families, Ferhad-beg Vukovic. Although much smaller in size than the Gazi Husrev-beg Mosque, this is another of the city’s important historical mosques, containing a small cemetery in front filled with centuries-old gravestones. Two blocks further we reached the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral, the largest cathedral in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The church was constructed in the late 1880s in a neo-Gothic style with two Romanesque bell towers topped by crosses. Above its portal is an octagonal rosette with a statue of the Sacred Heart. Inside is a beautiful marble altar and plenty of murals and stain glass windows. A statue of Pope John Paul II adorns the front of the church in honor of his visit shortly after the Bosnian War ended. The cathedral is the center of Catholic worship in the city and also serves as the seat of the Archbishop of Vrhbosna, an archdiocese with a territorial remit that includes the eastern parts of the country and all of North Macedonia.

Leyla pointed out what appeared to be a splotch of red paint on the sidewalk in front of the cathedral. She told us this was a ‘Sarajevo Rose’ and that there were roughly 200 of these throughout the city. During the Siege of Sarajevo, mortar rounds were routinely fired into the city, and the exploding shells that struck concrete created a unique fragmentation pattern that resembled a floral arrangement, hence the nickname. The red paint is symbolic of blood spilt since each ‘Sarajevo Rose’ marks the spot where at least three people died as a result of an exploding shell.

One block further down we reached a public square called *Trg Oslodenja-Alija Izetbegovic*. This park has an interesting statue (donated by Italy in 1997) called the Monument to the Multiethnic Human, which features the sculpture of a naked man inside of a metal half sphere surrounded by doves, symbolizing the notion that the future will be built by multiethnic peoples; a nod to the ethnic and religious tolerance of this great city. The park also features a gigantic chessboard that draws daily groups of

mostly older male chess players. On the square's eastern side stands the Cathedral of the Nativity of the Theotokos (1874), the biggest Serbian Orthodox church in Sarajevo and one of the largest in all of the Balkans. It is dedicated to the Nativity of the Virgin Mary. This impressive structure was built as a three-section basilica in a cross-shaped pattern with five separate domes. Also along the park's eastern side is the University of Sarajevo School of Economics and Business, which dates back to Socialist Yugoslavia.

Our walking tour of Sarajevo ended at the park. We thanked Leyla for her service but we did not say 'goodbye' yet because she would be our guide the following morning, as well. Our group had the rest of the day free to explore the city on our own. Before we split it up, though, Sanja invited us to a local bakery on the northern end of the square so we could try the tasty burek pastries of Sarajevo. The bakery was mobbed; a continuous stream of hungry locals kept lining up at the counter to buy the delicious delicacy, which is sold by weight. We were able to secure two tables in the front of the establishment while Sanja purchased five different varieties of the pastry for us to sample. Most people have a love-hate relationship with the burek. On the one hand, these flaky pastries, which aren't very big in size, are loaded with grease, fat and calories, but on the other hand they are *extremely* delicious. Um, we erred on the side of deliciousness. Each of the separate trays of burek Sanja placed on our table came filled with meat, cheese or spinach, or a combination thereof. I was so full afterwards I didn't need to have lunch that day.

After devouring five trays of burek the group broke up and went about exploring the city. I teamed up with Anne, Boston Mary, Ron and his wife, Ann. We began by walking through an enclosed local food mart called Saray Market just opposite the bakery. I am a big fan of public markets, local grocery stores and bazaars because they reveal many aspects of a society. What do the locals eat, what is the casual dress ware, how do they bargain or interact with one another? If one is observant, one can learn a lot about a city or town simply by going to the places where the common people shop. This particular market was divided into stalls selling mostly meats, dairy products and prepared foods.

We headed back to the Old Town section to visit the Jewish Museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina on *Mula Mustafe Baseskije* Street. Jews began arriving in Sarajevo in the 1540s. These were mostly Sephardic Jews who had been

expelled from Spain and Portugal at the end of the 1400s. They consisted of doctors, pharmacists, merchants and artisans who would later establish a Jewish quarter known as *El Cortijo* (the Courtyard) with permission from the local Ottoman pasha. In 1581 they built the first synagogue in Sarajevo, which was destroyed twice over the ensuing centuries and had to be rebuilt. The Jewish community continued to grow, especially during the 17<sup>th</sup> century when Ashkenazi Jews from Northern Europe began settling in Sarajevo, as well. In 1966, the Old Synagogue was renovated and reopened as a museum, showcasing the history of Jews in Bosnia-Herzegovina and their contribution to the arts and sciences. We spent 30 minutes walking through the museum's ground floor and two upper galleries, featuring synagogal objects, photographs, maps and other exhibits that explain the history of the Jewish community of Sarajevo and their impact on the city. Interesting fact, at one point every doctor in Sarajevo was Jewish. A book hanging from the ceiling in the upper gallery lists the names of the Jewish people from Bosnia-Herzegovina who died during the Holocaust.

From the museum we visited the indoor bazaar known as the Gazi Husrev-begov Bezistan. A *bezistan* was a covered market hall found in the cities of the Ottoman Empire, usually in the center of the commercial district. It was the place where important and precious items like jewelry and gold were stored and sold. The rectangular-shaped Gazi Husrev-begov Bezistan was built in the mid-1500s and still functions as a sort of high-end mall today. At least, judging from the items and prices. Our little group split up here. Ron, Ann and Boston Mary continued shopping while Anne and I returned to the hotel.

Back in my room I made a cup of instant coffee and spent the next hour writing the day's events in my journal notebook. At 2:30pm I met Anne and Boston Mary in the lobby. We had earlier agreed to get together and do a long walk through Sarajevo (for both sightseeing and exercise purposes). We ended up on Ferhadija Street again, heading west out of the Old Town and into the newer sections of Sarajevo. We reached Marshall Tito Street, a major commercial avenue within the city, and walked several blocks to Veliki Park, a large hilly public green space – adjacent to the smaller Mali Park – located directly in front of the BBI Shopping Mall. During the time of the Ottomans, this park was actually a cemetery, and you can still see old, worn gravestones here and there (which, I have to admit, seemed a little creepy). The Austro-Hungarians turned the cemetery into a public park area with plenty of walking trails. At the entrance of Veliki Park is a sad

memorial called the Children of Sarajevo Monument that honors the children who died as a result of sniper fire during the Siege of Sarajevo. Engraved are the names of all the children killed. A sobering moment for the first time visitor. We walked a section of the park before heading back to the Old Town, stopping to photograph the compact Eternal Flame Memorial at the intersection of Marshall Tito and Ferhadija Streets. This monument commemorates the military personnel and civilians who died during World War II.

We walked the entire length of Ferhadija Street eastward and into the Old Town area back to Bascarsija Square where we turned north and trekked uphill for several blocks. We passed the Martyrs' Memorial Cemetery Kovaci located along the hillside. This cemetery is the main resting place for Bosnian soldiers killed during the Bosnian War (1992 – 1995). Rows upon rows of white grave markers serve as a reminder of the terrible price communities' pay in wartime. Also located within the cemetery is the tomb of Alija Izetbegovic who served as Bosnia-Herzegovina's president from 1992 to 1996. Sunset was fast approaching at this point and we decided to return to the hotel, arriving around 5:00pm.

Back in my room I freshened up for dinner, watching a portion of the World Cup match-up between Mexico and Poland. At 6:30pm the entire group met in the lobby where Sanja escorted us to a local restaurant less than ten minutes from the hotel called Djulagin Dvor. This was an included dinner. We were served a vegetable cream soup for starters. The main entrée was *cevapi*. This traditional Bosnian fare is actually a variant of the Turkish kebab introduced by the Ottomans in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It consists of minced meat (which can include beef, pork or lamb) shaped into small patties that are grilled and served inside a large flatbread or pita. The dish comes with freshly diced onions and a side of sour cream, *kajmak* (milk cream), *ajvar* (relish) and salt. It was very tasty, like eating an improvised hamburger. For dessert we were served cherry brandy and a baked apple topped with whipped cream.

At the start of dinner, Sanja had received a text message from a friend informing her she was now a godmother, and to celebrate the occasion she ordered a round of hard liquor for the group. During the meal four street entertainers – a man with an accordion accompanied by a three-member dance troupe dressed in traditional Bosnian costumes – entered the restaurant and performed for us. Sanja and a few of the others got up and

danced along with them. We tipped the entertainers by placing paper money within the folds of the accordion. By 9:00pm we were back at the hotel. I was able to watch the second half of the World Cup match between France and Australia before nodding off.

## **Day Eight**

I awoke shortly before 4:00am and was unable to go back to sleep, so I went through my exercise-stretching routine and then sat down with a cup of instant coffee to write in my journal. Afterwards, I shaved, showered and dressed. By 7:15am I was downstairs for breakfast. At 9:00am we all gathered in the lobby to begin our daily sightseeing. This morning's outings were designed to give us a more in depth look at the Siege of Sarajevo, which lasted almost four years (from April 5, 1992 to February 29, 1996). One cannot visit Sarajevo nowadays without being exposed to the country's recent history. It would be akin to someone touring Europe in the 1960s and not hearing about World War II. The Yugoslav Wars occurred within the past thirty years. The pain, anger and trauma these conflicts unleashed are still prevalent in the minds of the peoples of the Balkans. And while the younger generation – those born after the wars – seem to want to move on, it is not that easy for their parents or grandparents who had to live through the death and devastation. Today's excursions focused on the hardships the city endured during the siege, but as the day unfolded I would learn even more about the Bosnian War, in general, and the overall brutality that accompanied this conflict. And I must admit, it was all very sobering.

We began our morning activities by walking several blocks to the Museum of Literature and Theatre Arts of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which was established in 1961. The museum is situated inside an old merchant house from the 1880s and contains a collection of literature and theater materials (books, manuscripts, correspondence, photographs, pamphlets, magazines and so forth). Our purpose here wasn't to visit the actual museum, though. We were escorted to a small conference room where a local Bosnian Serb writer named Vuk Bacanovic gave us a short lecture on the Siege of Sarajevo. Vuk lived in the city during the siege. He was only nine-years old

when it started and he shared some very personal experiences with us so we could understand how bad the situation was back then.

Vuk told us he was raised Orthodox Christian, but there were also Jewish and Catholic intermarriages within his family. Mixed families were common in the former Yugoslavia since the country was fully integrated under the rule of Josip Broz Tito. And this was especially true in Sarajevo, which was known for its long history of cultural and religious diversity. The person who had the most impact on him growing up was his grandmother, whom he described as 'his rock'. She was full of surprises, he said. For example, she would take him to church on a weekly basis despite being an 'atheist' – (under communism, religion was routinely criticized, discouraged or outwardly persecuted). Vuk described a city that was harmonious and peaceful. But things began to change in the aftermath of Tito's death in 1980. By the end of that decade the economies of the republics within Yugoslavia began to falter, and political discord erupted between the various ethnic and religious groups. In 1991, Slovenia and Croatia became the first to declare their independence from Yugoslavia. At the time, the Soviet Union was disintegrating and many former Soviet-bloc nations were also in the process of transitioning away from communism.

In 1992, the Bosnian Parliament announced a referendum to declare its independence from Yugoslavia. The election was boycotted by many Bosnian Serbs whose political representatives had already aligned themselves with Serbia and Montenegro, and wanted to form a separate government. After the referendum, Bosnia-Herzegovina officially declared itself an independent country and was immediately recognized by the European Community and the United States. The country quickly divided itself politically between its three main religious groups: Catholic, Serbian Orthodox and Muslim. Vuk said this was the first time in his life (at the age of nine) when he became consciously aware of his 'ethnicity'.

At the very beginning of the country's independence most people assumed the ethnic and religious discord would eventually be sorted out by political compromise. Using a slide projector Vuk showed us graphs of the ethnic make up of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the rest of the former Yugoslavia. But soon after the referendum, the Bosnian Serb assembly in Banja Luka (a city in the northern part of the country that served as the de facto capital of the country's Serbian population) announced that they were breaking governmental ties with the rest of Bosnia-Herzegovina and creating

their own country called the Republika Srpska, which aimed to control huge swaths of Bosnia-Herzegovina that were predominately Serbian, even if that majority in certain areas was slim or questionable. This led to open hostilities and the outbreak of the Bosnian War, which lasted until 1995.

With the collapse of the central government of Yugoslavia, chaos soon broke out within Bosnia-Herzegovina. According to Vuk, Bosnian Serb criminals were released from prison and recruited into local militias for the purpose of attacking Muslims and ushering in a period of lawlessness across the newly independent country. Ethnic cleansing became the norm during the Bosnian War as Bosnian Serb soldiers, police and militia members routinely attacked Muslims and Croats, looting and burning their homes, raping and killing indiscriminately. To a lesser extent, the other side also committed atrocities in retaliation. By the end of this bloody conflict almost half of the total population of Bosnia-Herzegovina had been displaced.

At the onset of the hostilities in 1992, most of the Serbian population of Sarajevo had vacated the city. Vuk told us that his grandmother refused to leave, though. He said this was probably a Slavic thing of not abandoning your home. She was also a proud citizen of Bosnia-Herzegovina and did not want to see the country torn apart. He showed us a photograph of the apartment building where he lived on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor with his extended family. But soon the situation within the city became dire, as the city was besieged initially by the Yugoslav People's Army and then by the Army of the Republika Srpska. Serbian forces encircled Sarajevo from the surrounding mountains and hillsides and continuously shelled the city. Snipers would pick off innocent civilians. And while the Bosnian government's defense forces (the ARBiH) in Sarajevo numbered around 70,000 – compared to the 13,000 Serbian forces surrounding them – they were poorly equipped to fight back and end the siege, which lasted for 1425 days.

As the violence ratcheted up, Vuk and his family began to be ostracized by the city's Muslim and Croat population. Even though they had elected to stay in the city and show their support for the cause, most people (including friends) became suspicious of them and outwardly antagonistic because they were Serbian Orthodox. His grandmother told him he should not be ashamed of who he was, but for a pre-adolescent boy who suddenly found himself isolated with no friends – whose city was being constantly attacked by Serbian forces – it became a very difficult time for him emotionally. A childhood trauma he still carries with him till this day. Years later, following

his graduation from college, Vuk would end up living in Belgrade, Serbia. He became very disillusioned with his own faith, he said, when the Serbian Orthodox Church began trying to justify the reported cases of rape and genocide committed against Muslims by Serbian forces. He had to travel out of the region in order to reconcile his differences and deal with his feelings and memories concerning the siege. Vuk admitted to us it was difficult to simply forget what happened back then, but he did say he has moved on and thinks the vast majority of people like himself who lived through the ordeal have done so, too. When asked about the situation in the Ukraine during our Q&A follow-up, he said he saw many parallels between Russia's invasion of the Ukraine and what his country went through, and felt much empathy for the Ukrainians.

When the session ended, we thanked Vuk for his time and for sharing his personal experiences with us. We then walked back to the hotel where Leyla, our guide from yesterday, was already waiting to continue with the morning's sightseeing activities. We quickly boarded our tour bus and began heading west towards the vicinity of the Sarajevo International Airport. We saw many historical sites and important buildings along the way. On *Zelenih Beretki* Street we passed the archeological ruins of Taslihan, one of three former caravanserais from the Ottoman period that is situated in the garden area of the adjacent Hotel Europe. A little further down we came across the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina, an art museum from the 1940s with a catalogue of over 6,000 pieces of artwork. Leyla told us the museum remained open during the entire siege and even conducted special exhibitions. Several blocks further west we passed the Sarajevo National Theater, founded in 1921 and home to the city's opera and ballet companies. The large square in front of the theater was renamed in honor of the late American author and activist Susan Sontag, who staged a production of Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* at the theater in 1993 while the siege was in progress. She hoped the event would lead to more international involvement to help end the Bosnian War. At the time, the Washington Post dubbed Sontag's production "Waiting for Clinton".

On Marshall Tito Street we drove by Veliki Park and its sad war memorial for the children of Sarajevo killed during the siege (the same memorial that Anne, Boston Mary and myself had visited the previous afternoon). The next block over was a group of governmental buildings including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Presidency building and the Constitutional Court of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Next to this complex was the



Ali Pasha Mosque, another 16<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman mosque with courtyard and cemetery. As we continued west now on *Zmaja od Bosne* Street, just beyond the U.S. Embassy, we passed a row of high-rise apartment buildings on our left hand side that were built during the sixties and seventies known collectively throughout the Bosnian War as *Sniper Alley*. Serbian snipers had taken up positions in these towering buildings and the surrounding mountains and had a commanding view of the city. During the siege the residents of Sarajevo still had to go about their daily lives and Serbian snipers routinely targeted them. More than 1,250 people, including children, were either killed or wounded by sniper fire during the four-year siege. Leyla told us signs were put up all over Sarajevo admonishing the residents to watch out for sniper fire. Running across open streets or sidewalks became a common thing in certain parts of the city.

By 10:30am we had reached the Sarajevo International Airport located on the western side of the city. We drove for several minutes through a small suburban neighborhood called Butmir, which is part of the Ilidza municipality on the outskirts of the city just to the west of the airport. Our purpose for coming here was to visit the Sarajevo Tunnel Museum located on a quiet street inside a two-story family home in this unassuming residential neighborhood. The home is situated next to the airport runway. In 1993, the Bosnian Army secretly constructed a tunnel from this house that stretched underneath the runway and into a neighborhood inside the city, providing an important lifeline to the beleaguered residents of Sarajevo. When we reached the museum, the first thing I noticed were the pockmarks caused by artillery shells and the various bullet holes along the façade of the house that have remained undisturbed since the war ended. There was also a "Sarajevo rose" in front of the building, signifying that at least three people had died on this spot as a result of artillery fire. Inside the house-museum complex, Leyla led us to a media room where we saw a short film explaining why and how the tunnel was constructed, and the overall impact it had on the lives of the people trapped inside Sarajevo.

An illustrated map in the museum showed exactly how precarious the situation was for the city back in 1992. The Serbian armies of the JNA (the former Yugoslavia) and later the Republika Srpska had managed to encircle most of Sarajevo, setting themselves up in the hillsides and mountains ringing the city, and even in some of the neighborhoods along the edges of the city limits. The only part the Serbs didn't control, besides the interior of Sarajevo, was a narrow strip just west of the airport leading into the

mountains beyond it, which was held by Bosnian forces. A complete blockade of the city was in place, severely limiting access in and out of Sarajevo. Supplies quickly ran out, and with no direct way into the city the residents and Bosnian army inside Sarajevo seemed trapped and doomed to constant barrages of artillery and sniper fire.

In the summer of 1992, world condemnation of the Serbian forces' use of indiscriminate shelling and sniper fire against civilians in Sarajevo allowed for the Sarajevo International Airport to come under the protection of UNPROFOR (the United Nations Protection Force) a UN peacekeeping force established in certain parts of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina during the Yugoslav Wars. Because the airport was now considered a U.N. protected zone, humanitarian aid could be airlifted into the city, but a strict international arms embargo severely curtailed the delivery of weapons and ammunition to the Bosnian forces within the city itself. To make matters worse, Serbian forces had effectively sealed off the city and continued to launch attacks from the surrounding mountains. So, in 1993, the Bosnian military came up with a very clever plan codenamed 'Objekt BD'. They found a private home adjacent to the airport's runway in the Butmir neighborhood (which they controlled) just outside the Serbian siege lines, and decided to build a tunnel from the basement of this house that would go underneath the airport runway and into the garage of an apartment building in a neighborhood called Dobrinja, which was located just inside the siege lines on the eastern side of the airport. It was initially nicknamed the Tunnel D-B (for the linked neighborhoods of Dobrinja and Butmir), but is now more famously referred to as the Tunnel of Hope (or the *Tunel Spaza*; Tunnel of Salvation).

Construction of the tunnel began clandestinely on March 1, 1993. Remarkably, it was completed just four months later and put to use immediately. The tunnel was simultaneously dug on both ends, eventually meeting in the middle. Three eight-hour shifts worked non-stop daily, digging with only picks and shovels. The workers were paid in cigarettes, one pack per day, which could be used to barter for other items. Hundreds of feet of trenches guarded by Bosnian soldiers protected the entrances on each side. The actual tunnel running underneath the airport was 340 meters (1,115 feet) long and up to five meters (16 feet) deep. Both iron and wooden reinforcements were used to shore up the tunnel, and less than a year after it was constructed a small railway track was added to push carts laden with supplies through it. The tunnel was pretty confining, to say the least, and

varied in height depending on the section. One of the biggest problems affecting the tunnel was underground water that would sometimes rise up to waist level and slow everything to a crawl. Eventually, the submerged passageway was equipped with pumps to help evacuate the rising water levels. An oil pipeline and an electrical system were also installed. If the forces of the Republika Srpska suspected a tunnel into the city, they surely hadn't figured out its location, for they would have bombed it repeatedly.

And what did the tunnel accomplish in terms of the siege? It allowed for a life-saving link between two Bosnian held territories that had been cut off by the army of the Republika Srpska. At first, the biggest beneficiary was the Bosnian Army, which was able to get weapons, ammunitions and other military supplies into the city (by-passing the international arms embargo). Eventually, the tunnel became a means for communications in and out of the city, and allowed for more humanitarian aid to filter in, along with oil to keep the city going. The tunnel also afforded the trapped residents of Sarajevo a means in which to evacuate if they chose to do so. On any given day, 3,000 to 4,000 soldiers and residents could enter or leave the city unnoticed. But according to Leyla, as the siege progressed, few residents actually took advantage of the tunnel to leave the city, using it instead to get food and water and to visit family living outside the siege areas. By the end of the war it is estimated that approximately 30 tons of goods and supplies went through the tunnel on a daily basis. This truly was a Tunnel of Hope for Sarajevo, for it helped the residents of the city to outlast the siege.

After the film presentation we walked through a 75-foot section of the tunnel (underneath the property) that has been preserved as part of the museum, the rest has been closed off for safety reasons. One area of the museum contained an exhibition room where undetonated rocket shells hang from the ceiling. By 11:45am we were on the bus heading back to the hotel. During the bus ride, Leyla spoke about the Bosnian War's aftermath on Bosnia-Herzegovina. While it has been difficult to ascertain just how many people were killed and injured (each side gave contradicting accounts) the numbers probably reach several hundred thousand. And in addition to the casualties caused by fighting the Serbian forces, there was also an ongoing limited war being waged between Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks (Muslims) for territorial control of their areas. Two million people were displaced during the war, and many have left the country altogether after the conflict ended due to the fragile economy and the bizarre two-government system put in place under the Dayton Agreement (the peace accord signed in

December of 1995 in Dayton, Ohio that ended the war). Today, she said the average Bosnian only earns the equivalent of 550 to 1500 euros a month, and many well-educated Bosnians have migrated to other countries for a better life, creating a 'brain drain' within the country that has hampered its growth and progress. Leyla also mentioned that upcoming legislation and future referendums might potentially lead to an additional government entity. If you think a country run by two separate governments is a bad idea, Leyla posited, how about one run by *three*? Whoa.

