

## **My Trip to the Balkans (Bulgaria, Serbia and Romania)**

I normally plan two trips annually; one in early spring, the other in late summer. This year I had booked a two-week tour of Italy beginning in August, but later cancelled the trip after reading a travel article about Bran Castle located in the Transylvania region of Romania. I am almost ashamed to admit this: I had forsaken the *splendor* of Italy for the chance to see ‘Dracula’s castle’. I blame it on my inner Scooby Doo. After some research, though, I soon discovered that tours to Romania were not cheap. In order to travel twice a year on my letter carrier’s salary, I have to avail myself of the budget travel companies I find on the Internet. One such company is Gate 1 Travel. They were offering an 11-day, air-inclusive tour of the Balkans that included Bulgaria, Serbia *and* Romania. Although the cost per day of this trip was a little higher than I am accustomed to paying, it included great hotel lodgings, most of the meals, all of the excursions, the travel insurance and the dreaded single supplement fee. And while my main interest was Romania, this particular tour would allow me the opportunity to experience two other countries I hadn’t previously thought of visiting. I would also get to fly round-trip directly out of Miami, Florida, my hometown. For me, this was a win-win proposition!

Well, what is it they say about “the best laid plans of mice and men”? This turned out to be the most difficult tour I’ve taken to date. Everything that could possibly go wrong at the beginning of a trip *did*. But let me not get ahead of myself here.

No trip I’ve taken recently is complete without the element of danger. I’ve been to Mexico during the bird flu epidemic and the rising gang-related violence. I toured Egypt just four months before the Arab Spring revolution, when you could feel the discontent in the air. My most recent trip to Turkey occurred while neighboring Syria’s civil war was raging (and still is) and tension between those two countries was at an all-time high. Mind you, I do not plan it this way. It’s just that if you wait for perfect conditions you might as well stay curled up on your sofa. So I wasn’t *too* scared when, six weeks prior to my trip, an Islamic suicide bomber blew up a bus full of Israeli tourists in the Black Sea resort city of Burgas in eastern Bulgaria. At least seven people died, and more than thirty were wounded. International news agencies blamed the incident on a proxy war being waged between Iran and Israel. I checked almost daily with the State Department’s website to make sure it was safe to travel to the Balkans. In spite of the terrorist attack, the region seemed relatively safe for American tourists. I kept my fingers crossed.

No visas were required for this trip. Just days before leaving I had assembled everything I would need for the journey, including a Lonely Planet travel book on Eastern Europe to acquaint myself with the cities and towns we’d be visiting. When I received my travel documents I discovered that a company called Kompas – and not Gate 1 Travel – would be doing the actual tour. Apparently, Gate 1 contracted us out to Kompas, who specialize in Eastern European guided tours. At first I was a bit concerned

by this, but a couple I met during my trip to Turkey, Alan and Kathy Cunningham, who would be joining me on this trip, told me that Kompas had done a great job when they visited Russia a few years earlier and highly recommended them. Their assurance was enough for me. On August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012, I took a taxi to nearby Miami International Airport to begin my adventure.

The next 48 hours did not go very well...

## Days One and Two

I arrived at Miami International Airport three hours before my Lufthansa flight was scheduled to leave. I was very proud of myself. My check-in luggage usually hovers around the 50-pound maximum weight limit, but this time it only weighed 30 pounds. This was due, in large part, to my decision to pack mostly nylon zip-off pants and lighter clothing for the trip. The average Balkans temperature this time of year should have been between 55 and 75 degrees Fahrenheit, but because of an exceptionally hot summer the mean temperature was over 90 degrees, with cooler morning temperatures only when we entered Romania, so it was not necessary to pack heavier clothes.

I checked in early – securing an aisle seat for my connecting flight from Frankfurt, Germany to Sofia, Bulgaria – and then proceeded to my terminal gate where I had a pleasant lunch in one of the airport restaurants. Pleasant, that is, until I read something in the business section of my USA Today, a short paragraph announcing an impending Lufthansa flight attendants' union strike for the following day in Germany. Concerned how this might affect my flight (since I would be arriving in Frankfurt the following morning), I headed over to the nearest Lufthansa ticket counter and asked the representative about it. She smiled sweetly and informed me the union strike was only going to affect *one* airport, and only for five hours, and that I should not be concerned. My flight, this pretty young woman assured me, would not be interrupted. *Whew!* With *that* off my chest, I sat near my terminal gate and began reading a Newsweek magazine until it was boarding time.

I seldom have a good experience on long flights, and this trip was no exception. I attribute this to my 6' 1 frame, which makes it all but impossible to relax comfortably in a coach seat. On my budget, traveling Business or First Class is nothing more than a pipe dream. During check-in I always inquire if anything is available in the exit row aisles, but these seats go faster than tickets at a Springsteen concert. For this particular Lufthansa flight I found myself wedged in tightly behind this inconsiderate German man who reclined his seat as far as it would go, boxing me in like a caged animal. He also had the annoying habit of stretching and leaning back with all his weight, further pushing the back of his seat into my knees.