We reached our hotel by 12:15pm. Our group said 'goodbye' to Leyla, thanking her for a job well done. The rest of the day was free for us to explore Sarajevo on our own. Sanja told us to rendezvous in the hotel lobby for dinner at 6:30pm. That evening we would be eating a home-hosted meal inside one of the apartment buildings within the infamous 'sniper alley' row just off Mese Selimovica Boulevard. I was pretty excited by the prospect of visiting a Soviet-era apartment complex. I had seen so many in my travels throughout Eastern Europe but had never actually visited one, so this would be a first.

At 12:30pm I joined Tim and Craig in the lobby. Earlier, we had agreed to visit a photo gallery that Sanja recommended if we wanted to know more about the horrors of the Bosnian War. The exhibit is inside a place called the *Galerija 11/07/1995*, or simply The Gallery, located next to the Sacred Heart Cathedral. Prior to our visit we stopped to have a lunch of *doner* sandwiches at a corner restaurant along Saraci Street that Tim had spotted the day before. For dessert we purchased some baklava pastries at a nearby bakery.

We reached the *Galerija 11/07/1995* by 1:15pm. It is located on the top floor of an office building on the eastern side of the Sacred Heart Cathedral. This modern gallery, utilizing documentary multi-media content and technology, focuses on one of the greatest tragedies of the Bosnian War, the Srebrenica Massacre that occurred during July of 1995. Srebrenica is a town in the easternmost part of Bosnia-Herzegovina that lies within the territory of the Republika Srpska. During the Bosnian War, this small mountain town, known for its salt mining, was populated by a majority of Bosnian Muslims (or Bosniaks), and formed a Muslim enclave within the Republika Srpska that the Serbian forces wanted to eliminate. In April of 1993, the United Nations declared several of these isolated Bosniak towns within the Republika Srpska as U.N. safe zones, and sent U.N. peacekeeping troops to keep the local populations safe from further Serbian attacks. A small unit of

lightly armed Dutch troops was sent to Srebrenica, but they were not given permission to use force against the Serbs, which tragically led to the town being captured in July 1995 by the Army of the Republika Srpska under General Ratko Mladic together with remnants of various Serbian militias. When the town fell, General Mladic ordered that all Muslim men of fighting age (above the age of 12) be separated from the rest of the population. The women and younger children, and the elderly above 65, were forcibly bused to Tuzla, the third largest city in the country. A sinister fate, though, awaited the Muslim men and boys left behind. In a systematically organized series of summary executions, more than 8,300 Bosniaks were killed in what is considered the only act of genocide committed in Europe since the end of WWII. The stated purpose of the *Galerija 11/07/1995* is to preserve the memory of the Srebrenica massacre and to call attention to the horrors of genocide *wherever* it is committed. We spent an hour and a half walking through the exhibits, learning about the massacre. *It was an emotional 90 minutes.* If you've ever visited a Holocaust Museum you'll know what I mean.

We paid extra for the audio tour, a listening device that allows one to hear commentary as you walk through the gallery. The first exhibition room is lined, wall-to-wall, with the photographs of the victims from the massacre. Most of the pictures were taken during happier times: a graduation photo, a wedding picture, and so forth. As you walk through the exhibitions you learn how the events leading to the genocide unfolded. The last exhibition is the saddest. Here we saw photographs of the forced separation and evacuation of the town of Srebrenica and the aftermath of the killings, with dead bodies in the fields and thousands unearthed. One section of the gallery shows photographs of the forensic teams operating in the town trying to document the genocide. Visitors can watch several continuously running documentaries on different aspects of the massacre. All of it was tough to watch, though.

During my research on this event, I discovered some very disturbing things concerning the Yugoslav Wars. It was known from the outset that unspeakable atrocities like rape and ethnic cleansing were occurring in the former Yugoslavia as a result of its disintegration, yet NATO and the United Nations were slow to act in preventing an escalation of the violence. I actually came across articles suggesting that some of Europe's wealthiest countries may have turned their backs on the Bosniaks' (Muslims) fate because they didn't really want an Islamic country within the primarily

Christian boundaries of the continent. This may have been one of the reasons why NATO waited so long to carry out military intervention against the Serbians. And while NATO may have argued it didn't want to escalate the violence or prolong the wars, it is hard to ignore the fact that once NATO *became* involved, the participants of these wars soon sat down to negotiate peace.

By 3:30pm we had seen enough of the gallery. It was, admittedly, a depressing visit, but at the same time an enlightening one. Currently there are several hot spots around the globe where the United Nations is closely monitoring the potential for genocidal acts, like in Western Africa or in Myanmar. Hopefully, memorials like the *Galerija 11/07/1995* (or the Holocaust museums worldwide) will remind humankind of the type of horror we're capable of unleashing on one another if responsible governments turn a blind eye.

On the way back to the hotel we stopped at a local grocery store to pick up a gift for the host families who would be providing us with dinner that evening. Sanja had suggested we buy either a box of chocolates or a package of ground coffee. I asked the store clerk what was the most popular brand of coffee in Sarajevo and then purchased the brand he recommended. Back in my room I freshened up and sat down to write the day's activities in my journal notebook, intermittently watching the Germany-Japan World Cup Soccer match on TV. At 6:30pm our group gathered in the lobby. Since there were two host families, Sanja divided us into two separate groups for dinner. In my group were Anne, Boston Mary, Texas Mary, Ron and his wife, Ann. We boarded our tour bus for the 20-minute drive, getting off in the parking lot of a sprawling apartment complex off Mese Selimovica Boulevard, on a back street just behind a branch of ASA Banka, a domestic commercial bank. Numerous apartment towers were lined up in a row, each more than a dozen stories tall. Some of the buildings still had visible scars from the siege like bullet hole markings.

When we exited the bus a member of each of the two families was there to greet us and escort us to their apartments. An attractive twenty-something year old woman named Anila met my dinner group. She spoke excellent English and after a brief introduction on the street she led us into the lobby of one of the apartment buildings. Anila was a schoolteacher who lived with her widowed mom, Amila, in a small, one bedroom unit on the 13<sup>th</sup> floor. As we waited for the elevator I took in my surroundings. The lobby floor and

walls were covered with pretty pink tiles. I took a photo of the cluster box (the mailboxes) in the vestibule. Judging from the amount of mailboxes, I calculated that at least 62 families lived in this building. When the elevator arrived I became a little anxious. It was rather small and I feared it might trigger a bout of claustrophobia. And knowing this building tower was constructed more than fifty years ago under communist rule didn't ease my anxiety one bit. Luckily, only four adults can ride the elevator at a time, according to Anila, so we had to make two trips. The elevator was surprisingly fast, whisking us up to the 13<sup>th</sup> floor in no time. On Anila's floor there were only four apartment units and her mom, Amila, was already waiting for us at their door. Amila had blonde hair and looked to be in her early fifties. Her English skills were also quite good, and she had an amicable, cheery disposition that was instantly infectious; I mean, we hugged like we were long lost family members.

The apartment was not very large, but it was comfortable. As we entered there was a narrow kitchen to one side and a small hallway leading to the bedroom and bathroom. We spent most of our time in the living room/dining room area where Amila and her daughter had set up chairs around a large table that was covered with the various dishes they had prepared for us. Our group handed over the 'thank you' gifts and took our seats at the table. We went around the room officially introducing ourselves, telling them which state we lived in. Turns out Amila had relatives living in the U.S., including some cousins in Florida. We all ate dinner together, Amila and her daughter helping to serve food or bring cold drinks to the table. I did not write down a description of the meal, so I cannot recall everything we ate, but it was a traditional meal for the region, which included a vegetable soup, rice, potatoes, a radish salad, and two types of dolma (stuffed vegetables); one was a beef-stuffed onion dish and the other, I believe, may have been grape leaves stuffed with minced meat and walnuts. For dessert, we had Amila's popular homemade baklava. The entire meal was very satisfying.

During dinner Amila told us about her life. Besides her daughter, she had an older son who was married with a beautiful one-year-old son who lived nearby. At this point the baby photos came out and were passed around. And, of course, this prompted the members of my group to show digital pictures of our families. When asked about the siege, Amila said they were Serbian Orthodox and had lived outside the city during the entire Bosnian War. When the war finally ended, she and her husband returned to Sarajevo to start a new life. Tragically, he passed away only a year later from lung

cancer at the age of 38 (he was a two-pack-a-day smoker, she said). Amila never remarried and raised her two children by herself. I do not remember what she did for a living. Her daughter Anila told us about her job as a grade school teacher. She did not have a boyfriend but was looking forward to eventually getting married and raising a family of her own. She said her favorite singer was Dolly Parton and the two places in the United States she wanted to visit the most were Boston and the state of Tennessee. *Hmmm, go figure.*

And as the night wore on, something unusual happened. Amila told us she had taken up belly-dancing as a form of exercise (and also as a means to get out of the house and socialize). She showed us trophies she had won in her forties, including a video of her performing in a belly-dancing contest in Montenegro. Without warning she disappeared into the bedroom and as we waited for what we assumed were more photos or trophies of her belly-dancing exploits, she returned wearing part of her costume over her jeans and then performed a belly-dancing routine for us in the living room. None of us were expecting this (with the possible exception of her daughter, who playfully rolled her eyes when mom exited the room, as if she knew what was coming). Amila put on some belly-dancing music and then proceeded to gyrate her hips and stomach as we hooted and cheered her on. This was when Ron began telling Amila that I was single. For a moment there, I thought I was going to get a lap dance!

We laughed and had such an incredible time, and we would easily have stayed longer but Texas Mary reminded me of my 'time master responsibilities'. Earlier, Sanja told us to wrap things up by no later than 8:30pm and had put me in charge of that task, which I would have forgotten completely if Texas Mary had not reminded me of the time. We thanked Amila for a lovely evening and then followed her daughter back to the bus. We gave her a big hug before boarding, some of us exchanging emails with her. It was a wonderful night overall, a fitting way to end our last day in the city, especially after all the depressing talk about the Siege of Sarajevo and the horrors of the Bosnian War. It made us feel the warmth and humanity of this great city. I was back in my hotel room by 9:10pm, just in time to catch the second half of the Belgium-Canada soccer match on TV. I made a cup of hot tea and later jotted down some notes in my journal notebook before going to bed.



## Day Nine

I was awake by 4:45am. I made some instant coffee and finished writing yesterday's activities in my journal. I showered, dressed and repacked my luggage and then sat down to watch the BBC International News on TV. By 7:30am I was downstairs for breakfast, leaving my luggage in the hallway for the porter to pick up. At 9:00am sharp we were all on the bus heading back to Croatia to visit a rural farming community called Karanac where we would be spending the night.

On our way out of Sarajevo, Sanja asked us if we had enjoyed our stay in the city, almost apologizing for all the sad and depressing information about the Bosnian War. She promised us (perhaps in jest) no more talk about the Yugoslav Wars for the rest of the tour. Actually, I think most of us really appreciated learning about this interesting, if violent, period in the Balkan's history. I can vaguely remember the Clinton administration's response to the Yugoslav Wars, which was in support of NATO's actions in the region. I do recall U.S. warplanes were used to bomb Serbian military positions in the mid to late nineties before the conflicts came to an end. But I was mostly ignorant on why the fighting was going on in the first place. Europeans often criticize Americans for not being aware of what goes on in other parts of the world unless it directly affects us. There might be some truth to that. In 2018 I took a trip to Myanmar while the sectarian violence against the Rohingya Muslims was underway in the country's Rakhine State. None of my friends or coworkers even knew where Myanmar was located. To make it easier for them I said it was the country formerly known as Burma, and many replied, "Oh, yeah, that's in the Caribbean, right?" (Yikes).

We traveled north out of Sarajevo, along Highway E73, towards the Croatian border. On the drive, Sanja spoke about what life was like in the former Yugoslavia. The late president Josip Broz Tito ruled the country as a ruthless autocrat who would quickly dispose of his political enemies. Normally, living under such a regime would be stifling, to say the least. But his role as an absolute ruler allowed for a more cohesive union between the various republics that made up Yugoslavia. Tito was able to squash nationalistic tendencies, which led to a more peaceful integration of the different ethnic and religious groups within the country. Under socialism,

she said, people were guaranteed employment and housing for life, along with pensions and other safety net services. When Yugoslavia broke apart in the early 1990s, just ten years after Tito's death, everything changed, and not necessarily for the better. Jobs and housing were no longer guaranteed; pensions and the country's currency disappeared. Ethnic and religious strife soon broke out with all the terrible violence and destruction it would entail. Today, many of the older generation actually look back fondly on the financial and political stability of the former Yugoslavia, viewing the former dictator with admiration (grudgingly or not).

The impact of the disintegration of Yugoslavia can still be felt in Croatia, Sanja explained, as very few companies offer 'permanent' employment contracts to its workers nowadays. And without a long-term job contract, she said, many banks will not approve housing loans, forcing young college-educated Croatians to live with their parents into their thirties as they try to save money to buy a house and start their own families, causing (I would imagine) feelings of economic uncertainty and anxiety among the younger generation. Interestingly, when I visited Russia in 2017 I heard a similar complaint from an old Russian college professor who served as a guest lecturer aboard our riverboat. He told us the collapse of the Soviet Union created a devastating financial hardship on the public as Russia transitioned away from a socialist model to a capitalistic one.

We drove for nearly two hours along Highway E73, winding through a landscape of mostly forests and mountains before stopping for a bathroom break at a large department store called FIS in a small village located within the Zenica-Doboj Canton in the central part of the country. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided into ten federal administrative units called *cantons* (think of them as provinces). The Zenica-Doboj Canton is sandwiched in-between the two separate land spaces that form the other half of the country, the Republika Srpska. We spent thirty minutes at the FIS department store, which resembled the Balkan equivalent of a Walmart Superstore. Later that evening our group would be dining with another host family, so I purchased a box of chocolates as a 'thank you' gift. I also picked up some snacks for myself.

By 11:30am we were back on the highway, continuing north, following the path of a stream that flowed into the Bosnia River near the town of Ljesnica. When we reached the city of Matuzici we crossed into the Republika Srpska, the Serbian side of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The road signs

were now in Cyrillic. By 1:00pm we stopped to have an included lunch at a restaurant/resort called the Royal Village Kotromanicevo roughly 20 kilometers north of the city of Doboj along Highway E73. The establishment lies on one side of the Velicanka River, in a hilly, forested area. It has numerous wooden houses and pathways resembling a small rural village from yesteryear and serves as a typical touristy stop on the way to Croatia. It was the last Thursday in November, or as Sanja reminded us, America's Thanksgiving Day. To be honest, I had lost track of the calendar, which is usually the case when you do a guided tour abroad. To celebrate the occasion she opened a one-liter bottle of Badel Pelinkovac Gorki, a bitter tasting liqueur (think Jagermeister) made from the wormwood plant that is very popular in this region, touted as a home-remedy cure for just about anything that ails you. The group did shots in the parking lot and then we disbursed for twenty minutes to explore the 'village' before we sat down in the restaurant for a chicken kebob lunch.

We were back on the road shortly after 2:00pm continuing in a curving northeastwardly direction, following the Bosnia River on our right until we crossed back into the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina near the city of Odzak. For the life of me, I don't know how a country can have two separate political entities like Bosnia-Herzegovina. I mean, think about it, we actually traversed a border from one side of the country into the *other* side of the country. That's just plain weird. A short distance later, before reaching the mighty Sava River, we came upon the official border crossing into Croatia. Immigration officials had installed tollbooths and we were made to get off the bus on each side of the border and present our passports individually. Prior to this, when we crossed from one country into another, Sanja had collected our passports for the immigration officials while we sat on the bus. It was very chilly and damp outside, and Sanja informed the immigration officers that we were all seniors. But they didn't care and told us to get off the bus and form a line. It was the only time I saw Sanja get angry during the trip.

As we continued now into the northeastern-most corner of Croatia, beyond the Sava River, the terrain's landscape flattened out and we drove by one farm after another. The region is known for its rich, black and very fertile soil, making it the breadbasket of the country. For this reason this section of the former Yugoslavia was highly coveted during the Yugoslav Wars. According to Sanja, the country uses approximately 1.5 million hectares of land for agriculture, and is self-sufficient in wheat, oats, corn,

major seed oils, mandarins and cherries but still must import other foods and agricultural products. As a result of the food disruptions caused by Russia's invasion of the Ukraine, the cost of importing food has risen, and the country continues to look for ways to improve its own sustainable farming to become less reliant on imports. Interspersed between the fields of farmlands were small patches of forests. Sanja told us this is deliberate to allow for bees to nest and pollinate the nearby crops.

We stopped at a gas station along the highway for a 15-minute bathroom break. When we continued our journey we drove by the town of Dakovo, famous for its livestock and horse breeding. In the distance we could see its most important landmark from the highway: the twin-towered 19<sup>th</sup> century Cathedral basilica of Saint Peter. Roughly fifty kilometers further north we drove past Osijek, the fourth largest city in Croatia with a population hovering around 100,000. Osijek serves as the cultural and economic hub of the eastern Croatian region of Slavonia. Beyond the city were mostly farmlands with a few scattered villages. In fact, that's pretty much all we saw since reentering Croatia. Thirty minutes later we arrived at the small village of Karanac where we would be spending the night at a local farmstead.

We pulled up to the property – called the Rural Homestead Skleplic – by 4:45pm. It was already dark outside and the temperature was cold and dropping fast. Denis and Goca, the husband-and-wife proprietors, met us in front of the large teal-colored wooden doors that frame the entrance into their farmstead. Accompanying them were the family dogs, a friendly, tail-wagging golden retriever and a fat little Pomeranian who went up to each one of us as we exited the bus for a sniff-and-greet. The owners welcomed us to their home and led us inside the property. The farmstead had a single, elongated one-story structure that was divided into numerous rooms and living quarters. Across from the main house were several support structures containing things like farming equipment, a tool shed, an outdoor cooking facility and a chicken coop. These two sections were divided by a brick-paved walkway that ran the entire length of the main house. In the back of the property were farm fields and some livestock.

We gathered outside on the walkway just in front of the kitchen/dining hall area of the main house while Denis and Goca served us homemade donuts (topped with apricot jam) and shots of brandy. To be honest, I was freezing my ass off and just wanted to go inside already, but it took about

ten minutes for the owners to explain the layout of the farmstead, the evening's itinerary and show us to our individual rooms, which were all connected to one another along the side of the house, reminding me of those old-fashioned roadside motels you might find on an isolated stretch of highway back home. My room was small and rustic, with hardwood floors and wooden beams running across the ceiling, the walls decorated in a green floral-patterned wallpaper. The bed consisted of two twin mattresses lying side by side, each with its own headboard. The only furniture was a small desk and chair, one night table and a tall wooden cabinet to hang or store clothing. In one corner was a tiny bathroom with a walk-in shower. There was a single window, covered by a decorative wooden shutter, next to the door, and below it was a heating apparatus that was turned on but didn't seem to make a dent in the temperature of the room. That evening I slept with my clothes on and an extra blanket I found inside the cabinet.

At 5:30pm we met in the kitchen/dining hall for a lesson on how to make cheese. Overseas Adventure Travel (or OAT), the company responsible for this tour, offers its travelers a unique cultural experience on each of their guided tours they like to call *A Day in the Life*. Normally, this is a half-day activity designed to enmesh the traveler in local customs and traditions, and typically consists of visiting a home, community or school and participating in some way in the daily routine of the locals' lives. Our overnight visit to the farmstead was part of this activity. This was my third trip with OAT and on my two previous outings with them the *A Day in the Life* activities entailed shopping at the local food markets and then helping to prepare our own lunch together with our host family. Afterwards, we would have a friendly Q&A session with the host family where each side can learn more about the other's cultural habits, livelihoods, religion and so forth. This experience, while highly personal and informative, can also be a hit-or-miss affair. Sometimes, if the host family does not speak English and there isn't an adequate translator on hand, or if the food and customs are so alien from what one is used to, things can get a tad uncomfortable. But, on the flip side, this unpredictability also adds a certain level of excitement. Our farmstead visit proved to be a fun and relaxing experience (and the food was delicious).

When we were all seated in the dining hall, Denis introduced us to a family friend and neighbor named Lily who demonstrated how to make cheese. She wore an apron and stood behind a wooden bench table on top of which were plastic pails, stainless steel containers, a portable hot plate, a

strainer, some ladles and other utensils, and several bottles of fresh milk. Lily and her husband have a dairy farm that provides milk to the community. Her cows are milked twice daily (at 5:00am and 5:00pm) and the milk she was using to make the cheese was not only fresh but also still *warm* from the evening milking. I grew up in cities and suburbs, so this was all new and fascinating to me. She began the demonstration by straining five liters of milk into a large stainless steel pan resting on top of the hot plate. She told us the straining removes any debris or bugs from the milk. She turned the hot plate on and added two and a half ounces of an enzyme called *rennet*, which is usually extracted from the lining of the stomachs of young goats, calves or lambs, producing a protease enzyme that curdles the casein in milk. But in this case I believe she said the rennet was plant-based from mushrooms. Lemon juice or vinegar can also be used. The milk had to be heated to 98 degrees Fahrenheit (so you need a cooking thermometer). Once properly heated, the milk was covered and set aside for thirty minutes while it began to curdle. Lily asked Tim if he could keep track of the thirty minutes for us.

As we waited for the milk to curdle, Lily spoke about farm life in the community. Her family owned three separate farm plots in the neighboring village, with 35 cows that produce roughly 450 liters of milk daily. They also had plenty of chickens, roosters, ducks and pigs. Most of the farming families in the region, she told us, make their own sausages, jams and pickled vegetables for both yearlong consumption and to sell to their neighbors or local stores. To prove this point she stepped to one side and pointed to the shelves lining one area behind her that were stacked with bottled preserves and pickled vegetables. When Tim informed us the thirty minutes had passed, Randy and I were tasked with separating the whey from the curd using ladles. We dumped the liquid whey into separate bottles. This whey can be used for drinking, she said, or for making other types of cheeses like ricotta. Once we removed as much of the whey as we could, the curdling milk was placed into two smaller plastic molds and pressed down gently. She poured paprika over one of the two molds to produce a spicier flavor and then covered both containers with a cloth and told us they needed to sit for two hours before being pressed again to give the cheese firmness. We would be eating this freshly made cheese tomorrow morning with breakfast.

At 6:45pm we split up into two groups for dinner. Each group would dine in separate homes adjacent to the farmstead. In my group were Bert and his

wife, Mary; Irene and her husband, Randy; Sanja, and Boston Mary. From the farmstead we only had to walk two houses over. We were visiting the Matosic family. Both the husband and wife – who appeared to be in their late sixties, or maybe early seventies – greeted us warmly at the door. We were led into the dining room area where two tables had been pushed together and a lovely dinner spread was waiting for us. There were plates of sausages, roasted and mashed potatoes, fresh bread, cheese, a variety of cucumber, beets and tomato salads, and fresh *ivar* (red pepper) sauce. We took our seats and were immediately served a welcoming round of pear brandy to toast the evening. Afterwards, upon our hosts' insistence, we dug right in, passing the serving plates around like it was a typical family gathering. The entire meal was made from locally grown ingredients. Even the red and white wines they offered us were produced in Croatia (which I discovered has a history of wine-making dating back 2,500 years). Everything was very tasty and satisfying.

Over dinner we introduced ourselves – Sanja acting as our interpreter – telling our hosts where we were from in the U.S. and what we did (or used to do) for a living. And what a diversified lot we were! Randy was a former B-52 pilot, his wife Irene worked in social services; Bert was a highly skilled surgeon, his wife Mary was a nurse practitioner; Boston Mary was a former educator, and I was a retired letter carrier. Mr. Matosic told us they'd been married 43 years and had three children (a daughter and two sons) who were all married and had one child apiece. And, of course, wedding and family photos soon came out, and then our group reciprocated by passing around family pictures stored on cellphones. It was a memorable evening and time just flew by. At one point, Mr. Matosic, who by now had a couple of glasses of wine in his system, told us he was a huge American basketball fan and even went to his bedroom and returned wearing a Golden State Warriors T-shirt and cap. When we finished eating, Mrs. Matosic brought out a square-shaped homemade chocolate layer cake for dessert. Her husband passed around a bottle of sour cherries to spoon over the cake. *Mmmmm*.

Whenever I travel I am always curious as to how couples in foreign countries get together, the dating and marriage rituals. So I asked Mr. Matosic how he met his wife. His face lit up and he proceeded to tell us an amusing tale about being a young town administrator and how his wife came into his office one day needing some kind of document. When they began dating he was very nervous about meeting his future father-in-law (as most young men usually are) and said they 'broke the ice' over their mutual love

of soccer. I don't recall everything we discussed that evening, but we spent almost two-and-a-half hours inside their home. Sanja reminded us we had to return to the farmstead. Denis and Goca told us earlier to be back from dinner no later than 8:30pm (they lock the big wooden doors into the property by then) and it was already after 9:00pm. To be honest, we could have stayed much longer but it had been a long driving day for us and we were all pretty tired. We thanked our hosts and exchanged big hugs before returning to the farmstead. Goca was waiting for us when we got back, and she had the same look on her face my mom used to have when I stayed out too late. Back in my room I set my cellphone alarm for 5:00am and then curled up on one side of the bed, wrapping myself in two blankets for warmth. I'm not sure if it was the quiet, country night, the wonderful home-cooked meal, or the fact there was no TV in the room (or a combination of the three) but I fell asleep almost immediately.

## Day Ten

I woke up twice during the night to use the bathroom (damn this aging prostate) and nearly froze in place. The room was so cold I had to wrap a third blanket around myself to stop from shivering. But I was able to doze off again fairly quickly each time, waking fully at 4:30am. I made instant coffee in my room using my trusty water emersion heater and then sat down at the desk and wrote in my journal notebook for an hour and a half. Afterwards, I forced myself to do my morning stretching and exercise routine before braving the tiny walk-in shower. I was *hugely* relieved that the heating apparatus attached to the showerhead worked, providing plenty of hot water. The coldness of the room had already shrunk my testicles to the size of marbles, and I feared if there was no hot water for the shower I would surely end up a eunuch!

I headed over to the dining hall at 8:00am, feeling somewhat guilty that most of the woman in our group had been up early and volunteered to help with breakfast. (*Women...ya gotta love'em*). And let me tell you, this was one of the best morning meals I ever had. Fried farm-fresh eggs, milk from that morning's milking, the cheese we made the previous evening, plates of



homemade smoked sausages, fried bread and *fresh* bread (made from rice and corn flour mixed with edible seeds), homemade butter and jam. Whew! I had to loosen my belt. After breakfast, Denis talked about the farm (it was built in 1910) and his family, showing us photographs of his parents and grand parents. He seemed to be particularly fond of his grandfather who served in the military during WWII and played the trumpet, instilling in him his love of music.

At 9:30am we gathered inside a pottery studio near the dining hall area where a local ceramics maker named Daniel gave us a lesson on how to make pottery. He told us he had a college degree (I forget in what) but that soon after graduating he discovered his passion for pottery and decided to pursue this line of work fulltime. His big break came when Pope John Paul II visited Croatia in 1994. Daniel made and sold 300 pieces of ceramics featuring the image of the pope on each one, garnering favorable reviews for his workmanship in the local press. This helped launch his successful pottery-making business. For the past several years he's also been teaching his craft to locals and tourists alike. He called pottery-making a poor people's craft because the materials are usually cheap and the skill set can be acquired quickly. Pottery pieces and fragments also serve as important artifacts, he added, as they have been around since the beginning of recorded civilizations.

Daniel sat behind a gas-powered, foot pedaled pottery wheel with a mound of moist clay resting on top of it. For nearly forty-five minutes he awed us by making all sorts of figurines, bowls and shapes with the same mound of clay, utilizing nothing more than the speed of the wheel, his skillfully placed fingers and a set of simple sculpturing tools (one of which was a cheese slicer). He told us that different metallic oxides are used to create color designs or to glaze the pottery after it has been baked in a kiln for 8-9 hours and properly cooled. When the demonstration was over, six of us tried our hand at making pottery. Daniel said this would be a contest with medals for first, second and third place. He would be the judge. I tried in earnest to make a small pyramid-shaped cup with a top and handle, but the last time I sculpted anything was with Play-doh back in kindergarten class...*and, um, it showed*. Some of the women had taken classes back in the States and were really good at this. New York Mary won first place with her excellent bird-in-a-nest sculpture; Irene was runner-up with an equally marvelous squirrel sculpture. And, believe it or not, I managed to land third place with my laughable lopsided drinking container. Although, I have a

sneaking suspicion I got third because I was jotting down notes the entire time and Daniel seemed partial to good press. The three of us were given clay medals fastened with strings and had our picture taken holding up our winning ‘exhibits’. As a parting gift, Daniel presented everyone with a small glazed cup that had the village’s name *Karanac* emblazoned on the side.

At 10:45am our group gathered with Sanja at the entrance of the farmstead for a walking tour of the neighborhood. We headed north along Kolodvorska Street, the main road of this tiny farming village. Lining both sides of the street were homes and farmsteads built in the same one-story extended style as the Skleplic Farmstead. Sanja told us this architectural design was German in origin. Karanac lies very close to the borders of both Serbia and Hungary, and I imagine its former Austro-Hungarian roots have heavily influenced the lifestyle and culture of the locals. The area was primarily residential with small farm plots behind most of the homes. We did see a few small businesses tucked in between the farmsteads, but basically this was the very definition of a ‘sleepy, one-horse village’. As we walked through the neighborhood the few locals we saw, whether they were children or adults, all stopped to smile and wave at us. Initially I assumed, like rural folk back home, they just had a natural inclination to be hospitable and friendly. But I later read that a good portion of the local economy is based on tourist groups like ours visiting the area farmsteads.

What I found interesting on our jaunt was the religious diversity of the neighborhood. Just up the street was the Reformed Christian (Calvinist) Church (*Reformatska Crkva*), a tall white structure with clock and bell tower, constructed in the same plain, austere manner as most of the protestant churches I’ve seen in Europe. This church is part of an umbrella group of Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregational and United Churches that form the World Communion of Reformed Churches with its administrative seat in Geneva. Just around the corner we came across the Serbian Orthodox Church of St. Stefan Stiljanovic. A small, pretty, brick building brightly painted in white and red stripes. And not to be outdone, just two blocks away on Ive Lole Ribara Street, was the Catholic Church of St. Donatus. Incidentally, this is not the same Church of St. Donatus located in Zadar, Croatia, along the Adriatic Sea, which was constructed in a beautiful circular style back in the 9th century. The Church of St. Donatus in Karanac is *relatively* new and – to me, anyway – resembled the Reformed Calvinist Church. They looked so similar I originally got them confused when I was posting my photos online.

We walked to the edges of a large farming field that seemed to mark the boundary of the village and turned back. During our walk I was delighted to spot the local mailman doing his rounds on a motorbike. I couldn't resist and took his picture. The man looked to be in his seventies, which I thought was a little old to be a letter carrier. But then again, his mail route couldn't have been too long (judging from the size of the community) and he had a motorbike to get around in. For all I knew he was probably the *only* mailman this village has known for the past fifty years. We arrived back at the farmstead by noon, just in time for lunch. Our hosts had prepared a wonderful goulash made with beans, potatoes, chunks of pork and bacon. Earlier, when I went for breakfast, several of my fellow tour members were helping Goca and Denis prepare the ingredients for the goulash, peeling and chopping vegetables. This traditional Croatian dish is slow-cooked in a clay pot for hours before it is served. It was already simmering on an outdoor open stove prior to our walk, and now we sat in the dining hall and dug right in. *It was absolutely delicious.* A hearty stew with plenty of fresh bread to sop it all up with. I helped myself to two huge bowls.

By 1:30pm we said our heartfelt 'goodbyes' to our hosts, taking a group picture with them in front of the farmstead entrance, and then boarded our bus for the three and a half hour drive to Zagreb, the country's capital where we would be spending the next three nights. We followed Highway E73 south for an hour before turning west onto Highway E70 near a tiny village called Struzani. We drove for another hour through Brod-Posavina County, one of five administrative counties that make up the historical region of Slavonia in the eastern section of the country. Most of the area consisted of rural farming communities and nondescript little towns and villages. At one point we drove by the ecological preserve at Jelas Polje, a stretch of wilderness floodplains, pastures and arable lands and rural settlements stretching south from Highway E73 towards the Sava River. This used to be a large wetland area until the building of embankments and canals drained away most of the water. Over the past several decades 2,500-hectares has been put aside for fishponds, which has led to the growth of an extensive fish farming industry.

We stopped at a gasoline station for a 15-minute bathroom break somewhere along Highway E73. Shortly after passing the village of Okucani we crossed into Sisak-Moslavina County in the eastern-central part of the country. Running the entire length of this county on our right hand side was

the Lonjsko Polje, the largest protected wetlands not only in Croatia but also the entire Danube basin, covering 505 sq kilometers (192 sq miles). This sprawling nature park offers boat rides, hiking trails and ample bird-watching opportunities along the Sava River and its smaller waterways. An hour later we crossed into Zagreb County near the tiny municipality of Velika Ludina. It took us almost another hour before we reached the actual city limits of Zagreb. Although the city is surrounded by Zagreb County it is not a part of it. To preserve the independence of the capital, it forms its own administrative county.

We reached our hotel, the Best Western Hotel Astoria, around 5:00pm. It was already dark outside and an eerie dense fog had crept over the city. Sanja told us fog events like this are normal during the fall and winter months. The check-in process took a while. The hotel seemed understaffed when we arrived and the only serviceable elevator was slower than molasses. I used the stairs to get to my third floor room, which was smaller than the other hotel accommodations thus far on this trip. But it did have one important upside...the room was noticeably warmer than every other hotel we stayed in. I did not need to sleep with two blankets. After getting my luggage squared away I made some instant coffee and jotted down some notes in my journal.

At 6:30pm our group gathered in the lobby for an orientation walking tour. Our hotel was conveniently located just a few blocks from the historic section of the city. Sanja led us on a wide, eight block loop to the Ban Jelacic Square, the city's historic main square, and back to the hotel so we could familiarize ourselves with the area, pointing out ATMs, grocery stores and several good restaurants (dinner was on our own that evening) in the process. The atmosphere was pretty festive, as the city was preparing for the Advent season and many of the parks and squares were already decorated for the occasion. We arrived back at the hotel by 7:30pm. Many of us, tired from two days of long bus rides, retired for the evening. I was still full from the heavy breakfast and lunch at the farmstead to have dinner, and decided to just nosh on snacks I purchased during one of our restroom stops. I was able to watch the USA-England soccer match on TV before dozing off.

## Day Eleven

I woke up several times during the night. My throat was sore and I was afraid I was coming down with something. I gargled with hot water and took an Advil. By 4:30am I was fully awake and began taking stock of my remaining clean clothes, re-sorting my luggage as I went along. People who are accustomed to taking guided tours learn early on that it is woefully impractical to unpack one's suitcase at every stop since the average hotel stay is usually one to three days before you're moving on to the next location. I utilize packing cubes (nylon zippered bags) that compress my clothing into groupings of shirts, pants, underwear, and so forth. Whenever I need an item I know exactly where it is. The packing cubes not only keep my clothes neatly organized but they also help prevent wrinkling. When I arrive at a new hotel I take out only the clothes I'll be wearing until we reach the next destination, leaving everything else in my luggage. As the packing cubes empty out, I simply rotate them to the bottom of my suitcase filled now with my dirty laundry. I also bring along some of my rattiest underwear, T-shirts and socks, discarding them as the tour unfolds, this way my luggage becomes lighter by the end of the trip. This is perfect, by the way, if you're prone to buying souvenirs and don't want your luggage to tip the scale at the airline counter on the return flight home. After resorting my clothes, I made instant coffee and then wrote in my journal for an hour before shaving and showering. At 7:30am I went downstairs to the hotel dining room for breakfast.

At 8:45am our group gathered in the lobby for a walking tour of Zagreb. We donned our Whisper listening devices and followed Sanja as she led us back to Ban Jelacic Square in the historic quarter of the city, delighted to be showing us her hometown. From the hotel we walked to the corner of Pavla Hatza Street and turned left for two blocks before heading north along a sidewalk adjacent to a public square named after Josipa Jurja Strossmayer, a famous 19<sup>th</sup> century Croatian politician and city benefactor, who also served as Catholic bishop. On the northern end of the square was another public green space called Park Zrinjevac, which ran for an additional two streets. Both areas were already decorated for the Advent season, with lights and ornaments hanging from the trees and lampposts and sections set up with tables and booths for the evening's Christmas market.

One block further north and we reached Ban Jelacic Square, the central square of historic Zagreb, dodging a number of tramline cars that operate along the southern border of this plaza. We met our local tour guide, Harry, in front of a large equestrian statue in the middle of the square. He warmly welcomed us to Croatia and immediately launched into a brief history of the city, starting with the military figure brandishing a sword atop the horse statue. Harry told us this was Ban Josip Jelacic. The word *ban* in front of his name was the official title of local rulers or officeholders in Croatia, a term that was used until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Josip Jelacic came from one of Croatia's oldest noble families and rose to the rank of lieutenant field marshal in the Imperial Austrian Army, later serving as the governor (viceroy) of Dalmatia between 1848 until his death in 1859. He is responsible for abolishing serfdom in Croatia during the turbulent one-year period in Europe known as the *Revolutions of 1848*. That year saw a wave of democratic uprisings across more than fifty countries of Western, Central and Northern Europe, constituting the most widespread revolutionary fervor Europe has ever seen. Many of these rebellions were inspired by the notion of romantic nationalism, French political thought and, in the area of the Balkans, a pan-Slavic desire for self-rule. Josip Jelacic led military campaigns against Hungary for the Austrian Empire during this period, thinking this would later pave the way for his country's independence. But this would not be the case, as Croatia continued under the rule of the Austrian Empire. Nonetheless, Ban Josip Jelacic is considered a Croatian national hero.

Historically, there has been human settlement in this area of the country since the Neolithic Age. During the second century BC the region came under the control of the Romans. As for the origins of present day Zagreb, that can be traced back to the year 1094 AD when a Hungarian King established a Catholic diocese here called *Kaptol*. Another, more fortified settlement called *Gradec* was established atop a neighboring hillside. In 1242, the Croatian and Hungarian ruler, King Bela IV, had to take refuge in Gradec after an attack by the Tatars. In appreciation, he issued the Golden Bull of 1242, making Gradec a free royal city. From that point forward there were *two* cities here: Kaptol (known as the Lower Town) and Gradec (known as the Upper Town). In 1850, the two towns were merged into a single administration becoming the City of Zagreb. Today, the boundaries of these two former medieval towns constitute the historic quarter of the city, drawing over a million tourists annually, Harry told us.

Geographically, Zagreb lies on the southern slopes of the Medvednica Mountain in the northwestern part of the country along the Sava River. It is both the capital and largest city in Croatia with a combined metro population of approximately 1.2 million inhabitants, representing almost one third of the overall population of the country. Its large concentration of industries, scientific and educational institutions, and administrative offices makes Zagreb the cultural, political, educational and economic hub of Croatia. Its various transportation systems serve to connect the city with Central and Southeastern Europe and the Mediterranean. Politically, Zagreb is divided into 17 districts that span from the low-lying areas near the Sava River up into the foothills of Medvednica Mountain, offering a unique diversity to the city's landscape.

After imparting all of this information, Harry led us on a walking tour of the historic quarter. Surrounding the Ban Jelasic Square are many buildings from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries constructed during the Austro-Hungarian period. The square itself is located in what used to be the Lower Town (Kaptol) but is now part of a city district called the *Gornji Grad-Medvescak*, which combines parts of the Lower Town section with the Upper Town (Gradec) area, forming the center of the city. Here you will find many beautiful structures, some dating back to Zagreb's medieval history. I thought it was a very lovely area, a wonderful mix of new and old architecture.

From the square, Harry led us west along Ilica Street, one of the oldest and longest streets in the city, its brick roadway lined with tramline tracks. We saw several modern commercial buildings but most of the structures on Ilica Street appeared to be from the 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. We walked about half a dozen short blocks along this commercial street before turning north on Tomiceva Street, boarding a funicular train that whisked us up to the hilly Upper Town area in less than a minute. We were now standing in a small observation plaza overlooking the Lower Town. In back of us was the *Lotrscak Tower*, a fortified tower dating to the 13<sup>th</sup> century that once guarded the southern gate of the walled medieval city of Gradec. Since 1877 a cannon has been fired from the top of this tower at noon to mark the midday.

We continued north along a narrow street, passing the 18<sup>th</sup> century Dverce Palace, and reached a public square containing on one end the St. Catherine's Church, a restored Roman Catholic church from the 1600s

known for its ornate Baroque interior. On another corner of this square was the Museum of Broken Relationships (*Muzej Prekinutih Veza*) housed in a former palace, featuring exhibits and stories from heartbroken lovers the world over. Harry told us this was one of the more popular museums in the city. *Hmmm, go figure.* We were walking now along Cirilometodska Street where we came upon the Greek Catholic Co-Cathedral of Saints Cyril and Methodius, an Eastern Catholic Church in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. I was not aware of the Eastern Catholic Church until I saw this structure. Harry told us this particular branch of Christianity has existed in Croatia since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, created by Greek-Slavic Christians fleeing the advancing Turks in Bosnia and Slavonia who settled in the frontier and western parts of the country. It was built in 1866 (on the site of a previous Greek Catholic church) in a Neo-Byzantine style. Adjacent to this cathedral was another peculiarly named museum, the Croatian Museum of Naïve Art (*Hrvatski Muzej Naivne Umjetnosti*), which is also housed in a former palace. According to Harry, the museum was established in 1952 to showcase the artwork of self-taught artists. ‘Naïve art’ gained recognition in Croatia during the middle of the last century and is characterized by its simplicity, vibrant colors and folk-inspired motifs. This is another of the city’s more popular museums, he added.

On the next block over we stopped in front of the old city hall building, one of the meeting places for the City Assembly of Zagreb, the lawmaking body that governs the city. The structure consists of three historic buildings that were connected in the late 1800s, including a theater section where the first opera and stage plays in the Croatian language were performed back in the 1840's. Harry pointed out a plaque near one of the entrances depicting the relief of inventor Nikola Tesla (who was born in Croatia). The plaque commemorates an address Telsa made to the Zagreb city council in 1892. Harry also pointed out the gas-lit lanterns in front of the city hall building, telling us the Upper Town first started installing them in 1863. You will find them along the narrow streets of the Gradec section and they are still in use today, a kind of romantic throwback to yesteryear. The lanterns have to be manually lit each night, and, according to Harry, the same caretaker (who has become a sort of minor celebrity here) has been doing it for decades.

At the end of Cirilometodska Street – across from the old city hall building facing north – is the St. Mark’s Church (*Crkva Sv. Marko*). This Catholic Church is one of the oldest structures in Zagreb. Originally constructed during the 13<sup>th</sup> century in the Romanesque style of the time, it



was later radically reconstructed in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the Late Gothic style we see today (although evidence of its earlier architectural design can still be noted). The Baroque bell tower was added in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At first, I thought it was a government building because the slanting roof above its southern portal was decorated with colorful tiles in the shape of two enormous coats of arms, one representing the City of Zagreb and the other the Triune Kingdom of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia (a short-lived, nominally autonomous kingdom established in 1868 within the Austro-Hungarian Empire). It is a very picturesque church but unfortunately we could not go inside. In March of 2020, at the height of the Covid pandemic, a 5.3 magnitude earthquake hit the region followed by severe aftershocks that caused heavy damage in the historic quarter, making hundreds of structures in this area of the city uninhabitable. When we visited, the square in front of St. Mark's Church was sectioned off with metal barricades, and scaffolding equipment surrounded the entire building. Across from the eastern side of the church is the Croatian Parliament, housed in a beautiful centuries-old palace. This area was sectioned off, as well.

We walked east along the cobblestone Kamenita Street until we reached the Stone Gate (*Kamenita Vrata*). This historic landmark once served as the eastern entrance into the medieval city of Gradec. It is the only remaining city gate in Zagreb, and a very popular spot for both tourists and locals alike. Inside the Stone Gate's structure is a 17<sup>th</sup> century painting of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus, which is said to have survived a terrible fire in 1731 that burned down the previous gate. When the gate was rebuilt, a shrine was set up around this painting – thought to have 'miraculous powers' – and today the city's residents pay homage to this image of the Virgin Mary (the patron saint of Zagreb), placing flowers in front of it or lighting candles nearby. We stopped at the shrine before proceeding to the other side of Kamenita Street, which ended at the bottom of a hill on Pavla Radica Street, next to an *awesome* statue of St George slaying the Dragon. This image of St George is a popular Christian Orthodox legend that spread rapidly through Byzantine culture in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12th centuries.

We followed Pavla Radica Street as it curved downward, leading back to Ban Jelacic Square. Harry stopped briefly in front of a small clothing shop called Kravata-Zagreb, makers of handcrafted men's neckties, bow ties and women's scarves and shawls. This particular store, in business for more than 65 years, is the oldest tie craft shop in Croatia. Harry told us the origins of the necktie could be traced back to Croatian mercenaries who fought for

France during the Thirty Years' War (1618-48). These mercenaries hailed from the Military Frontier – a borderland area that served as a buffer zone between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottomans – and wore traditional small, knotted neckerchiefs, which caught the eye of the Parisian elite. Neckties became fashionable when a very young Louis XIV began wearing a lace one in 1646, setting off a fashion trend between the French Nobility that would later spread all over Europe.

We walked one block over to Ivana Tkalčića Street, a very popular pedestrian zone with 19<sup>th</sup> century town houses that have been converted into rows of street level eateries and café-bars. At this hour of the morning it was relatively quiet, but by late afternoon and early evening this area is packed with locals out for a good time, and both Sanja and Harry recommended this section for its awesome selection of good restaurants, bars and lively atmosphere. From here we walked east and came upon a large, two-leveled public market plaza called *Tržnica Dolac*. Farmers from the surrounding countryside come here on a daily basis and set up stalls – underneath the shade of oversized red umbrellas – to sell everything from fresh produce, flowers, and souvenirs to traditional artisan items like honey and juices. The marketplace is particularly busy on the weekends.

We continued walking east to Kaptol Street to see the impressive Cathedral of Zagreb. My heart sank a little when I saw the huge cranes and scaffolding equipment surrounding the structure. I knew immediately we were not going inside. During the 2020 earthquake the tip of its southern spire fell off, collapsing onto the adjacent Archbishop's Palace. Ever since, the building has been undergoing restoration work to ensure its structural integrity. But even this didn't detract from its overall grandness. The cathedral was built in a Gothic style between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, constructed over the previous cathedral destroyed by the Tatars in 1242. Following an earthquake in 1880, which severely damaged the church, it was restored and two magnificent Neo-Gothic steeples were added that account for the cathedral's striking appearance. These two spires make it the second largest building in Croatia, and the city's most iconic landmark. The cathedral is dedicated to the Assumption of Mary and the kings St. Stephen and St. Ladislaus who served during the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The cathedral's treasury contains relics from both monarchs. In front of the structure is the Monument of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a quatrefoil fountain with a tall central column rising approximately 30 meters into the air,

surmounted with a golden sculpture of the Virgin Mary. At the base of the column are four golden angels.

From the cathedral we walked back to Ban Jelacic Square, stopping to see a bronze, 3-D map of Zagreb located in a market area just east of the plaza. Our walking tour ended here and we said our 'goodbyes' to Harry. Sanja gave us a twenty-minute break to use the public restrooms before we gathered again for a visit to the *Mirogoj Cemetery*. The remainder of the day was actually free for us to explore Zagreb on our own, but Sanja had earlier volunteered to take us to this famous graveyard, which was listed as a must-see sight in my travel guidebook. Our group purchased bus tickets at a kiosk in front of the Ban Jelacic Square and then boarded a public bus near the cathedral for the 15-minute drive to the cemetery, which is located on a hillside north of the downtown area.

The land used for the Mirogoj Cemetery was purchased by the city in 1872. The graveyard was inaugurated four years later. The main building was designed by an Austro-Hungarian architect named Herman Bolle (who helped restore the Zagreb Cathedral, among other notable projects). Over a period of fifty years, beginning in 1879, an enormous arcade was constructed in front of the cemetery topped by a series of striking green cupolas; an imposing brick wall that can easily be spotted in the distance as one approaches. A beautiful church was built into the entranceway. Neatly landscaped pathways divided by hedgerows and lined with towering horse chestnut trees lend this graveyard its parklike image.

Unlike older cemeteries in the region, which were church-owned and exclusive to their faith, the Mirogoj Cemetery was city-owned and allowed burials from all religious backgrounds. As we walked along the black marble gravestones we were able to see the graves of Roman Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, Muslim and Jewish individuals, many lying side-by-side in a truly egalitarian fashion. The tombs located within the arcades (or adjacent) were filled with noteworthy Croatians, great artists and statesmen, including the first president of the Republic of Croatia, Franjo Tudman, who passed away in 1999. Some sections of the arcade sustained damaged during the 2020 earthquake and were still under restoration. The cemetery also has some interesting monuments memorializing events from both world wars, and we saw many exquisitely carved tombstones and stone murals. I've been to many historic cemeteries in my travels and this one was definitely worth a visit.

We returned to the downtown area by 1:15pm. Our group split up at this point to explore the city on our own. I teamed up with Boston Mary, Anne and Debra. We made our way back to the Ban Jelacic Square, stopping first to visit both sections of the Trznica Dolac market plaza (the top section is the farmer's market and the lower level is primarily flowers and crafts). From the square we walked south along Petrinjska Street for more than seven blocks until we reached the *Zagreb Glavni Kolodvor*, the city's main train station and the largest such station in the country, serving as the principle hub of the Croatian Railways network. Constructed in the early 1890s in a neoclassical style, this historic train station, like much of the rest of the city, underwent major renovations just prior to the 1987 Summer Universiade (which is now called the FISU World University Games). The station is 612-feet long (186.5m) and its track lines have been updated to accommodate the demands of the times, making this a wonderful mix of old and new. The engine of an older train model is on display next to the railroad tracks. The Zagreb Glavni Kolodvor is considered one of the city's architectural monuments, a beautiful reminder of when it served as a stop along the world-famous Orient Express. We purchased pizza slices from a food counter inside the main terminal before continuing our walk.

From the Zagreb Glavni Kolodvor we headed west now along Grgura Ninskog Street. We stopped briefly to have a look at the Importanne Centar, a subterranean mall with over 200 stores, before continuing one block over to visit the famous Esplanade Zagreb, a ritzy, Art Nouveau 5-star hotel dating back to the 1920s. There were a lot of high-end cars and limos in front of the hotel, and security up the wazoo. Turns out we arrived during a big wedding reception and the building was filled with wealthy-looking people dressed to the nines. Our excuse for going inside was to use the restrooms (and, considering we were all senior citizens, this was not entirely untrue). We walked into the lavish lobby and I immediately felt out of place in my hoodie jacket. A stocky security officer abruptly stopped me and asked if I was staying at the hotel. I glanced around the lobby momentarily – surmising that a one-week stay in this place probably cost a lot more than my entire tour package – and gestured at the three 'little old ladies' with me and told the man we just wanted to use the bathroom. My accent and the way we were dressed indicated we were Americans, and the security officer just grunted and pointed to the restrooms near the wedding reception area. I queued up to pee next to men in expensive dress suits. I may have

'accidentally' trickled a little urine onto their fancy leather shoes out of spite, I don't remember.

After using the bathrooms we went back outside and strolled briefly through an outdoor Christmas-themed food court situated on a patio adjacent to the eastern side of the hotel. We continued further west on Antuna Mihanovica Street, walking by a botanical garden affiliated with the University of Zagreb's science department. The park was closed at that time of the year. We turned right when we reached the Croatian State Archives building (*Hrvatski Drzavni Arhiv*) – across from the botanical garden – making our way back north along Marka Marulica Square. A row of ivy-covered six-story apartment buildings lined one section of the square reminding me of the old brownstone structures of New York City. We stopped momentarily to see the Monument to Marko Marulic, the square's namesake. He was a famous medieval writer and Renaissance humanist (among his many accomplishments) who wrote the epic poem *Judita*, considered the first long poem ever written in Croatian, earning him the title of national poet of Croatia. Interestingly, he is also known for coining the word 'psychology' in the early 1500s.

One block further north we walked through another plaza, the Mazuranic Square, in front of a building housing the National Folk Dance Ensemble of Croatia LADO (*Ansambl LADO*), a theater group founded in 1949 to preserve the rich and diverse musical and choreographic traditions of the country. Along the western side of this square is the Zagreb Ethnographic Museum, highlighting the cultural heritage of the nation. On the next block over we reached the Republic of Croatia Square, one of the city's most impressive plazas. In the center of this square is the beautiful Croatian National Theater building, which opened in 1895, providing three principle theater venues: drama, opera and ballet. Although the theater itself is not very large, accommodating less than 900, it was designed in an eye-catching neo-Baroque style by renowned Viennese architects Ferdinand Fellner and Herman Helmer, who made a name for themselves building opera houses and apartment buildings during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In front of the theater is a unique wall fountain with a wonderful bronze sculpture called the *Well of Life* created by Croatian sculptor Ivan Mestrovic in 1905. It is a circular piece depicting ten life-sized naked people crouching around a well filled with water. The facial expressions of the figures display their joy at being alive as they peer into the water at their own reflections.

It was now 3:30pm. We were all pretty tired at this point and decided to return to the hotel. In my room, I wrote the day's details in my journal notebook and took a short nap. At 6:20pm we gathered in the lobby. That evening was the lighting ceremony of the ice skating rink in front of the Art Pavilion building in Kralja Tomislava Square. This was the official city ceremony that kicks off the Advent season. We walked two blocks west to the square where thousands of locals were already jam-packed around the plaza's large ice skating rink. It was very festive. A sound system blared out traditional Christmas songs, including many classic American numbers, while a troupe of ice skaters performed a wonderfully choreographed show for the cheering crowds. Afterwards, a magnificent fireworks display lit up the night sky.

We headed back to the hotel by 7:00pm for a delicious buffet dinner. I piled my plate high with roasted pork, chicken schnitzel, potatoes, veggies, some kind of cheesy dumpling dish, rice, dessert...*whew!* I was so grateful for all the calories I burned that day walking around the city. At dinner I sat with Ute and Debra and we had a nice conversation about our relationships and travels. We got to meet Sanja's handsome 13-year old son (he looked just like her) who stopped by to have dinner with his mom. I was up in my room by 8:30pm and was able to watch the Argentina-Mexico World Cup match on TV. It was a tough game with a lot of roughhousing and penalties. Shortly after the match ended I dozed off.

## **Day Twelve**

I was wide-awake by 4:30am. My throat was still sore and I felt a general malaise coming over my body. I skipped my normal exercise routine and rummaged through my medicine kit for some cold medication. I also decided to forego the coffee that morning and consumed several cups of herbal tea, instead. After writing in my journal for nearly an hour, I shaved, showered and got dressed. I then sat on my bed and watched the morning news broadcast on the BBC channel before going down for breakfast at 7:45am.

By 9:00am we were on the bus for a daylong excursion to explore the countryside of Hrvatsko Zagorje, a rural region north of Zagreb. The name *Hrvatsko Zagorje* means ‘Croatian backlands’ and refers to the hilly lands behind the Medvednica Mountain, along the northern border of the city. Locals simply refer to this cultural region as *Zagorje*. With a population of approximately 300,000 – spread out over small towns, farming villages and hamlets – Zagorje extends to the border of Slovenia. This region offers a sharp contrast between life in a bustling city like Zagreb and the rural Croatian countryside.

From our hotel we headed south for several blocks before turning west on Ljubljanska Avenue. After crossing the Sava River we turned north onto Highway E59, driving along the western rim of the city towards Medvednica Mountain. The areas we passed – south of the historic quarter and along the western boundary of the city – is considered the ‘newer’ sections of Zagreb, according to Sanja. Many of the apartment complexes along this route were constructed under communist rule from the 1950s onward. Due to strong winds from the north, the earlier Soviet-style housing projects were designed with plenty of open spaces between them to allow the winds to pass through. Today, she said, most structures are built next to each other, trapping these strong wind currents, creating the type of foggy conditions we witnessed when we arrived the previous evening. She told us the wealthier communities of the city tended to be located around the foothills of Medvednica Mountain.

As we passed one of the city’s many colleges, Sanja mentioned that Zagreb has long been considered an educational center, attracting tens of thousands of college and graduate students annually. Its premier school, the University of Zagreb, is one of Europe’s oldest learning institutions. Under communist rule, she said, the universities did not have traditional campuses where students could congregate. This was done intentionally to avoid student protests and uprisings. We continued driving north out of the city along E59; the Medvednica Mountain was now to our right.

The Medvednica Mountain (the name translates into “Bear Mountain”, although there are no more bears living here) is located just north of Zagreb and forms the southern border of the Zagorje Region. Its highest peak (at 3,396ft, or 1,035m) is called *Sljeme* and offers skiing along its northern slope during the winter months. According to Sanja, most of the mountain serves as a nature park, of which almost two-thirds is covered by forests. She

told us the mountain is a very popular destination for the city's residents in the summer, offering many activities for the outdoor enthusiast like hiking and cycling trails, caves exploration and even paragliding. In fact, its natural beauty – coupled with the city's cultural blend of museums, theaters and concert halls – makes Zagreb a wonderful place to live overall.

As we drove past Medvednica Mountain, Sanja spoke of the local lore and legends arising out of the region's medieval history and the superstitious nature of the rural folk. As an example, she told us the legend of the Black Queen:

*On the southern slopes of Medvednica Mountain is a medieval fortress city called Medvedgrad. It was constructed in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century following an attack by the Tatars (Mongols) that destroyed much of the lower town of Zagreb. The fortress was built on a rocky spur approximately 1500 feet above the city for defensive purposes and was occupied by a long line of counts and bans (viceroys) who ruled the immediate region with an iron fist from this lofty perch. Today, the fortress has been partially restored and is another of the many tourist attractions of the city. During the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, Medvedgrad was home to the infamous Counts of Cilli, an influential late medieval noble dynasty. Barbara of Cilli was married to Sigismund of Bohemia in 1405. He would later become the king of Hungary and Croatia, Germany and Bohemia, and was later crowned Holy Roman Emperor. On the many occasions King Sigismund was away leading military campaigns, Queen Barbara served as regent. She was very astute at politics, independently administering large feudal fiefdoms and the collection of taxes. Duties that women of her time – regardless of their societal status – were rarely in charge of. Peasant life was exceptionally hard, and made even tougher by the taxes imposed on them by the nobility. Aristocratic landowners took two thirds of everything the peasants grew and another ten percent was given to the church. When a farming season failed to produce good crops, the peasants would suffer immensely. According to the legend, Queen Barbara was very adept at forcing the peasantry to fork over their taxes. She was known to be a practicing alchemist and astrologer, and this gave way to her being labeled as a witch. In addition, her skin was said to be very white, like alabaster, and she was prone to dressing in black. Yikes. And thus was born the legend of the Black Queen!*

We had entered the Krapina-Zagorje County by now, and were traveling further north beyond the Medvednica Mountain through an area of winding



country roads – passing quaint little villages along the way – surrounded by natural springs, rolling hills and, judging from the scattering of vineyards, a fertile wine region. By 10:00am we reached our first stop of the day, the Antun Augustincic Gallery situated in Klanjec, a hillside ‘town’ of 600 people near the border of Slovenia. Antun Augustincic (1900-1979) was one of Croatia’s prominent sculptors. He was renowned worldwide for his colossal public monuments, chief among them the *Peace* monument standing next to the United Nations building in New York City and the *Miner* statue in front of the International Labour Organization building in Geneva. In 1976 a gallery was opened in his native hometown of Klanjec to honor the man’s work. The sculptor donated his personal collection to the gallery before he died.

The Antun Augustincic Gallery consists of three main exhibition halls. Petra, the museum curator, took us on a 45-minute tour, explaining the artist’s works and the motivation behind his most notable pieces. The museum is not very large and sits atop a hill with a nice view of the surrounding valley. The works are divided into two sections: an indoor gallery displaying intimate sculptures, portraits and public monuments, and an outdoor sculpture park that surrounds the building. Most of the sculptures on display are part of the permanent exhibit from 1990, which reflect a thematic and comparative approach to the artist’s works. Augustincic was a master of intimate sculptures. One of the halls contained life-sized nudes and the torsos of women and children. The middle exhibition hall featured the busts of important people during the time of Yugoslavia, including President Tito and his wife, Jovanka. The largest and most fascinating hall had a number of public monument sculptures, some of which were probably replicas of the originals. Many of his bigger public monuments (including those done for display outside of his country) were representative of the wars and political divisions that marked the 20<sup>th</sup> century and were quite dramatic in their expression of human triumph, suffering or class struggle.

After touring the museum we walked one block uphill to visit the 17<sup>th</sup> century Franciscan Monastery and Church of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the main church of this tiny community and, from what I could tell, the ‘center of town’. I went into this historic church to take photographs, unaware that Mass was being conducted. It was Sunday – (you lose track of what day of the week it is when you do guided tours) – and I was slightly embarrassed when the priest and locals turned to look at me as I

snapped some photos with my cell phone before exiting, probably muttering to themselves: “*Tourists!*”

By 11:15am we re-boarded the bus and drove fifteen minutes further north, traveling alongside the Slovenia border, to visit the Old Village Museum (*Muzej Staro Selo*) located in Kumrovec, the birthplace of former Yugoslav president, Josip Broz Tito. During this short drive, Sanja spoke about Tito and some of the experiences of his early life that helped shape his social and political views. Tito was one of 15 siblings. His father was a Croat, whose family had lived in Kumrovec for centuries. His mother was Slovenian from a nearby village. Tito’s father inherited an estate with a big house and 4 hectares (10 acres) of land for farming, but he was not a successful farmer so the family had its struggles. Even after serfdom was abolished in Croatia in 1848, the life of the peasantry was still an exceptionally hard one. The riches brought back from Europe’s colonies would sometimes create inflationary reactions in the local economies, taking a toll on the peasant class. Not to mention the affects of the Industrial Revolution towards the end of the 1800s, which disrupted the traditional European agricultural economy and caused monumental shifts in the local populations from the rural areas to the cities where factory workers were often exploited. Tito grew up among peasants and this sense of injustice made a strong impression on him, which is one of the reasons he empowered the peasant class when he took power.

We traveled along a rural roadway through small rolling hills – Sanja called them ‘chubby hills’ – covered by farm plots, passing an occasional village, which amounted to nothing more than a few clusters of homes. According to Sanja, some of the taller houses or farmsteads (with upper floors) used to belong to the nobility. They lived in the upper floors while their servants and cooks lived below. Many of the farms here grow corn for local consumption. People in this region are fond of cornbread, cottage cheese and poultry, with turkey being a local favorite, she added. They also enjoy a flat, square-cut noodle called *krpice* (or *flekice*) made from eggs, salt, water and flour. Another thing the locals enjoy is wine. Most of the farms had small vineyards. Sanja said the area wines are not necessarily of the best variety, but the locals are fiercely proud of their homemade vintage and are quick to offer it to their guests. She also told us the region has roughly 3,500 hot springs, and is famous for its thermal spas.

We reached the Old Village Museum by 11:30am and spent one hour touring the site. The museum is actually a large open-air ethnographic complex consisting of about 30 traditional rural homes and farming facilities from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Near the entrance is the farm and house where Tito was born and spent his early childhood years. We began our tour in front of an iconic life-sized statue of Tito that stands in front of his childhood home. The statue depicts him wearing a military uniform underneath a long, opened field coat while staring at the ground in contemplation. Antun Augustincic created this statue, and replicas of it can be found all over the former Yugoslavia. We then toured the inside of the house, which has been restored to its earlier self, with period furniture and many ethnographic exhibits, including photographs from Tito's life. The house, by late 1800s standards, would be considered large and fairly modern, but I had a difficult time envisioning such a large family living inside of it. I mean, there weren't that many rooms. By comparison, my condo in South Florida is only 640 square feet, and, believe me, I need every *inch* of that space to keep my mental equilibrium. I guess the notion of 'personal space and privacy' is a modern luxury.

After the tour of Tito's birthplace home we were given free time to explore the museum village on our own. The homes were constructed with wood, bricks and stone. The economy of the village back then was divided into specialized fields of labor. One house was the local seamstress' home, with ancient singer sewing machines on display; another structure was the local blacksmith's shed with all the necessary tools of his trade hanging on the walls. My favorite house was the toy maker's home, which was filled with old-fashioned toys, dolls and wooden trains. Several locals were hired to dress up like the villagers of yesteryear and were more than happy to show you around the different houses, giving details about them and answering questions.

We wrapped up our visit to this outdoor ethnographic museum by 12:40pm and drove further north to a tiny village called Desinic for an included lunch. The scenery was so beautiful; rolling hills and forested valleys with scattered hillside farms. To our left was the mountainous border of Slovenia. We arrived at the Gresne Gorice Restaurant around 1:15pm. This farmhouse restaurant is located on top of a steep hill with wonderful panoramic views of the Zagorje countryside. Our bus was too big to navigate the driveway so we had to walk a short distance uphill to reach the establishment. Upon reaching the restaurant, we were greeted by employees

holding trays with square cut pieces of cornbread (and some kind of dipping sauce) and homemade honey brandy. Afterwards, we took our seats inside for a delicious traditional meal of roasted turkey, broad flat noodles and beef soup. It was delicious.

During lunch I sat with Debra and we had an interesting conversation about global warming and the overall state of the world. A conscientious 85-year old from California, Debra was very concerned about the future, especially for her grandchildren. She ruminated over what we could do to stop the disastrous toll our modern lifestyles were exacting on our lovely planet. I'm not sure if she appreciated my response, but I told her that aside from trying to limit our carbon footprints (through energy-savings, recycling, etc) and voting for responsible candidates, there wasn't really much our generation could do at this point. This seemed to distress her a little, so I laid out my thoughts on the matter, telling her that *my* generation (the Baby Boomers) had already dropped the ball on the environment. We started out in the Sixties in earnest, trying to change the status quo for the better and protesting to rectify social and economic injustices, but in the end we became the Me Generation, a self-involved group who opted to pursue the finer things in life and 'keep up with the Joneses'. We were now at the tail end of our consumer-driven lives and our contributions at this stage appear limited in scope. Don't get me wrong, I'll do my part; but honestly, I think it's up to the younger generations – with their technological savvy and innovative, space-age sciences – to come up with the solutions to save the planet. Sadly, our generation is so behind the technological curve we'd only get in the way. Poor woman, I almost made her choke on her turkey drumstick.

After lunch I took a stroll around the farmstead property. They had some livestock – goats and Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs – in a corral. The property had its own vineyard, as well. But what I really enjoyed was the view. In the distance, on top of an even higher hill, was the Veliki Tabor Castle, which dates back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century and was built in a Late Gothic and Renaissance style. On the ride from Kumrovec to the restaurant we could see the impressive semi-circular Renaissance towers of the castle from the bus windows. Sanja shared with us a popular romantic legend concerning this structure. During the Middle Ages, Herman II, Count of Cilli – who was also the father of Barbara, the Black Queen – owned the castle. He had a major falling out with his firstborn, Frederick II, because his son took as his second wife a woman named Veronika. In fact, it is rumored that Frederick II was

responsible for having his first wife murdered (probably so he could marry Veronika). Herman II did not approve of this marriage because Veronika was born to a lower class noble family. So the count accused her of witchcraft, and even after she was acquitted he still went ahead and executed her...*by drowning!* This led Frederick II to revolt against his powerful father. His rebellion failed and he was later imprisoned at the castle. Yeah, romantic legends never end well for the lovers. But this story lives on in popular culture and literature.

We headed back to Zagreb, arriving at our hotel around 4:30pm. I relaxed in my room with a cup of instant coffee and wrote the day's events in my journal notebook. At 5:30pm, I met Anne, Texas Mary, Ron and his wife, Ann, in the lobby. We had agreed earlier to walk over to Ban Jelacic Square at night to see the various Christmas markets. It was already dark when we left the hotel. We walked two blocks west to see the lighted ice skating rink at Kralja Tomislava Square. Locals were skating up a storm. We then proceeded north, stopping along the way to visit the Christmas market situated in Josipa Jurja Strossmayera Park. The trees and lampposts were decorated with Christmas lights. Stalls and booths selling holiday items, souvenirs and food were set up along the inside edges of the park. It was still early, so the crowds were not that big. But the atmosphere was very festive.

From here we continued to Ban Jelacic Square. It looked so beautiful at night with all the Christmas decorations, including a Santa Land exhibit for the kids. At this point Texas Mary left us and returned to the hotel while the rest of us continued up Pavla Radica Street. This popular pedestrian street was hopping with locals and tourists. We eventually ended up on Ivana Tkalcica Street where the restaurants, cafes and bars were packed with young people watching Croatia play Canada in the World Cup. In front of one small square a large screen was broadcasting the game, and just as we got there Croatia scored a goal and the crowds went wild. As an American, it was an awesome experience to witness Europeans going crazy over their beloved soccer. Shortly thereafter we decided to head back to the hotel. The temperature kept dropping and we were pretty tired by now from all the walking. Besides, we had an early departure the following morning. I reached my hotel room by 8:15pm. I skipped dinner that night because I was still full from lunch, snacking on some biscuits I purchased at the convenience store a block from the hotel. I watched the Spain-Germany match on TV before going to bed.

## Day Thirteen

I awoke at 3:00am and was unable to go back to sleep so I performed my daily stretching and bodyweight exercises and then hopped in the shower. Afterwards, I worked on my journal and edited my photos for about an hour. By 6:00am I placed my luggage in the hallway for the porter to pick up and proceeded downstairs to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. We gathered in the lobby at 7:30am for a final luggage check and then boarded the bus for what turned out to be one of the longest driving days of the tour. Our next destination was the seaside resort town of Opatija located within the Kvarner Gulf (along the northern Adriatic coastline), a very popular summer retreat for both Croatians and foreign tourists. En route to Opatija we would be visiting the beautiful Plitvice Lakes National Park for a guided tour of the lower lakes area. As we exited the city along Highway E65, a heavy blanket of fog had engulfed Zagreb. The gentle rolling of the bus combined with the low visibility made me feel sleepy and I soon nodded off, waking nearly an hour later as we drove through the city of Karlovac.

Karlovac is situated along E65. This roadway is part of a Class A European road system that stretches from Sweden to Greece. The Austrians founded Karlovac during the end of the 1500s; its fortress was used to defend against the Ottomans. Today, Karlovac serves as the administrative center for the Karlovac County and has a population around 50,000. The area is famous for its parks and four rivers (of which three flow through the city). In Karlovac we turned onto a two-lane road (on my map it was Highway 1) and headed south through Karlovac County, traversing a mountainous region with tiny villages clustered around the highway. The homes we saw were mostly rural dwellings or farmhouses, with chimneys spewing black smoke. Near the village of Veljun we could see the Korana River on our right hand side.

At 9:15am we stopped for a twenty-minute bathroom break at the Hotel Mirjana Rastoke, a nice resort just north of the town of Slunj. Afterwards, we continued further south along Highway 1 and drove through a section of Slunj known as Rastoke Village. Slunj – (*love the name*) – became a fortified town during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This mountainous region served as the

Military Frontier, a wilderness buffer zone separating the Austrian Empire from the encroaching Ottomans. The Village of Rastoke has long been famous for its waterfalls. And while they are not the most spectacular waterfalls I've seen in my journeys, they are definitely fascinating to watch. The waterfalls are formed at the juncture where the Slunjica River dumps into the Korana River. What is striking about them is that dwellings have been built adjacent to these waterfalls, and when you look down at them from the highway it appears as if the water is gushing out from the structures, giving the initial impression of a rampaging flood. I've never seen anything like this before and I took as many photos as I could as we drove by.

Twenty-five kilometers further south of Slunj we reached the first entrance into Plitvice Lakes National Park (there are three entrances). Our guide Zack – a young, bearded, outdoorsy type with a very cheery disposition – met us as we disembarked, welcoming us to his 'neck of the woods'. We would spend the next several hours at the park, mostly exploring the lower lakes portion. After using the restrooms we gathered in front of a large outdoor illustrated map of the site (next to a life-size bear statue) while Zack gave us a little background information concerning the history and geological formation of the area.

Founded in 1949, the Plitvice Lakes National Park is one of the oldest and largest national park systems in Croatia, covering approximately 296 square kilometers (73,350 acres) of protected land space. Ten percent of it lies within Karlovac County. The rest is situated in a county called Lika-Senj, which is the biggest but least populated county in the country, incorporating most of the mountainous areas of Lika and a large section of the Adriatic coastline. In 1979, Plitvice Lakes National Park became a UNESCO World Heritage Site due to its natural beauty of tufa lakes, connected waterfalls, caves and underground water systems. The park is a huge tourism draw, attracting over a million and a half visitors annually.

Geographically, the Plitvice Lakes National Park lies within a plateau surrounded by three mountains of the Dinaric Alps: the Pljesevica Mountain, the Mala Kapela Mountain, and the Medvedak Mountain. Despite its close proximity to the Mediterranean Sea, the park has a moderate mountain climate, which contributes to the emergence of many natural phenomena and the park's rich biodiversity. This unique climate situation exists because of the Velebit mountain range – a part of the Dinaric Alps – that runs along the

Adriatic coastline, effectively separating the Mediterranean climate from the interior. The forested mountain slopes of Plitvice Lakes National Park serve as natural water reservoirs, forming a refuge for different species of animals. The forests are home to deer, wolves, bears, wild boars and the Eurasian lynx. Due to the different elevations of its mountainous landscape, Plitvice Lakes National Park contains multiple ecosystems. But most visitors don't come here because of the flora or fauna. What attracts the vast majority of people to the park (including our group) are the area's 16 beautiful cascading, crystalline lakes, which are connected to one another forming one gigantic water system with numerous waterfalls, both large and small.

The Plitvice Lakes, according to Zack, were created over hundreds of thousands of years by a combination of small surface rivers and subterranean karst rivers. These interconnected lakes follow the same water flow, exiting into the Korana River along its lowest lake. What separate the lakes from one another is a system of travertine barriers that have formed over time by the natural deposit of sediments (tufa) and the interaction of algae, moss and bacteria. Encrusted trees and plants, swept into the lakes by the natural gush of the water, begin to overlap, forming these travertine dams at the rate of 1 cm (.4 inch) a year. As a result, Zack told us, the lake system is constantly evolving; its size and pathways will continue to meander and change in the future.

The lakes are filled by run-off from the surrounding mountains and are separated into two distinct clusters – upper and lower – spread out over an 8-kilometer (5 miles) stretch that gradually ascends to roughly 133 meters (or 457 feet). Our tour schedule only permitted us time to visit the lower lakes area. After Zack finished giving us the park's details, we followed him to a stone-paved, switchback trail near the visitors' center and made our way down into the lower lakes. Along the way we took in the natural surroundings and stopped to get panoramic views of both the upper and lower lakes. I'm not sure how high up we were, but this vantage point allowed us to enjoy the distinct colors of the water, which can range from bright green to blue to gray depending on the quantities of the minerals or organism in the individual lakes and the angle of the sun hitting the surface. Because it was nearing winter, the normally green vegetation covering the mountain slopes had given way to yellowing leaves and bare trees, exposing more of the rock face. Sanja had never been to the park this late in the year and she commented on how different it looked from her summertime visits.



Another thing that was different, she said, was the absence of people. It's like we had the park all to ourselves.

When we reached the bottom of the trail we followed a wooden pathway over a section of the raging Korana River to see the *Veliki Slap* (or Great Waterfall). At 78 meters high (256 ft) this is the tallest waterfall in the country. And unlike the other waterfalls in the park that are formed by water spilling over from the upper lakes into the lower lakes, the source of the Veliki Slap is the Plitvica Potok, a river that extends 3 kilometers to the west of the fall. In the heart of winter, according to Zack, the waterfall freezes over, forming a gigantic ice sculpture. I took many photographs from the observation point in front of the waterfall, and we posed in front of it while Sanja took several group shots.

From the Veliki Slap we continued walking the wooden pathway over the river to visit the Supljara Cave situated near a mountain crevice along the Korana River. Certain sections of the pathway – which amounted to nothing more than nailed down wooden boards – elicited a nervous reaction within me, especially the segments lacking handrails. The water gushing furiously underneath us was at times just inches from the bottom of the pathway (and in certain areas it was pounding the bottom of this wooden trail unmercifully). I asked Zack who maintains the trails and he told us the park inspects them routinely for any damages and quickly replaces any loose or rotting boards. *Good to know*. We stopped for about 15 minutes at the Supljara Cave. The opening is located roughly 80 meters up the side of a limestone canyon on the eastern edge of the river. To access it one has to climb up a very slippery rocky trail. Zack told us the cave wasn't very large and there wasn't much to see except bats. After attempting the climb (who doesn't want to see bats, right?) I came precariously close to slipping twice and decided it wasn't worth the risk. To my chagrin, Bert, who I think is in his early eighties, made the climb with no problems and took photos of the inside.

We continued south on a dirt trail next to the Korana River and almost reached the edges of Jezero Kozjak, the lowest of the upper lakes. This is also the largest and deepest reservoir in the park, its depth lending it a beautiful dark turquoise color. We began hiking up another switchback dirt trail that took us back to the main road of the park. Various lookout points along the way rendered wonderful panoramic views of the entire lake system. Walking in front of me holding hands were Irene and Randy. I

believe they had just celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary (or were about to). I was impressed. Fifty years is a long time to do *anything*, let alone be married. My own wedding vows lasted only nine years...and let me tell you, it felt like nine *very long* years by the time I divorced. But these two half-century lovebirds, who got along so well, still made for a cute couple. I couldn't resist and took a picture of them as they sauntered up the trail hand-in-hand.

When we reached the main road we availed ourselves of the outdoor restrooms next to an isolated closed-for-the-season café. Our bus picked us up here and drove us further south to the second entrance of the park where we had an included lunch at the government-run main restaurant called Restoran Poljana. It was a tasty meal of fresh trout, potatoes, soup and salad. By 2:00pm we were back on the bus heading out of Plitvice Lakes National Park towards the day's final destination, the resort town of Opatija. Sanja told us the ride would take just over three hours because we needed to detour back to the city of Karlovac. The reason for this, she said, was because the mountain roads leading to Opatija from Plitvice Lakes National Park would have been a little too rough for some of the members of the group who suffered from motion sickness, and the weather forecast also called for heavy snowfall along that particular route. Better to be safe than sorry.

The nice thing about long bus rides, especially after a meal, is that one can take a good nap. I dozed off after passing the town of Slunj and didn't wake again until we reached Highway E65 in Karlovac, heading west towards the Adriatic Coast. We drove through forested mountains, passing small groups of dwellings every so many kilometers. Near the villages of Stara Susica and Ravna Gora we traversed two separate tunnel systems that cut through the mountains. By now the sky was a canvas of increasingly darkening clouds. The forests and fields at this high altitude were blanketed in snow, which looked very pretty to me. When the sun disappeared over the horizon, the scenery became obscured in the darkness and I began tracking our route via the Google map on my cellphone. The snow quickly vanished the further we descended towards the coastline. We reached the city limits of Rejika – a port city located within the Kvarner Bay – and turned west on Highway E61. After driving through a section of Rejika we continued westward along the Adriatic coastline and less than thirty minutes later entered the resort town of Opatija through an upper main road called Nova Cesta (which means 'new road').

We arrived at the Amadria Park Hotel Agava, our lodging for the next two nights, shortly after 5:00pm. This elegant building was originally constructed as the Hapsburg Villa in 1895 and later converted into a hotel. Most of the rooms were very spacious, resembling small apartments. I later learned that many of the larger, older hotels along the coastline in Opatija were actually converted villas and private estates dating back to the time of the Austrian Riviera, a stretch of coastal towns along the Adriatic that became famous as summer resorts for the affluent. Today, Opatija is still a very popular summer retreat, catering to large crowds from the Balkans, Central and Western Europe. But when we visited the tourist season was over, and the town seemed almost as deserted as the Jersey Shore in winter.

After checking in and freshening up in my room, I met Anne and Boston Mary in the lobby and we walked a section of the Franje Josip I Promenade – (the *Obalno Setaliste Franje Josip I*, named after the former Austrian emperor) – that runs the entire length of the town along the Kvarner Bay. The promenade was just a few minutes walking distance from our hotel, in front of the Bistro Yacht Club. It was a beautiful, chilly night. We walked east along the promenade, passing several marinas, small beaches and high-end resort hotels that were mostly empty or closed at this time of the year. The promenade ended at a marina for fishing boat rentals and we turned around and headed back to the hotel along Marshal Tito Street (*Ulica Marsala Tita*), Opatija's main commercial avenue. The entire distance took us almost an hour and we hardly saw anyone. Opatija was like a beautiful ghost town.

At 7:00pm the group met in the lobby and Sanja led us to the restaurant of a nearby luxury hotel for what I thought was one of the best buffet dinners of my lifetime. Freshly grilled steaks, chicken and fish; a delicious seafood risotto; a salad, soup and cheese bar to die for, and a dessert selection guaranteed to totally destroy any diet. *What a feast!* We waddled back to our hotel by 8:30pm. I managed to watch the Uruguay-Portugal soccer match on TV before falling into a very deep slumber.

## Day Fourteen

I was up by 4:30am. There was no coffee maker in the room so I had to prepare instant coffee with my water emersion heater. After sipping down two cups I felt invigorated enough to do my exercise routine. I showered, dressed and jotted down some notes in my journal while intermittently watching the BBC International News on TV. Before heading to the dining hall for breakfast I took another stroll along the waterfront promenade to take in the view in the morning sunlight. I assumed I'd be seeing more people than when I walked the promenade the previous evening with Anne and Boston Mary, but I was wrong. Aside from an occasional jogger I saw almost no one else.

Today was a free day for the group. During summertime, Opatija is full of vacationers soaking up the sun on the small, scattered beaches along its promenade. But it was now the end of November, the beaches were empty and many of the shops and restaurants that cater to these visitors were closed for the season. As such, there didn't seem to be a whole lot to do in town so most of the group elected to take a daylong optional excursion into the interior of the Istria peninsula to visit several medieval hill towns. Only Ute, Debra, Tim and Craig decided to remain in Opatija, the rest of us gathered with Sanja and local guide Tina on the bus at 9:00am.

As we drove out of the city along Nova Ceste (New Road), Tina provided us with some background information on Opatija. This traditional seaside resort lies within the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County, in an historical and cultural region referred to as *Croatia proper* (or Central Croatia), which together with Dalmatia, Istria and Slavonia make up the four historic regions of the country. Opatija is located in the Kvarner Bay, a part of the Adriatic coast, roughly 18 km (11 miles) northwest of Rijeka, the regional capital. It is one of Croatia's more popular summer resort towns along the Adriatic coastline. I was surprised when Tina told us the town is also famous for its Advent season, with a lively Christmas market scene. I'm assuming their winter season must kick in during early or mid December, because we were there at the tail end of November and the town was empty.

During Roman times Opatija was home to patrician villas connected to other Roman settlements along the Istria peninsula. And even after Croats began arriving in the area after 700AD, the country's coastal communities

have been heavily influenced by Italian culture, most notably by the Republic of Venice, a wealthy, maritime power in the Adriatic from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance period. According to Tina, many locals in Opatija and in the nearby coastal and hill town communities can speak Italian. The modern history of Opatija (as a resort town) can be traced back to 1844 when Iginio Scarpa, a wealthy merchant from Rijeka, built a beautiful country home called Villa Angiolina within an extended park near the waterfront. Our hotel was actually across the street from this park. The Villa Angiolina prompted other wealthy locals to build grand summer homes here, as well. In 1873 the Austrian Southern Railway constructed a new train line from Slovenia to Rijeka, this allowed for the growth of tourism along the coastal towns. Hotels and elaborate villas soon followed, designed in the classic Austrian architecture of the time. Today, most of those grand villas have been converted into hotels. In addition to its beaches, Opatija is situated within a very rocky and scenic coastal strip surrounded by woods filled with bay laurel trees. We were not able to appreciate this when we arrived the previous evening because it was nighttime. But as our bus ascended the cliffs just above the town, we reached a lookout point next to a roundabout with a panoramic view of the Kvarner Bay. We could see the two largest islands of the north Adriatic – Krk and Cres – as well as Opatija and its adjoining coastal villages.

From Opatija we traveled west into the heart of the Istria peninsula along Highway E751. At one point we had to traverse the Ucka Tunnel, a single tube tunnel with one lane in each direction, which goes underneath the Ucka mountain range. The scenery beyond here was the forested mountain and valleys of the Ucka Nature Park that eventually gave way to numerous small farming communities the further inland we went. The Istria peninsula is the largest peninsula of the Adriatic Sea. It is shared by Italy, Slovenia and Croatia, although the vast majority of it (almost 90%) lies within Croatia, most of it within the Istria County, the westernmost county of the country. Near the village of Lupoglav we turned onto a rural highway (Highway 44 on my map) and proceeded in a western arc towards the center of the peninsula. The view from the bus window was one of beautiful rolling hills punctuated by farmlands with forested mountain ranges in the distance. According to Tina, most of the villages and towns we passed along the way were constructed using limestone from the nearby mountains. White limestone is typically used for dwellings while the grayer limestone is used for the roadways.

Shortly after passing the small town of Buzet we had the narrow, meandering Mirna River to our left. Tina told us this was the longest river in Istria, which empties out into the Adriatic near the town of Novigrad on the western side of the peninsula. Centuries earlier, the Mirna River was much wider than it is now and Venetian ships would routinely ply this waterway for trade. And what kind of trade could this triangularly shaped peninsula generate? Tina said the western part of Istria has reddish soil suitable for growing grapes and orchids; the central part of Istria (where we were) had a grayish soil (due to clay) perfect for the cultivation of olive trees and for the formation of truffles. Central Istria also has a concentration of oak trees used for timber. The fertile mountains of Istria provide seasons of wild asparagus, cherries and chestnuts. This is in addition to whatever else the local farmers grow here. In fact, Istria today is a rather prosperous region in Croatia, not just for its agriculture but also for its shipyards (along the harbor of Pula, an industrial city located on the southern tip of the peninsula) and for its growing tourism industry that heavily touts the region's delicious Italian-inspired cuisine.

The name *Istria* is derived from the name of the Illyrian people who occupied the region prior to the arrival of the Romans in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. For more than two thousand years, a large part of European history has marched through this peninsula. Three great civilizations – Roman, Germanic and Slavic – have ruled and clashed here. Later, centuries of Venetian dominance over the Adriatic, enforced by Italian migrations, have left a sizeable Italian minority on Istria, heavily influencing everything on the peninsula from the architecture to the food to the local dialects. Throughout the peninsula you'll find many reminders of its past: Roman ruins, medieval hilltop fortresses, early Christian churches and Byzantine mosaics, and Baroque-style palaces. In the area we were visiting, Tina told us there were over 130 hilltop towns with populations of 50 or less people. She said communities with larger populations were called villages in Istria. We passed many of them on our drive, mostly farming communities scattered along the hillsides.

Around 10:15am we turned left onto a two-lane road from Highway 44 and drove through a beautiful valley often referred to as Croatia's Tuscany due to its colorful trees, farmlands and mountain scenery. Our first stop was a visit to Motovun, billed as the best hilltop village in Istria, and for good reason. This medieval village sits atop a hill some 270-meters high (886 feet). The buildings are situated around the hillsides protected by two

defensive walls, one that wraps around the lower homes and a taller defensive wall surrounding a fortress at the very top. As we approached the hill I looked up, admiring the village's defenses, which included not just its double ring of walls but also a commanding view of the Mirna River valley in every direction. During medieval times, it would have been impossible for its enemies to sneak up on this place. Buses are not permitted to traverse the single, switchback road that winds up the hill to Motovun. Normally, tourists are left off at a spot on the hill and have to walk the rest of the way up. But the tourist season was over and Sanja had gotten permission in advance for our coach to get as close to the main entrance as possible. Ours was the only bus up there. We spent over an hour exploring this picturesque village.

Tina led us up a hilly main street paved in areas with large cobbled stones that she said were originally laid by the Romans. During the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Republic of Venice took control of the town, building its defensive walls (which are still standing today). Between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Motovun developed into three parts with internal and external fortifications and gates, designed in the Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance styles of that time. The village still resembles a typical Venetian colonial town from the Middle Ages, and this is one of its biggest appeals.

We stopped at a truffles shop on our way to the fortress. Eva, the owner of the shop, welcomed us to Motovun and provided us with some delicious samples. This area of Istria is famous for its truffles, which grow in the damp, dark forests of the verdant valley below. Eva passed around a basket of truffles so we could see what they looked like. Truffles are a type of fungi (mushroom) that grow in the ground around tree roots. The ones in the basket were mostly dark brown and circular, with a bumpy exterior. Eva offered us bread squares topped with spreads made from white truffles, black truffles, truffles with cheese and truffles with olives. She also put out some chocolates with truffles. To wash it all down we were given samples of the local wine, both dry and sweet. I had never tasted truffles before. It has a pungent smell and a distinct woody flavor. In fact, the whole shop smelled like one gigantic truffle. Afterwards, we continued up the hill towards the fortress. Along the way we passed a sign pointing to the birthplace of former racecar driver Mario Andretti who was born in Motovun in 1940.

To reach the fortress walls of Motovun we walked through a 14<sup>th</sup> century city gate, an upwardly slanting stone corridor that leads into the main plaza,

the Andrea Antico Square. This square contains the town's centerpiece, the Church of St. Stephen, a large Renaissance-style church built in the early 1600s believed to have been designed based on sketches made by the famous Venetian architect Andrea Palladio. Adjacent to it was a bell tower from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. We walked the entire ramparts of the upper wall, enjoying the spectacular panoramic views of the beautiful Istrian countryside. Afterwards, we walked back to the bus, many of us stopping at the truffle shop to do a little shopping. I purchased a seasoning made with truffles, which I put to good use in my kitchen when I returned home. For six months I 'truffled up' everything I could, from meats to pasta to scrambled eggs.

We left Motovun around 11:45am and drove towards the Motovun Forest. We passed a white sculpture replica of the largest truffle ever found in these parts, a boulder-sized specimen! Our bus came to a stop along the roadway in one section of the forest where local truffle hunter, Nikola, was waiting for us. With him were his two black dogs, Nero and Sara. I later looked up the top ten breeds of dogs utilized for truffle hunting, but Nero and Sara were not among them. Either way, these two mutts were an essential part of Nikola's job. Truffles grow along tree roots beneath the ground and dogs are used to sniff them out. In other parts of Europe, pigs are sometimes used. Pigs can sniff out truffles even better than dogs, but they have a tendency to ruin the ground and eat the truffles, so dogs are normally preferred. Nikola told us that any dog can be trained to do this, but it must be done early when they are very young to make them skilled hunters. He personally trains all of his dogs by applying the scent of the mushrooms on the mother dog's teats so her puppies grow accustomed to the smell. He said that to be a truffle hunter in Croatia, you have to undergo training and obtain a special license, although the rules and regulations concerning truffle hunting are seldom enforced (unless you're on private lands).

According to Nikola, the truffle-hunting season is usually between September and December. During this time he goes into the Motovun Forest twice a day with his dogs for about 3-5 hours. Many days he finds nothing. This tedious, boring work is not something young people like to do, he told us. So, it begged to ask: Why did *he* do it? The short answer was the price of truffles on the world market. I was shocked when he told us how expensive truffles were. In some cases, truffles can cost more than gold. For this journal I Googled the current price of these mushrooms and discovered – incredibly enough – prices, depending on the variety, ranged from \$1,500 to



\$5,000 for a pound of this smelly stuff. *Wow*. And what makes truffles so expensive? The unique conditions under which they grow. Truffles have no roots and are hard to grow commercially (some countries like Australia and China do, but according to Nikola the taste is not the same with commercially cultivated truffles). The best places to find them are in a Mediterranean climate with mild winters and only occasional rain during the rest of the seasons where the soil remains humid but not saturated. Adding to the cost is the fact that truffles are hard to find, grow during a short season and have a limited shelf life. When asked where he sells his truffles, Nikola replied that a local broker purchases most of the truffles in the area for the larger European market.

Nikola had given Texas Mary a hand shovel and a small piece of truffle and asked her to bury it in the forest, out of eyesight. When she was done, Nikola let loose his dogs who were able to sniff it out in no time. The more I thought about it, the more I liked the job of the truffle hunter...I mean, think about it, you get to spend the day in the woods with your dogs digging up shrooms. *Sure beats delivering mail!* We thanked Nikola for his time, re-boarded the bus and proceeded to our next destination – the hilltop town of Hum – located about 20 minutes east of Buzet.

As we drove to Hum, we passed several roadside monuments depicting the Croatian Glagolitic Script, the oldest known Slavic alphabet, dating back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Tina told us that in 863, Michael III, the Byzantine emperor, sent two brothers – Saint Cyril and Saint Methodius – into the territories of Great Moravia to convert the Slavs to Christianity. *Great Moravia* covered the area of Central Europe and parts of the Balkans. In order for the Slavs to better understand the religion, the brothers decided to translate the liturgical books into the local Slavic language. St Cyril came up with a new alphabet, Glagolitic, which was based on the local dialect used by Slavic tribes around the Greek city of Thessalonica where he was from. After the deaths of the two brothers, the Glagolitic alphabet, known as Old Church Slavonic (or Old Slavonic) gradually began to disappear and would eventually be replaced by the Cyrillic alphabet used today. But parts of the Glagolitic alphabet (or Old Church Slavonic) are still used by certain Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic churches as their liturgical language.

We arrived in Hum around 1:30pm and immediately headed to the *Humaska Konoba* (Hum Tavern) for an included lunch. This appeared to be the only eatery in the town. If that seems unusual, it's not. Hum is listed in

the Guinness Book of World Records as the smallest town on earth. When we visited, the population consisted of only 27 inhabitants. We were served a traditional Istrian meal. For starters, minestrone soup with plenty of crusty bread and olive oil. The main courses consisted of a hearty meat and potato stew, and pasta lathered in a black truffle sauce. For dessert we were served fried dough (think crunchy Elephant Ears) covered in powdered sugar. I also had a superb non-alcoholic beer. It was a thoroughly enjoyable lunch. Afterwards, we ‘explored’ the town.

Hum is roughly 100 meters (328 feet) long and 30 meters (98 feet) wide. The town has only two streets and, oddly, three defensive walls. The earliest mention of Hum dates back to the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In 1552, a watchtower with a small garrison was erected here to protect against roaming bandits in the countryside. Eventually, a small town developed, inhabited by the watchtower guards and their families. Like Motovun, it sits atop a tall hill with a commanding view of the valley surrounding it. There are a few notable places to see in Hum. These include the town’s ancient bell tower, its well-preserved town hall building and its parish church, the Church of the Assumption of Mary, built with a classical façade in 1802. But if you want to see the oldest structure in Hum, visit the little chapel church (the Church of St Jerome) located within the cemetery just outside the town walls. This 12<sup>th</sup> century Romanesque chapel still has original frescoes and graffiti in the old Glagolitic script dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.

After walking through the whole of Hum (believe me, it didn’t take long) we stopped to visit the town’s cultural museum, the Museum of Hum Aura. This nifty museum is situated in a very old, two-story preserved dwelling. Over 1500 exhibits are on display, arranged into 11 thematic rooms that represent what life was like in this tiny town at the turn of the last century. There was a typical kitchen, a country store, a mill, a pharmacy, a classroom, a tiny post office, a distillery, and replicas of the local shoemaker, carpenter and tailor’s shops. One of the rooms upstairs was dedicated to the preservation of the Glagolitic script. The museum has five rooms that are interactive. You can mill your own coffee beans, bottle your own brandy in the distillery or make your own lotion in the pharmacy. Our group gathered in the small classroom (they had photographs of students from the early 1900s on the back wall) where the museum curator spoke about the Glagolitic alphabet and what the educational curriculum entailed back then. To make the classroom atmosphere more authentic, Sanja made Irene stand in the corner for ‘misbehaving’. That was pretty funny.

From the museum we walked next door to the town's liquor store. Yeah, you read right. This town, all two streets and 27 persons in it, had a liquor store. And a big one at that. I'm assuming the locals enjoy a stiff drink...probably on account they live in, well, Hum. Actually, the liquor store sells locally made wines and brandies to the tourists. They offered us free sample shots of *Biska*, a local brandy made from grape marc, white mistletoe and other herbs. The recipe for this traditional drink can be traced back to Celtic Druids more than 2,000 years ago (a recipe still used today, we were told). Our optional tour of the Istrian countryside ended here. At 3:45pm we boarded the bus for the long ride back to Opatija. As we were approaching the bus, Sanja accidentally bumped her face on a piece of farming equipment hanging off of a parked truck and received a small cut and nasty bruise just below her right eye. Luckily, it just missed her eyeball. For the rest of the tour she sported a shiner. Somehow, though, she still managed to look adorable.

We arrived at our hotel by 5:10pm. It was already dark outside. I met Anne and Boston Mary in the lobby twenty minutes later and we spent the next two hours exploring Opatija. We began our walk by crossing through the wonderfully landscaped Angiolina Park adjacent to our hotel. This was part of the original Villa Angiolina estate built by the Scarpa family in 1844 (that would eventually make this coastal town a tourism destination). Today, it serves as the central park of Opatija with 3.64 hectares (nearly nine acres) stretching from Marshal Tito Street (*Ulica Marsala Tita*) almost to the seafont. The park is divided into 60 professionally landscaped fields with roughly 150 different plant species from around the world. It was nearing winter when we were there and the park was simply enchanting, especially with all the Christmas decorations, so I can only imagine what it must look like during springtime when the flowers are in bloom. In one section was the famous Villa Angiolina, the beautiful, pink neo-classical country home of the Scarpa family that now serves as a museum.

We exited the park via the promenade and headed south-southwest along the rocky waterfront areas along the Adriatic coastline. We passed the elegant Hotel Kvarner, the first luxury hotel built in Opatija in 1884. Shortly thereafter we came upon the backside of the Church of St Jacob, a Catholic church that extends all the way to the boardwalk. This structure has quite a history in Opatija. It is situated on a site where a former Benedictine Abbey once stood from the early 1400s, which was the original settlement of

Opatija. A church was constructed at the abbey around 1506. It was later reconstructed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and expanded in 1930 into what we see today. I read online that the original abbey was the site of court trials during the early years of Opatija, and the monastery grounds were used to celebrate religious feasts. It was also the site of the town's first cemetery. The church is located within St. James Park, which runs from Marshal Tito Street to the very edge of the seafront.

At the southern tip of the park we stopped to photograph the famous Maiden with the Seagull statue standing atop a rocky ledge overlooking the water. This iconic shoreline statue is a cherished symbol embodying the carefree spirit of the coastal region, but it has a sadder story attached to it. In 1891, a vacationing count and his wife were killed in a raging sea storm not far from where the statue stands. Originally, the count's family erected a Madonna statue on this spot to commemorate their loss. Over time the Madonna statue sustained damage from the elements and was removed (I believe it has been restored and is now on display inside Villa Angiolina). The Maiden and the Seagull statue was erected in its place in 1956 and has become a popular symbol of the town.

We continued walking along the promenade, beyond the Slatina Beach and Plaza. We passed an outdoor vendor's market along the boardwalk but almost all of the shops and concession stands were closed, as were many of the businesses along the promenade. At one point we cut through the beachfront entrance of a swanky hotel, reemerging on Marshal Tito Street where we began heading back to our hotel. We stopped to see the Croatian Walk of Fame (*Hrvatska Ulica Slavnih*) near the Slatina Plaza. Sections of the sidewalk along Marshal Tito Street had the names of famous Croatians who have honored the country in the fields of science, sports, arts and culture. I'm embarrassed to admit this, but the only name I recognized was that of Nikola Tesla. We also stopped to visit the Church of St Jacob. The church entrance is located on the side of St. James Park that faces Marshal Tito Street. We reached our hotel around 7:30pm. I was beyond tired but managed to stay awake long enough to watch the USA vs Iran soccer match on TV before dozing off. That night, I dreamt the Maiden and her Seagull were chasing me down the promenade trying to steal my truffles...

## Day Fifteen

I was awake by 4:30am. After consuming two cups of instant coffee (while jotting down notes in my journal) I shaved, showered and re-sorted my luggage. Prior to going downstairs for breakfast I left my suitcase in the hallway for the porters to pick up. By 9:45am we were on the bus heading to the Postojna Cave in the southwestern part of Slovenia. From Opatija we took Highway E61 (the *Kvarnerska Autocesta*) and proceeded north. As we drove through the rolling hills on our way to the Slovenian border, Sanja played some traditional Istrian folk music over the bus' sound system. Istrian folk music is based on a distinctive six-tone musical scale often referred to as the *Istrian scale*. This unique musical scale is accompanied by a two-part, slightly nasal singing that forms the backbone of the folk music found on the Istria peninsula and the North Adriatic coastal communities. It is so unique that in 2009 UNESCO included this music on its Intangible Cultural Heritage List. Some of the musical instruments used to create this specific sound include double reed instruments like the shawm, the *sopela* and the bagpipe, together with flutes and a long-necked lute known in the region as a *tamboura*. I found the music to be very lively, tailor-made for social gatherings...but, um, perhaps a bit much for a nice morning drive.

By 10:15am we had reached the border of Slovenia near the Croatian village of Rupa. We were instructed to get off the bus at the border crossing and form a single line outside (it was pretty nippy) and show our passports to the immigration official individually. Once we entered Slovenia our bus driver continued north along a rural highway (Route 6, I believe). At this point Sanja gave us a little background information on the fourth and final country of the tour.

The Republic of Slovenia is a tiny country of just over 2.1 million people located in southern Central Europe. It is surrounded by Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia. The majority of its population (roughly 80%) is made up of Slovenes, a South Slavic ethnic group. Four different geographical regions can be found in Slovenia: the Alps, the Dinarides (also known as the Dinaric Alps), the Pannonian Plains (a large sedimentary basin) and the Mediterranean Sea. As a result, its geography is quite scenic, with majestic mountain ranges on one hand and forests that cover nearly half of its entire

territory on the other. Slovenia has three climatic systems that interact strongly with one another. In the northeastern part of the country there is a continental climate with varying degrees between the seasons. Along its small Adriatic coastline the climate is sub-Mediterranean. And in the mountainous regions above the tree lines a bitterly cold Alpine climate prevails. Of the four countries we visited on this tour this was by far the coldest, especially when we reached Ljubljana (the capital) later that afternoon.

Slovenia's location has made it a crossroads for just about every major civilization that has reigned supreme in this part of Central Europe. From the Roman Empire to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Slovenia's territory has been governed by a long list of regional power brokers for more than 2,000 years leading into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Shortly after WWI it morphed into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia; during WWII it was occupied by the Axis powers. Following the Second World War, Slovenia became one of the socialist republics under the former Yugoslavia. It appears (to me, anyway) as if the country has only known *real* independence since it broke away from Yugoslavia in 1991.

I began to reflect on all that I've learned about this part of the world in my recent travels. From an American perspective, the struggles modern European nations have endured – and still endure as we see in the Ukraine today – to achieve a more peaceful unity is very confusing to me. I guess as Americans we're lucky. The United States' geography has helped insulate us from the kind of continuous strife seen on continents where many nations share their borders. And, in all honesty, the U.S. has benefited *greatly* from the constant waves of immigrants from downtrodden folks the world over (despite what MAGA republicans may think). One of the reasons we do not suffer from a low birth rate is due to this influx of new peoples. But even if the concept of our 'melting pot' nation has become somewhat antiquated – and possibly *disingenuous* considering our currently divided political climate – the fact remains that despite our religious, racial, ethnic or political differences, Americans have not had to engage each other in battle since the 1800s. But how many conflicts, between and within nations, have erupted on the European continent since the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone? I looked it up on my cellphone. It's mind-boggling. I guess what I'm trying to say is this: *My thoughts wander incredibly during long bus rides....*☺

We continued heading north along Route 6 – through a traditional region known as *Inner Carniola* – comprised (from what I saw) of forests, meadows, farmlands and small rustic villages with woodpiles stacked neatly against many of the homes. Slovenia has five traditional regions: *Littoral* (along the Adriatic coastline), *Carinthia* (a tiny section in the north), *Styria* (just below Carinthia), *Prekmurje* (in the easternmost section) and the large, centrally located *Carniola*, which is divided into Upper, Lower and Inner. These regions were established by the Habsburg Dynasty centuries earlier, according to our guide, and are not politically administered divisions. But historically, Slovenes tend to identify themselves by these regions the way an American might identify himself as being from the South or the Northeast.

We reached the Postojna Cave, located near the town of Postojna, by 11:40am. This awesome cave system has been a popular tourist attraction ever since members of the Austrian Empire's royal family visited it back in 1819. To date, over 40 million visitors have stepped foot inside. At nearly 15 miles long (24km) this is actually the *second* largest cave system in Slovenia (the Migovec Cave System within the Triglav National Park is almost 12 miles longer). A park-like complex has been built around the Postojna Cave opening, which includes a fairly new resort hotel and restaurant, a permanent expo center with information about the cave and karst cave formations in general, and a vivarium that is divided into two parts, a research facility and a speleobiological exhibition section. In addition, just a few miles away one can visit the Predjama Castle, a fascinating medieval structure from the early 13<sup>th</sup> century built in the middle of a tall cliff in front of a large cave entrance. We were scheduled to take the one and a half hour tour of the Postojna Cave that is open to the public. Guided tours through the caves are done in a strict, timely fashion and are available with English, Italian, Slovenian or German-speaking guides (they also offer audio-devices in other languages). We were scheduled for the 12:00pm English tour and were advised to use the restrooms prior to the commencement of the tour.

The Postojna Cave is a karst cave system consisting of a series of connecting caverns and subterranean passageways that were hallowed out over a period of two million years by the Pivka River, which flows into this underground tunnel near its entrance. In 1872, rail tracks were installed inside the first part of the cave and wealthy visitors were literally pushed through it by local guides. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a gas locomotive was used. Nowadays, an open seated miniature electric train

whisks you through the first 3.7 kilometers (2.17 miles) of the system. Beyond this point visitors can explore an additional 1.5 kilometers (.93 miles) on foot. Our cave guide told us this was the only cave offering a railroad system worldwide. In fact, this has to be one of the easiest cave systems to explore (as a tourist) due to the train and the use of ramps and paved walkways within the caverns and passageways. But that does not take away from the natural beauty of this karst wonderland. *It was quite a remarkable experience.*

We boarded the train (with dozens of other tourists) and proceeded to snake our way through the cave system. At times we entered very narrow passageways where if you extended your arms it was possible to touch the roof or walls of the cave tunnel as the train passed through them (to prevent injury you're advised to keep your hands inside the train). This was followed by well-lit cavernous chambers filled with incredible rock formations that made our mouths drop in awe. The temperature in the cave, even in the summer, hovers around 50 degrees Fahrenheit (10 degrees Celsius), so you need to bring a jacket or sweater. It took us about ten minutes or so to reach the Great Mountain Cavern where we disembarked and did the rest of the tour on foot.

The group gathered momentarily inside the Great Mountain Cavern so the park guide could impart some interesting facts about the cave formations, but, in all honesty, I was so enthralled by my surroundings I barely remember what he said. I was snapping photos left and right. All around us was a wonderful world of stalactites hanging down like icicles from the ceiling and tapering stalagmites rising up from the cave floor shaped into bizarre pillars. It's almost unfathomable to imagine that tiny droplets of water (over millions of years) created this subterranean system. To put this into perspective, our guide told us it takes 30 years of dripping water to make just 1 millimeter of stalactite. *That's only .039 inches.* Whoa. What a work in progress!

We spent over an hour walking the cave system through mostly dry galleries and chambers where each section offered up a dizzying array of uniquely shaped stalactites. Some hung down like heavy icicles while others were needle-like or formed wavy ribbons along the ceiling. Not to be out down, the stalagmites rising from the cave floor formed fascinating columns with folds of mineral deposits resembling layers of melting ice cream piled on top of one another. The oldest stalagmite in the Postojna Cave is a



towering specimen known as the Skyscraper located within the Great Mountain Cavern. It measures 16 meters in height (52.5 feet) and is so wide it doesn't look like a typical dripstone. Surrounding it are other magnificent stalagmites rising up to the ceiling. Looking down at them from the winding ramp inside the Great Mountain Cavern, it was as if I was gazing upon a stone forest. Adding to the beauty was the fact that the caverns are brightly lit. Before we embarked on the walking tour, our guide momentarily had the lights turned off so we could experience the darkness of the cave. I couldn't see my hands in front of my face. That was pretty spooky.

In one cavern called the Beautiful Caves, filled with incredible ribbon-like formations, we passed the Russian Bridge built by Russian prisoners of war. The guide told us that during WWII the German occupying forces used the Postojna cave to store over 1,000 barrels of aircraft fuel. Slovene partisans blew it up in April of 1944 causing a tremendous conflagration within the cave, which burned for an entire week and blackened the cave entrance. In one chamber called the Winter Hall we saw a spectacular snow-white stalagmite named Brilliant, it stood next to an ornament-rich pillar that looked like some kind of Baroque column.

Towards the end of the walking tour we reached a large aquarium filled with olms, an aquatic salamander that is endemic to the underground water systems within the limestone bedrock of Central and Southeastern Europe. These unusual-looking creatures were nicknamed *baby dragons* back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when some of them washed up from below and superstitious locals assumed they were the offspring of a giant dragon that lived within the cave system. These pale, almost translucent, lizard-like amphibians appear eyeless due to the fact they live in total darkness. Their underdeveloped eyes make them blind, but they have other well-tuned senses that are suitable for living in this unique environment, particularly their senses of hearing and smell. Growing up during the Cold War years I was told that cockroaches were adaptable and could survive a nuclear war. Well, I would say that olms, or baby dragons, have them beat. These freaky-looking salamanders live their entire lives under water, can reach 100 years in age, and, check this out, *can go without eating for up to ten years*.

The walking tour ended inside a massive chamber called the Concert Hall, which is the largest of the caverns within the Postojna cave system. This chamber is so big it can accommodate up to 10,000 people. It's called the Concert Hall because musical performances are conducted in it

throughout the year. An enormous Christmas tree decorated with blue lights stood in one area. Along another section was an exhibition and retail pavilion that included the world's only underground post office. *Hmmm, go figure.*

From the Concert Hall chamber we reboarded the electric train for the cool ride back to the cave entrance. Afterwards we walked over to the park's hotel restaurant for an included lunch. We ate turkey with potatoes and veggies, a salad, and fruit cocktail with ice cream for dessert. By 2:30pm we were back on the bus heading towards the final destination of the tour, the capital city of Ljubljana. We left Postojna, traveling north on Highway E61 (also known as Highway A1). We only saw a few scattered villages or settlements en route. Most of the scenery was flat farmlands interspersed with forests. The majestic mountains of the Dinaric Alps were constantly in our view the closer we got to the capital. We reached our hotel in Ljubljana – the centrally located Premier Hotel Slon – shortly before 4:30pm as night was rapidly falling. I do not recall how cold it was when we arrived, but it was definitely chillier than every other place we visited on this tour.

The Premier Hotel Slon, part of the Best Western chain, is a nice establishment, but the room I was given was too small. The queen-sized bed took up most of the space and I had to maneuver around its edges carefully. Over the next two days I had to do my exercise routine in the tiny hallway in front of the bathroom. Normally, small accommodations like this would have warranted a major complaint from me, to either the tour guide or the hotel staff, but the truth of the matter was that all of the other hotel rooms I was assigned on this tour were *exceptionally* large and comfortable. In fact, throughout the tour I took to showing off my big accommodations to the other members. And not because I was bragging, either; I was just shocked to get such large rooms, especially in Europe. Normally, this isn't the case when one travels solo on a guided tour through the European continent. In the past I've been put up in what I like to call 'alternative rooms', some so small I questioned if perhaps they weren't expanded linen closets. I felt bad for Tim and Craig, two buddies from Minnesota, who, despite having traveled with OAT five times already had each been assigned rather small rooms on this tour. Prior to leaving Opatija, I informed Sanja of this and she thanked me for mentioning it. They each received a larger room in Ljubljana... while I got the 'claustrophobic special'. *Hmmmm, maybe I should have kept my mouth shut...*

After checking in and sorting out my luggage (I also made a cup of instant coffee) our group gathered in the hotel lobby at 5:30pm for what I thought was going to be a short orientation walk around the hotel to get us acquainted with our new surroundings. I did not bring my Whisper listening device (nor my city map nor pen and paper) because I thought Sanja was just going to show us where the local grocery stores and ATM machines were located and point out the general direction of the city's major sites for our free time (we were in the historic quarter and *everything* was within walking distance). But as it turned out we were actually taking a night tour of the historic downtown area with a local female guide. It was already dark and (for me) bitterly cold outside when we started walking to the city's central square along *Copova Ulica*, a wide pedestrian street adjacent to the hotel. I'm embarrassed to admit this, but I actually got upset at this point. In my dubious defense, because I write these long, detailed journals, I'm seldom without a local tourist map and pen and paper to jot down site information, the guides' comments and my own personal observations. It's the only way I can later recall what I experienced when writing my journal. We were now on an official tour of the historic downtown area and I could barely hear the guide unless I was standing right next to her. And without my map I couldn't mark the specific areas we visited, nor remember their importance. So I was not a happy camper. And while most people would have taken it in stride, I chose, instead, to be angry. Yes, at the age of 62 I was morphing into a stereotypical opinionated, unfiltered cranky old man...or, as my brother would put it, I was becoming my dad. *Yikes!*

My only saving grace (it sometimes seems) is that I can at least admit my shortcomings and usually change course as I quickly did the following day. But that evening, as we walked the beautifully decorated downtown area of Ljubljana – (and it *was* lovely, lit up with Christmas lights and festive crowds) – I shut my mind off and just went through the motions. And I feel especially bad that I was curt with Sanja, who, when she saw how upset I was, was nice enough to go back to the hotel and get me a Whisper listening device and a tourist map. So, to Sanja, if you're reading this, please accept my apologies for being an 'ugly American' that night. You were a truly wonderful tour director and made this trip a *very* memorable one.

The tour began and ended in the Preseren Square (*Presernov Trg*), a circular pedestrian hub in the middle of historic Ljubljana, shortly after 7:00pm. I will go over the areas we visited in tomorrow's entry. I redid the walking tour on my own the following evening. At this point I was just cold,

tired (and cranky) and wanted to return to the hotel. Anne joined me for the walk back. Along the way we stopped at the Sparo grocery store just around the corner from our hotel to pick up some snacks. In my tiny, claustrophobic room I began watching the Argentina-Poland soccer match on TV but fell asleep by half time.

*I dreamt the walls were closing in on me...*

## **Day Sixteen**

I woke briefly around 1:15am with a slight sore throat, an indication I might be coming down with something. As a preventive measure I did warm water gargles and fished through my travel kit for a vitamin C supplement and an Advil cold medicine tablet. I managed to get back to sleep shortly thereafter and was wide-awake by 4:45am. To my surprise, the room was not cold. I guess it doesn't take much heat to warm such a small space. I made instant coffee and wrote in my journal before rushing through my travel exercise routine of leg stretches and bodyweight exercises. After resorting my remaining clean clothes, I shaved, showered, dressed and was downstairs for breakfast by 7:00am.

That morning we were visiting Lake Bled located roughly 55km (34 miles) northwest of Ljubljana near the Austrian border. We drove out of Ljubljana along *Celovska Cesta*, a major thoroughfare within the city, and hooked up with Highway E61 heading north through the countryside of the Upper Carniola region. It was a scenic drive through forested areas contrasted by the majestic presence of the Alps mountain range. During our drive, Sanja gave us some background information on the Slovenian capital.

Ljubljana is situated along the Ljubljanica River in the central part of the country, between the mountains of the Alps and the Karst Plateau region. More specifically, it lies within the Ljubljana Basin, which is part of the upper basin of the mighty Sava River where several waterways converge. The city, spread out over an alluvial plain, sits just north of the Ljubljana Marsh, the country's largest marsh area. It is the largest and most populated

city in Slovenia. Over the past four decades it has expanded greatly due to the incorporation of its outlying settlements (small towns or villages) into the larger metropolitan area, boosting the total population to just over half a million people. As such, it is the cultural, political, educational and economic center of the country.

Historically, the area of Ljubljana is located along what was an important trade route connecting the north Adriatic Sea with the Danube region, attracting settlers since pre-historic times. In fact, excavations of the nearby marshlands have uncovered the pile dwellings of prehistoric lake settlers and even the oldest known wooden wheel. The ancestors of the modern-day Slovenes began moving into the area around the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. From the Middle Ages until 1918, Ljubljana was under the control of the Hapsburg dynasty. Its city center (the Old Town) remains largely intact, the architecture dating back to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Larger, more modern buildings have emerged on the edges of the capital since then. Because of its geological location within a mountainous region, Ljubljana is prone to earthquakes, two of which caused notable damage to the city. In 1511 a massive earthquake devastated the Old Town and it was rebuilt in a Venetian-inspired Baroque style. Following the 1895 earthquake, the Old Town was once again rebuilt but in a Vienna Succession style (juxtaposed over the remaining Baroque structures). This is the architecture one sees in the historic quarter today. And believe me, the Old Town is absolutely lovely.

We continued driving north through the Upper Carniola region, passing one forest after another, waves of trees shedding their multi-colored leaves before the winter. We saw almost no towns, mostly small settlements or villages. Near the settlement of *Sencur* the snow-capped mountains of the Alps rose high above the forested landscape, providing an awesome backdrop to the scenery. Halfway through our drive we passed the city of *Kranj* on our left, the third largest municipality in the country, with a population of just over 37,000 inhabitants. Less than thirty minutes later we turned left near the town of *Lesce*, one of the oldest documented settlements of Slovenia, and drove west for about ten minutes before reaching the town of Bled.

Bled lies along the southern foothills of the Karawanks mountain range, a part of the Southern Limestone Alps that separate Austria and Slovenia. Adjoining the town is Lake Bled, a popular tourist destination in the country.

By lake standards it is not particularly large, measuring only 2,120m (6,960 ft) long by 1,380m (4,520 ft) wide. But it is surrounded by natural beauty. To the south of Lake Bled are two heavily forested karst plateaus – the Pokljuka and the Jelovica – and the easternmost edges of the Julian Alps. Encompassed by spruce forests and mountain ranges, Lake Bled is *incredibly* picturesque. In the middle is a tiny islet (Bled Island), which is the only natural island in all of Slovenia. On a precipice overlooking both the town and the lake is the 11<sup>th</sup> century Bled Castle, the oldest medieval castle in the country. Bled is also famous for its thermal spring (near the Bled Fault) and has been a noted health retreat for centuries. In addition to its lake, the area of Bled serves as a starting point for people who wish to do mountain treks or wilderness hikes, especially in nearby Triglav National Park. The current population can probably trace its roots back to the arrival of the first Slovenes in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, but human settlement in this area dates to the Middle Stone Age, and many important archaeological discoveries of those ancient marsh peoples have been uncovered in the region.

We drove through a section of the town before arriving at the lake pier around 10:30am and immediately boarded an awaiting *pletna* boat (the Slovenian version of a gondola) for a ride around the lake. Pletna boats are wooden, hand-made vessels topped by a colorful awning, and can accommodate up to 20 passengers. Our ‘captain’ was a strapping oarsman who easily rowed us across Lake Bled. He fielded some questions from the group (with Sanja interpreting) concerning the lake’s geography. This body of water developed over millions of years through glacial and tectonic activity. During the winter months when the lake freezes over, he told us, people can actually walk to Bled Island in the middle of the lake. The water had a lovely teal-colored tint to it and was very calm. We were heading towards Bled Island to visit the pilgrimage church dedicated to the Assumption of Mary. This Catholic church was built on the islet – over the site of a previous medieval church – in the late 1600s and is considered an important cultural icon in the area. On our way to Bled Island we passed a large, luxury hotel along the lakefront that once served as the summer villa of President Tito.

We reached Bled Island and disembarked in front of a daunting stone Baroque stairway with 99 steps leading up to the Pilgrimage Church of the Assumption of Mary (*Cerkev Marijinega Vnebovzetja*). The church is a popular site for weddings, according to Sanja. Local tradition requires the

groom to carry his beloved up the stairs, while the bride remains totally silent, before ringing the church bell (three times) for good luck. Um, I don't mean to sound *unromantic*, but if I had to carry my ex-wife even half way up those stairs I would have called off the wedding...or married a dwarf. The church is also referred to as Our Lady of the Lake. Bled Island was once the site of a temple honoring Ziva, the ancient Slavic goddess of love and fertility, but the triumph of Christianity over pagan culture put an end to all that. A church was built over the former temple, which has since been reconstructed several times over due to earthquake activity. The Baroque style of the church we see today is from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. The frescoes in the presbytery, though, are from the earlier Gothic version from the 1400s. Next to the church is a 52m (107 ft) tall clock tower that offers a wonderful view of the lake. We went inside the church, taking turns ringing the bell and making wishes, and toured a small museum with information about the history of the lake and its original inhabitants. Afterwards we had some free time to explore the tiny islet before reboarding the pletna and heading back to shore. From the pier we drove to Bled Castle.

We pulled into the parking lot just below Bled Castle. Looking up at the castle's main defensive wall, rising high above a cliff overlooking the lake, I felt like I was on the set of some medieval Hollywood movie. We walked up a winding pathway to the main entrance of the castle, which is located in the lower courtyard area. Sanja led us on a brief walking tour through the lower and upper courtyards; along the ramparts we had spectacular views of the lake and surrounding mountains and countryside. We were given just over an hour to explore the castle on our own before we had to meet back on the bus. The group quickly split up.

According to information at the site, Bled Castle dates to the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In the year 1011, the Holy Roman Emperor Henry II donated the castle to the bishops of Brixen, an ecclesiastical principality from what is now northern Italy, who used it as a residence for eight hundred years. This is the oldest castle in Slovenia; its buildings are arranged around two courtyards (upper and lower) connected by a stone staircase. The oldest part of the castle is the Romanesque tower, with other buildings being added throughout the Middle Ages designed in the Gothic or Renaissance styles of the time. A 16<sup>th</sup> century Gothic chapel sits in one corner of the upper courtyard containing illusionist frescoes that were added at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Bled Castle has seen its share of troubles, from devastating

earthquakes to peasant uprisings, but today the castle has been renovated and serves as a cultural museum for the region.

I visited the chapel and the main museum in the upper courtyard first. Using artifacts, diorama displays and information boards, the museum outlines not only the history of the castle but also the story of the early inhabitants of the lake. Afterwards, I took the stone staircase to the lower courtyard to visit the galleries situated along the castle walls and the small museum in the Romanesque tower, the oldest part of the castle. Even through the cloud cover the views of the Alps from this side of the castle were phenomenal. One section of the tower was devoted to the life and achievements of Arnold Rikli, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Swiss businessman who set up a successful dye factory in Austria, on the opposite side of the Alps from Bled. When Rikli noticed that his workers were becoming ill from the chemicals used in the dying process he began to read up on natural cures and remedies. When he himself became ill, he took the advise of the locals and went to convalesce in Bled where he made a full recovery and decided to sell the family business and dedicate himself to natural healing. In 1855 he opened his first sanatorium in Bled, offering a host of natural remedies to a very affluent clientele, making the town famous as a health retreat.

By 12:45pm our group was back on the bus. We drove for fifteen minutes to the town of Radovljica for an included (and delicious) lunch of schnitzel, mashed potatoes, veggies and mushroom soup, topped with chocolate cake and ice cream for dessert. The restaurant was located within the quaint, historical Linhartov Square. I picked up a tourist brochure of the town as we were walking to the restaurant. Billed as the ‘most beautiful small town in all of Slovenia’ it boasts many preserved homes from the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Radovljica is also the center of beekeeping in Slovenia, and even has a museum (Museum of Apiculture) where you can learn all about the famous Carniolan grey bee.

After lunch we drove back to Ljubljana, arriving at our hotel by 3:30pm. The rest of the day was free for us to explore the city on our own. I went up to my room and made some instant coffee and wrote the day’s events in my journal. At 4:30pm I decided to do my own walking tour of the Old Town and set out in earnest with my map and camera in hand. It was already dark outside and the weather was even colder than the previous evening. I bundled up in layers; a knit skull cap pulled down over my ears, with a scarf and gloves rounding out the ensemble. As I walked down the pedestrian



street *Copova Ulica* towards Preseren Square I noticed that most of the locals were wearing thin jackets with maybe a light sweater underneath. Meanwhile, I resembled the Michelin Man ...and I was *still* freezing my ass off. I made a mental note to get out of South Florida more often, or at least have my thyroid checked out. This sensitivity to cold can't be normal, right? But I mustered through, spending the next two and a half hours walking the streets of the Old Town.

For the walk I downloaded an app on my cellphone called *GPSMyCity*. This app (cost: \$19.99 for a one-year subscription) provides detailed walking maps of thousands of popular travel destinations worldwide. It offered several different walking tours for Ljubljana, which include commentary on the sites or locations it takes you to. I selected the one covering the area we had walked the previous evening with the local guide, and customized it by adding some additional stops. I began in Preseren Square (*Presernov Trg* in Slovene).

Preseren Square is a central plaza of historic Ljubljana. It is part of the Old Town's pedestrian zone and was rebuilt in a circular design with cobbled stone streets that branch out in different directions into the old quarter. The Ljubljana River winds its way through this Old Town section, and the riverfront is filled with bars and restaurants that make this place a very lively spot for locals and tourists alike. The square is often the center of festivals, concerts and political events, and when we visited the city the Christmas (or Advent) Market season had already begun, with food vendors setting up shop around the plaza and on the streets adjacent to the river. On the north side of Preseren Square sits the landmark Franciscan Church of the Annunciation, a 17<sup>th</sup> century building with a red-colored Baroque style façade that has been redesigned, both inside and out, several times since its initial construction. The church layout is that of a basilica with one nave and two side chapels. Many of the frescoes inside were damaged by cracks during the 1895 earthquake and newer frescoes were added by impressionist painter Matej Sternan in the early 1900s. I went inside and took some photos before moving on. Next to the church is a Franciscan Monastery that can trace its roots back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It contains the largest monastic library in Slovenia with over 70,000 volumes including early printed works and medieval manuscripts.

I walked over to the Preseren Monument on the eastern side of the Square. This popular statue is a tribute to Slovenian national poet France

Preseren (1800-1849) and depicts him standing (supposedly staring at the building where his beloved once lived) with the sculpture of a Muse sitting behind him holding a laurel above his head. Behind the statue stands the prominent Ljubljana Central Pharmacy, housed within a former palace, a three-story structure with a neo-classical façade. From the statue I crossed the Triple Bridge (*Tromostojve*) over the Ljubljana River and continued south along a street called *Stritarjeva Ulica*. The Old Town has many small pedestrian bridges (and a few larger ones for vehicular traffic), each with its own special design. The Triple Bridge was constructed during the 1800s and has two adjacent footbridges that were added during the 1930s (hence the name). Framing Stritarjeva Street are two former palaces – the Philip Mansion (*Filopov Dvorec*) and the Kresija Palace – which mark the entrance into the Old Town. Both buildings were built after the 1895 earthquake and are now used as apartment dwellings, offices and businesses. To my right, after crossing the Triple Bridge, was the *Cankarjevo Nabrezje*, the famous riverfront street with outdoor cafes and bars, an idyllic spot to have a drink and a bite to eat and engage in a little people watching.

At this point I decided to divert from my map and follow the riverfront to another small bridge (*Ribja brv*), re-crossing the Ljubljana River to visit Congress Square (*Kongresni Trg*), another of the major central plazas of the Old Town. This historic square was built on the ruins of a former Capuchin monastery in 1821 and was named after the post-Napoleonic *Congress of Laibach*, which was part of a conference of major European powers that tried to maintain peace and political boundaries following the Napoleonic Wars. A park with a star-shaped design is adjacent to the square called Park Zvezda. The park and plaza take up an entire city block. Throughout its existence the square has been at the forefront of political change. Under Communist rule it was called Revolution Square; after the country's independence it became known as Liberation Square. Today, though, locals simply refer to it by its original name, Congress Square.

During the 1930s, the square was renovated by famed Slovenian architect Joze Plecnik who spent the last 35 years of his life in Ljubljana and was instrumental in giving the capital city its modern identity by designing many iconic structures like the Slovene National and University Library Building. Plecnik also helped restore or renovate numerous historical structures and contributed greatly to the civic improvements done in the city prior to WWII, including the renovation of the city's bridges, parks, plazas and the Ljubljana riverbanks. Because of his strong Catholic beliefs he fell out of

favor with the communist government but was such an architectural influence that he continued to work late into his life. When he died in 1957 he was given an official state funeral. Today, some of his works in Ljubljana are inscribed on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, which has sparked a renewed interest in the architect's style, described as Vienna Succession (a type of Art Nouveau).

The park, like the rest of the Old Town, was decorated for the Christmas season with trees and lampposts wrapped in lights and colorful Christmas banners stretching above the park's walkways. Surrounding the square I found several notable structures. Facing the southwestern corner of the plaza is the Ursuline Church of the Holy Trinity, an interesting-looking Baroque building from the early 1700s with a row of six stone columns on its façade, making it look more like a government building than a church. Inside is an extensive altar made from African marble. Across the street from the church (inside the plaza) is a beautiful pillar statue called the Holy Trinity Column. Along the northwestern corner of the square is a structure that was once the home of Ljubljana's Casino Society, *the* meeting spot for the city's upper crust. This edifice is one of the few neoclassical buildings that survived the 1895 earthquake intact. On the southeastern corner of the square sits the Slovenian Philharmonic Building constructed in 1891. In the distance, behind this structure, I could see Ljubljana Castle, the city's main landmark situated atop a hill overlooking the city center. The castle, which we visited the following day, was lit up with blue floodlights, providing the square with a very awesome-looking backdrop. Also along the southeastern section of Congress Square is the rectorate building of the University of Ljubljana, a structure that once served as the seat of the Provincial Diet during the Hapsburg period.

From Congress Square I walked south for three blocks along *Gosposka Ulica* (street) to visit the National and University Library building, designed by Joze Plecnik and considered to be one of his finest works. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the country's main library system (established in 1774) had outlived its usefulness in terms of capacity, especially after the University of Ljubljana opened in 1919. Plecnik drew up the design for a new national library in the 1930s and the structure was built between 1936-41. This building is included as part of Plecnik's legacy on the UNESCO World Heritage List. It resembles a giant square block with an open courtyard in the middle. Its mesmerizing façade consists of red bricks with embedded stone blocks that jut out from the brick walls, giving off a weird but

aesthetically pleasing presence all at the same time. A university student was kind enough to let me in with his door pass so I could look around. *This was one gigantic library!* I read online that it holds over 1.3 million books, nearly 9,000 manuscripts and gosh-knows how many visual, text and multimedia resources. In addition, the library subscribes to thousands of periodicals worldwide.

From the National and University Library I walked one block further south and came across the City Museum of Ljubljana (*Mestni Muzej Ljubljana*) housed in a former palace. The museum charges an entry fee but it was almost closing time and I was allowed to go in and look around for twenty minutes or so. From a discarded visitor's information pamphlet I learned that excavations conducted during the early 2000s inside the building, when the palace was being renovated, uncovered a treasure trove of historical artifacts in the basement and courtyard areas, many of which are now on display. These artifacts date from the Late Bronze Age, to the Iron Age, to the Roman period and well into the late Middle Ages. I was sorry I couldn't explore the whole thing. I love museums and this one offered a wonderful glimpse into the timeline history of the city and its immediate region from the earliest marsh inhabitants up to the present, with many interesting items and interactive displays. For example, the oldest known wooden wheel with an axle can be found here. Alas, I was kicked out when they announced the museum was officially closed.

Two blocks further south I re-crossed the Ljubljanica River via the St. James Bridge, one of the busier vehicular bridges in the Old Town area. On the other side of the river was the St. James Parish Church, built in a Baroque style in the early 1600s. Joze Plecnik renovated the courtyard in front of the church in the 1920s. Across from the church was the Gruber Mansion, a beautiful braided Rococo style building from the late 1700s that now houses the Archives for the Republic of Slovenia. From here I walked north along the cobbled stone streets until I reached the Old Square (*Stari trg*) section of the city. For many, this is considered the heart of Ljubljana's Old Town. I'm not sure exactly where the square began for it seemed to go on for several blocks, but I think it starts in the open plaza containing a Hercules water fountain. The area had a very quaint, picturesque feel, with wooden shopfronts and cafes, surrounded by buildings from the 1800s, and narrow passageways branching out into small courtyards.

I continued north and came upon another of the city's oldest plazas, the Town Square (*Mestni trg*). Wonderful Baroque town houses dating back to the Austrian empire grace this area. Divided now into apartment dwellings with many of the street level floors offering boutique shops and art galleries, these buildings are a joy to look at. Carved wooden doors, framed by columns, with large brass handles; the upper floors decorated with intricate ironwork, balustrades and statuary. In the main part of the square is the city's town hall building (the *Magistrat*). The structure was originally built in 1484 and was renovated in the early 1700s in a baroque style with a Venetian inspiration that included a gable front, a loggia and a three-part staircase. The interior has since been updated and now features a section that hosts temporary art exhibits. I went inside and toured the art gallery and took some photos before moving on. In front of the town hall is a replica of the Robba Fountain (also called the *Fountain of the Three Carniolan Rivers*), which was designed by famed Italian sculpture Francesco Robba back in 1751. The original fountain statue was renovated in 2006 and moved to the National Gallery. This replica is one of the most recognizable landmarks in the Old Town, featuring sculptures of three men with jugs fetching water, symbolizing the three rivers of the Carniola region: the Ljubljana, the Sava and Krka Rivers. In the center of the fountain is a tall obelisk.

I took my photos of the fountain and walked a short distance further to visit the St. Nicholas Cathedral, which is located next to the Roman Catholic Archdiocese building in the Cyril and Methodius Square (*Ciril-Methodov trg*). The history regarding this church goes all the way back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century when a Romanesque church was built on the site. It eventually burned down and a refurbished church in a Gothic style went up in its place in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, which was later renovated when the church became a cathedral in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In 1469 the cathedral burned to the ground in what was suspected to be an act of arson perpetrated by the Turks. The cathedral we see today was built in a Baroque style between 1701 and 1706. The exterior has an unusual design; an octagonal green dome on its eastern side and two belfries on its western side. As a result – in my novice opinion – the whole structure appeared *a little off*. To be perfectly honest, it didn't even look like a grand cathedral, especially at night. The structure is sandwiched between other buildings and trying to get the whole thing in a single photo frame was nearly impossible, at least from the Cyril and Methodius Square. I'm certain the interior is spectacular, but I couldn't locate the main entrance, or even ascertain if it was open. By now I

had been walking for over two hours and was so numbingly cold all I wanted to do was return to the hotel for the evening.

I made my way back to the Triple Bridge and Preseren Square. Food vendors had set up kiosks near the Triple Bridge and were selling the biggest grilled sausages and hamburgers I'd ever seen. For me, hunger always trumps tiredness and I plucked down my last remaining euros and bought a hamburger the size of a dinner plate (I kid you not). I stood next to the vendor's grilling station for warmth and ate the burger with both hands before continuing back to the hotel. On the way I ran into Sanja and a few of the others who were heading to dinner. They invited me to tag along but I had to politely decline. It was shortly after 7:00pm when I reached my room. I brushed my teeth and laid down on the bed, flipping through the channels to see if there was something interesting to watch on TV. The over-sized hamburger digesting in my stomach, though, made me sleepier than my xanax prescription and I soon slipped into a deep slumber.

## **Days Seventeen and Eighteen**

I woke up at 6:30am feeling fully refreshed. Today was the last full day of the tour. I repacked my luggage, setting aside the clothes I would be wearing for the remainder of the trip. Over several cups of instant coffee I wrote down the details of my walk the previous evening. Afterwards, I performed my exercise routine. Lufthansa Airlines sent me an email allowing me to check-in early for my following morning flight and I was able to secure aisle seats for all my connections. At 9:00am I went downstairs for breakfast, sharing a table with Bert and New York Mary. We talked about the recent storm along the American east coast that had dumped a ton of snow on their area of Upstate New York. Meanwhile, the weather in Miami was a balmy 84°F (28.8° C). *Um, I didn't have the heart to tell them.*

At 10:40am the group met in the lobby. Sanja led us on foot through the City Center to a quay along the Ljubljanica River where we boarded a riverboat for a 45-minute tour of the waterway. Several different tour boat companies operate in the city. This is a very leisurely (and inexpensive) way to see some of the unique bridges that span the river and to admire the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century architecture situated along the city's famed embankments. We followed the Ljubljanica River in a kind of semi-loop around a portion of the Old Town surrounding Ljubljana Castle.

Most of the smaller pedestrian bridges we passed were unremarkable, but there were a few gems that were either built or renovated by famed architect Joze Plecnik during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first notable one we saw was the Cobblers' Bridge (*Sustarski Most*). Back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century a wooden bridge stood here called the Butcher's Bridge (butchers had set up shop next to it). The smell of rotting meat, though, turned people's stomachs and the emperor at the time paid to have them relocated. Shoemakers eventually replaced the butchers near the bridge and the name was changed to Cobblers' Bridge (Note: there is also a popular footbridge called Butcher's Bridge in another part of Ljubljana). Due to fires and floods the structure has been rebuilt several times. The current arched stone bridge was designed by Joze Plecnik in the early 1930s. It is included as one of his legacy works on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The bridge is decorated with two types of pillars; Corinthian columns line the bridge while Ionic pillars serve as lampposts.

The next bridge we went under was the beautiful Triple Bridge (*Tromostovje*) which connects Preseren Square with the medieval quarter. As we approached the structure we had a nice view of the reddish Baroque façade of the Franciscan Church of the Annunciation in the background. Like the Cobblers' Bridge, the original wooden structure that once stood here dated back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In 1842, a two-arched bridge with a metal fence was erected in honor of Archduke Franz Karl of Austria, and became known as the Franz's Bridge. This structure has since been renovated and preserved. In 1929, Joze Plecnik designed two adjacent footbridges to the main bridge (one on each side) to prevent 'bottlenecking' from increased pedestrian traffic. As a result, this unusual bridge widens into three slightly angled pathways like splayed fingers. It was by far my favorite one in the city.

Up next was the Butchers' Bridge (*Mesarski Most*), a simple footbridge connecting the *Petkovskovo Nabrezje* embankment with the Ljubljana

Central Market. Originally, an elaborate covered bridge had been designed by Joze Plecnik that was to be part of his Central Market renovation, but the outbreak of WWII put an end to its construction. The bridge was finally opened in 2010 in a very modern yet simple style. It features a glass walkway along its sides with steel wire fencing. Three large sculptures adorn the bridge: *Adam and Eve* (looking shameful), *Satyr* (a Greek mythological figure with a tail) and *Prometheus* (often referred to as the Greek God of Fire). Along the wide shelves that form the top of the steel-wire fences are smaller sculptures of grotesque frogs and shellfish. What this peculiar combination of scary-looking sculptures was meant to convey is beyond me, but, ironically, the bridge has become a magnet for the hopelessly romantic. Since opening, couples have been placing padlocks on the steel-wires as a symbol of their eternal love.

The last bridge we went under was the Dragon Bridge (*Zmajski Most*). Built at the turn of the 1900s, this was the first reinforced concrete bridge in Ljubljana (and among the earliest of such bridges in Europe). The Dragon Bridge is regarded as one of the best examples of the Vienna Succession style, which emerged in Vienna in the late 1800s and is closely related to the Art Nouveau movement. Four magnificent copper dragon statues (now greenish in color) stand guard on the four corners of the structure, their wings arched back as if ready to take flight. If you look closely there are also sixteen smaller dragon statues adorning the bridge. The use of the dragon symbol is based on the Greek mythical figures of Jason and the Argonauts. The legend, as it pertains to the city, is that Jason and his gang founded Ljubljana and slaughtered a dragon here.

At this point the riverboat turned around and we headed back to the quay, arriving by 11:45am. The rest of the day was free for us to explore Ljubljana on our own before our farewell dinner later that evening. Sanja offered to take us up to Ljubljana Castle and we all agreed. She led us over the Cobbler's Bridge. We walked north along Town Square (*Mestni trg*) passing the Town Hall building and stopping briefly at the Cathedral of St. Nicholas so she could show us the bronze church doors that were added prior to Pope John Paul II's visit in 1996. The front door of the church depicts the history of Christianity in Slovenia, while the side doors have images pertaining to the history of Ljubljana's Catholic diocese. From here we walked to the nearby Vodnik Square (*Vodnikov trg*) where the Central Market is located.

Vodnik Square is another historic plaza within the Old Town situated on the right embankment of Ljubljanica River between the Triple Bridge and



the Dragon Bridge. The square is named after Valentin Vodnik, a Slovene priest and writer from the Late Enlightenment Age who is regarded as the first real poet and journalist of Slovenia. A monument dedicated to him adorns the square. Following the 1895 earthquake, a former monastery that once stood in the square, containing a female diocesan college, was heavily damaged and had to be pulled down. The empty space was used as an open public market. In the 1930s, Joze Plecnik designed a Renaissance-influenced marketplace building inside the square, considered one of his crowning architectural glories. The two-story market hall complex follows a curve of the river, with large semi-circular windows facing the water and a series of colonnades on the street side. The structure is interrupted by two opened-column loggias, which allow a view of the river from the square. The entire complex, now known simply as the Central Market, is listed as one of Plecnik's legacies on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

We walked through the outdoor area of the marketplace to a paved trail across from the Vodnik monument that winds its way up to Ljubljana Castle (*Ljubljanski grad*). This medieval fortress sits atop a large hill overlooking the entire Old Town. Sanja instructed those of us who didn't want to walk uphill for fifteen minutes to take the funicular train located on the northern side of Castle Hill. The rest of us walked to the top. In addition to the forests surrounding the hillsides, we were provided with exceptional panoramic views of the city the higher up we went.

The structure perched on top of Castle Hill dates back to a wooden and stone fortress built around the 11<sup>th</sup> century that was later reconstructed and renovated many times over the ensuing centuries. But due to its strategic position, the area of Castle Hill has actually been used as a military fortification going all the way back to the Romans (and beyond). The castle's primary purpose during the late Middle Ages was to defend against the Ottomans and to quell peasant revolts. It was the home of the rulers of *Carniola* (the historic region of what is now modern-day Slovenia) and as such was targeted by invading forces throughout its history. During the 15<sup>th</sup> century the castle was demolished and rebuilt. It was completely walled and had defensive towers at its entrance together with a drawbridge. The St George's Chapel inside the fortress was constructed at this time, as well. Further additions were added during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

As modern warfare developed, though, the castle's usefulness began to decline, and coupled with the cost of maintaining it, the complex was slowly abandoned by the country's rulers. During its declining years the castle was

utilized as an arsenal, a military barracks (sometimes by invading forces), and eventually converted into a notorious prison during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The municipal government of Ljubljana purchased the property in 1905 with the hopes of converting it into a museum. Those plans were delayed for decades as Castle Hill was used to house the city's poor. When Joze Plecnik was remodeling the city he proposed razing the fortress to build a new parliament building on Castle Hill, but it was never carried out. Plecnik created the promenade and renovated the landscaping surrounding the castle. Beginning in the 1960s the castle underwent a 35-year restoration period and today the complex is a major cultural landmark of the city and a very popular tourist location (at least, judging from the crowds).

Upon reaching the castle entrance we gathered in the courtyard and waited for those who had taken the funicular train to arrive. As we waited I took in the buildings around the courtyard. Just to the right of the entrance was the Archers Tower, its base dating back to another, smaller watchtower from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Around the entire perimeter were defensive walls connecting to other towers. One of them, the Tower of Erasmus, was named after a robber baron from the 1400s (the son of a governor) who had killed the commander of the Imperial Army at the Vienna Court over an insult. The dead commander was a relative of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III who demanded immediate justice. Erasmus, though, escaped and fled to his castle (the famous Predjama Castle near the Postojna Cave) and aligned himself with the king of Hungary and began attacking Habsburg estates and small towns in Carniola, gaining quite the reputation until the emperor ordered a siege of his castle, which resulted in the death of Erasmus. I'm not really sure why this tower is named after him, but, at any rate, *he was one ballsy nobleman*.

When the group was re-united, Sanja led us up to the Panoramic Tower for some nice views of the city and surrounding mountains. The tower was originally made of wood and was rebuilt with masonry in the mid-1800s. A double spiral staircase led to the top. The reason that towers often had two separate stairways, I learned at the castle, was to avoid soldiers from crossing each other as they went up and down during times of battle. From the observation deck we could look down onto the terracotta rooftops, spires and green cupolas of the Old Town. We also visited the former prison section, which was built between the defensive walls and the natural bedrock. Prisoners were lowered into the holding cells via rope from the castle's patio area. We saw cells used for torturing inmates; although, being

shackled in such a small, enclosed and crowded space, with very little sunlight and sanitation, was probably torture enough. There are information boards and displays from the time the castle was used as a prison. Before it was officially closed, both local criminals and prisoners-of-war were kept here.

We also visited the 15<sup>th</sup> century Chapel of St. George. Consecrated in 1498, this Gothic chapel was later renovated in a Baroque style in 1727. The chapel is still in use today. The altar consisted of a plain tiled floor with a hanging Jesus Cross and three large Nativity Scene statues in front of it. Behind the altar was a series of elongated Gothic windows from the original construction. Running along the nave's high walls were balconies where the nobles would sit to hear Mass. The most striking thing about this 626-year old chapel – for me, anyway – were the frescoes lining the upper walls and the ceiling, depicting not religious scenes but rather the coat-of-arms of the governors who ruled Carniola from this castle. The frescoes were added during the Baroque renovations.

After our tour of the castle grounds we took a group photo shot behind a large touristy heart-shaped sign (situated next to the oldest tree inside the courtyard) before returning to the Old Town. Some members of the group took the funicular train while the rest of us hiked back down the trail with Sanja. When we reached Vodnik Square the group split up for the day. Boston Mary, Anne and I walked through the Central Market taking pictures. At this hour of the day the market was not very busy. Before we headed back to Preseren Square I also stopped to take photos of the 'lovers padlocks' and statues on the Butchers' Bridge (*Mesarski most*) adjacent to the Central Market. In Preseren Square, Boston Mary bought a bag of roasted chestnuts from an outdoor vendor that she shared with Anne and me after I mentioned I had never eaten a chestnut before.

As we ate our chestnuts in Preseren Square we ran into Tim and Craig who were on their way to visit the *Neboticik* ('Skyscraper') building on Stefanova Street. The *Neboticik* is a prominent high-rise structure built in the 1930s. When first completed, its 13-story height made it the largest building in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and one of the tallest in Europe for a time being. The first five floors host shops and offices; floors six to nine contain private apartments. On the top three floors you'll find a very popular café, bar and observation deck offering panoramic views of the city's landscape, Ljubljana Castle and the Julian Alps mountain range. Anne decided to join Tim and Craig. I returned to the hotel with Boston Mary. She

agreed to accompany me to Tivoli Park, which was located near our hotel. Actually, Boston Mary had already visited Tivoli Park during her morning walk earlier that day and simply wanted to complete her '10,000 steps' before nighttime. As for me, I wanted to explore this impressive public park and perhaps some of its nearby museums. After a quick bathroom break at the hotel we began heading west for four blocks along a street called *Cankarjeva ceste* until we reached the park.

Measuring five square kilometers (almost 2 square miles) this is the biggest public park in Ljubljana. Revered French engineer Jean Blanchard originally designed the park in 1813 when the city became the capital of the Illyrian Provinces, a short-lived autonomous province under Napoleon's rule. Blanchard created the park by uniting the open green spaces surrounding two large mansions (the Tivoli Castle and the Cekin Mansion, both still standing) and linking them with the downtown area. He also designed many of the park's tree-lined lanes and flower gardens. In 1880 a pond was excavated in the park's southern section and later a tree nursery was added. And during the 1920s and 1930s, Joze Plecnik added his own special touch to Tivoli Park, creating a sprawling central promenade adorned with neoclassical lampposts that is now used for large exhibitions and gatherings. When we reached Tivoli Park we were facing the promenade.

This central park is well utilized. It is the place where city dwellers who don't wish to leave the capital go for the weekend. The green lawns are perfect for family picnics, and there are many playgrounds for the children. The park even has a mini-golf course. Ten kilometers (6.2 miles) of paved walkways and trails snake through Tivoli Park making it a favorite spot for joggers, cyclists and roller skaters. Along the southwestern edges of the park, in an area designed as a nature reserve, is the Ljubljana Zoo. Boston Mary and I walked to the end of the promenade and then we parted ways. She was very fond of her long walks and the quiet, reflective time it afforded her.

I continued exploring the park on my own for another 45 minutes. From the promenade I headed over to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Tivoli Castle, which now houses the International Center of Graphic Arts, a museum featuring fine art prints from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. In front of the castle is a water fountain, and just beyond it a lavish stone staircase leading up to the building, decorated with cast iron dog sculptures. The castle was purchased by Austrian emperor Francis Joseph I and gifted to his Field Marshall Joseph Radetzky von Radetz in the middle of the 1800s, who then renovated the

mansion to its current neoclassical style. I did not go inside because I wasn't really interested in fine art prints. Instead, I walked along the park's meandering trails admiring the landscape. I was trying to locate the park's other famed castle, the Cekin Mansion (which is now the site of the Museum of Modern History). It is situated in the northeastern corner of the park, but I got a little disoriented and ended up looping back to the promenade.

On my way back to the hotel along Cankarjeva Road, one block from the promenade, I passed the Museum of Modern Art of Ljubljana (*Moderna galerija*). This museum is housed in a single-story structure built in the 1940s and designed by another famed Slovenian architect named Edvard Ravnikar, a student of Jozef Plecnik. The museum features Slovenian and Eastern European artwork from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. It was one of the galleries recommended by my guidebook so I decided to go inside and have a look around. I spent well over an hour here. The museum has about a dozen or so galleries with four of them displaying a permanent collection showcasing the Slovenian avant-garde movement of the last century, and one section devoted to Partisan Art from WWII, which was pretty cool. The thematic set-up of the museum takes the visitor on a chronological journey that explains the influences and development of art in Slovenia over the past 120 years, from the expressionist artwork that arose from the national uncertainties and anxieties following World War I to the origins of the avant-garde movement of the 1920s to the rise of antifascist Partisan Art in the 1940s to the development of art over the past forty years. In addition, on odd-numbered years, the museum hosts the International Biennial of Graphic Art, an exhibition of prints and installations from around the world. I am not an art historian, so I will not do the place any justice by trying to describe what I saw, but I will say this is a wonderful museum and worth a visit.

Before heading back to the hotel I crossed the street from the museum and took photos of an unusual public sculpture known as the Potato Statue. It looked more like a gigantic silver egg that had been sliced into five sections than an actual potato. I couldn't find any relative information concerning the statue, but I did read there is an annual potato festival in the city that celebrates the use of spuds in Slovene cuisine. In back of the statue is the beautiful Eastern Orthodox Church of Saints Cyril and Methodius. This little gem of a church was built during the 1930s in a Serbo-Byzantine Revival style. It features five domes topped with golden crosses. I went inside and was completely blown away by the ostentatious interior.

Religious frescoes covered every inch of its walls. The large iconostasis in front of the altar had been exquisitely carved in wood and the nave had polished, granite-looking columns topped with frescoes. This structure has served the Orthodox community of Ljubljana for nearly 90 years. I found it odd that I was the only visitor.

I continued down Cankarjeva Road and stopped to photograph another beautiful building: the Ljubljana Slovene National Theatre (of) Opera and Ballet (*SNG Opera in balet Ljubljana*). This pink-colored theater was constructed in 1892 in a neo-Renaissance style featuring a richly decorated façade that catches your attention *immediately*. Ionic columns support a majestic tympanum above the entrance with two large niches on the sides adorned with the allegorical statues depicting Tragedy and Comedy. The roof sported dragon sculptures. I wanted to see the interior, as well, but sadly the building was closed. I returned to the hotel by 4:00pm, stopping at a local bakery to pick up a meat and cheese pastry to tie me over until dinner. In my room I made instant coffee and ate my pastry while watching the second half of the Uruguay-Ghana soccer match on TV.

At 5:30pm the group met in the lobby and Sanja led us upstairs to a conference room where we toasted the successful completion of the trip with champagne (or juice, for those of us who didn't imbibe). It was a sentimental send-off, if you will, with Sanja talking about how special the group had been. And truly, this was one of the closest travel groups I'd ever experienced in all my years of guided touring. We bonded from day one and many of us have stayed in touch via WhatsApp for more than a year now, which, believe me, is quite remarkable. We went around the room taking turns describing what we really enjoyed about the tour and what we gained from the experience. We all shared special moments from the trip, but I think a common thread was the in-depth knowledge of the region's current history, especially the causes and effects of the Yugoslav Wars on the various countries we visited. I, for one, will always be moved by what I learned about the sieges of Sarajevo and Dubrovnik.

Sanja gave each one of us an envelope containing a 5,000,000 (dinar) banknote from the former Yugoslavia. When someone in the group jokingly asked if we could cash the banknote, I was reminded of my best friend's favorite comeback line: *Yeah, that and \$10 will get you a cup of coffee at Starbucks!* Also included in the envelope was the police-required hotel registration card from our stay in Sarajevo and a commemorative pin of the tour. Afterwards, we walked to the Restaurant Sestica (*Gostilna Sestica*)

located on the corner next to the hotel for our farewell dinner. This tavern/restaurant is a local favorite in the city dating back to 1776. Although, due to the establishment's popularity I found the staff to be somewhat harried and not too friendly. The elderly waitress who served me my food, for example, had all the warmth of a partisan brigade captain leading an attack against the Nazis. But the restaurant did have an authentic feel and we were treated to a traditional Slovenian meal of soup, spicy sausages, potatoes, cabbage salad and chocolate cake with ice cream topped with raspberry sauce for dessert. I sat next to Texas Mary and Debra and we had a nice conversation about our past and upcoming travels. By 9:00pm we returned to the hotel where we hugged and said our final goodbyes to one another, with promises to keep in touch. Up in my room I finished writing the day's events in my journal notebook and did my final packing while watching Serbia get defeated by Switzerland in their World Cup soccer match. I slept lightly that night.

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My cellphone alarm went off at 3:00am. I made instant coffee and then showered and dressed. I was in the lobby by 4:30am. I was scheduled for a taxi transfer to the airport with Ron, Ann and either Boston Mary or Texas Mary (I'm not sure which one now). Sanja, bless her heart, was there to see us off. We arrived at the international airport by 4:55am but had to wait forty-five anxious minutes to check in because the Lufthansa employees hadn't shown up for work yet. Our driver was nice enough to stay with us until the check-in counter was opened.

I will not bore you with the minute details of my return trip home. I had a stopover in Frankfurt before continuing on to Miami, arriving in South Florida shortly after 3:00pm on the same day. From there I took an Uber to my condo. Over the following weeks I posted my photos of the tour on my website and then began writing the final draft of this travelogue. As has been the case with my more recent trips, it has taken me quite a while to finish

this journal and post it online. I apologize to everyone who has been diligently reading this. Since retiring I've noticed that I'm not in a hurry to do *anything*, anymore. Besides, I also took some other trips which delayed the completion of this journal. But now its finished, and I have to turn the page on this adventure and concentrate on the next one.

I would like to thank everyone in the tour – Ron and Ann, Boston Mary, Debra, Tim, Craig, Texas Mary, Anne, Irene and Randy, Ute, Bert and New York Mary – and our wonderful tour leader Sanja. This was an awesome trip, thanks in no small part to the camaraderie of our group. Because of all of you, this will always be one of my favorite tours. And now that I've committed my memories to paper, I hope this journal will also serve as a reminder of the time we shared together back in late 2022.

Until next time, happy trails...

Richard C Rodriguez (also known as *Devet*)

(My trip to Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Slovenia occurred on November 16 – December 2, 2022)

