I was not able to clearly hear the audio portion of the in-flight movie over the roar of the plane's engines, so I chose to read, instead. I had several back issues of Smithsonian magazine with me. My routine on these long plane trips is always the same: hang on until lunch or dinner is served and then pop an Ambien and try to get some sleep. When the stewardess finally arrived with the dinner cart the woman sitting next to me asked for some Tylenol, complaining she had a terrible headache. The stewardess smiled apologetically and told her she didn't have any. At this point, trying to be the Good Samaritan, I offered the woman some Advil, which was in my backpack buried deep within the overhead compartment. She gratefully accepted...and then expected me to retrieve the pills that very moment, even though I was wedged into my seat with a tray of food practically on my lap. Okay, I'm a gentleman; I asked her to please hold my dinner tray and then managed to squirm out of my seat and began rummaging through the overhead bin for my backpack. I accidentally dislodged a small carry-on bag that promptly fell on the head of the inconsiderate man in front of me. I tried not to snicker as he yelped something out in German. I apologized profusely but he only calmed down once the 'headache woman' (who turned out to be his wife) told him I was just trying to get her some medication from my bag. But this embarrassing moment wasn't over for me. When I tried to sit back down the space was so confining that I actually had to plop into my seat, the momentum forcing the tray of food of the passenger sitting behind me to go flying all over the front of his shirt. This elderly man *really* had a fit as the stewardess tried to wipe the wine and gravy off his chest. I'm glad I don't speak German, because I'm pretty certain he was cursing the day my parents met. Once again, I turned around and apologized profusely. By now, the other passengers were looking at me and frowning, probably wondering who this troublesome American was. *Oh, the indignity.* I slinked into my seat as far as I could and ate quickly. Afterwards, I dry-swallowed an Ambien, pulled my cap down over my eyes and gratefully fell asleep for the next five hours.

My flight arrived in Frankfurt on time, shortly after seven in the morning on Day Two of my trip. I had a two and a half hour layover before my connecting flight to Sofia, Bulgaria. Frankfurt airport is huge; we stepped off the plane and onto the tarmac where a long transport terminal bus was waiting for us. We literally drove over runways (the driver stopping to make sure the coast was clear) to reach our terminal building. It took me almost half an hour to locate my departure gate because it was situated in the far corner of the Terminal J building. I purchased a café latte and sat down to wait for the boarding call. This was approximately 8:00 am. Fifteen minutes later, an announcement was made over the speaker system informing us that our flight to Sofia was now departing from gate J17. So I collected my backpack and trekked over to the new terminal gate. It was now approximately 8:30 am.

My first inkling that something was *afoot* began when a long line suddenly materialized at the ticket counter next to our terminal gate. All the announcements were in German and I assumed they were beginning their boarding process, albeit a bit early. I got on line and met a fifty-something year old American woman named Christine from Pennsylvania who was on her way to the Balkans for a two-week tour. I also met a very nice young German fellow named Meikel Brandmeyer who was joining his Bulgarian

wife in Sofia for a vacation. We struck up a conversation and became fast friends the way only seasoned travelers can do. Meikel became our interpreter, asking the now beleaguered Lufthansa ticket counter representative what was going on. Apparently, our plane was fueled and ready for take-off, the pilots were in the cockpit, but the flight attendants hadn't shown up for work yet. Several P.A. announcements followed, indicating that perhaps a strike was in progress, informing the increasingly anxious passengers to wait near the terminal gate until further notice.

While we waited, I met a Bulgarian couple, Nino and Svetlana (whose accent reminded me of the Natasha cartoon character on Bullwinkle), and they, too, became part of my growing list of new friends. The last couple to join our 'circle' was Ron and Anke Wilckens from Mahwah, New Jersey. I have a knack for spotting other GATE 1 tour members in airport terminals, and I correctly assessed these two Americans were on the same tour as me. Over the next two days the Wilckens and I would become inseparable traveling companions. Our little group waited for several hours until 11:20 am, when the official announcement was made that the flight attendants' union of Lufthansa had indeed gone on strike. As a result, 200 flights were simultaneously cancelled and I became one of several thousand travelers now stranded in Frankfurt. Thanks to Meikel's inquiries, we knew enough to head over to the transfer service counters inside the terminal building to get re-booked. Unfortunately, so did everybody else. Thousands of desperate travelers were now rushing over to the service windows. When our group arrived we encountered a long line, and while it appeared to move *relatively* quickly, it was only the line to get into the 'waiting area'. After standing for more than an hour we reached another section and soon discovered hundreds of other travelers forming a meandering queue that snaked its way into a glass enclosed ticket counter area. It was now approaching one o'clock in the afternoon and it became increasingly clear to me this was going to be a very, very long day.

I must say, for an airline known for its efficiency Lufthansa seemed ill prepared for this strike despite the advanced warning from its union. There was very little monitoring on the long lines, allowing devious travelers to suddenly cut in front of others. To make matters worse, several Russian-speaking Lufthansa representatives seemed to favor Russian travelers and somehow they made it to the front of the line quickly. I do not know if money changed hands, but it was very frustrating to witness this, especially since *our* line moved at a snail's pace. The few seats available in the adjacent lounge were all taken and our group languished on our feet for hours, taking the occasional bathroom break. Eventually, Lufthansa employees began distributing snacks and bottled water and juice.

By 4:00 pm we rounded the line at the end of the waiting room, but the more we advanced the longer it seemed to take. There were only sixteen reps manning the service windows. The only thing that made this bearable was the camaraderie of our little group. Christine had since abandoned us, having worked out her own separate deal with United Airlines, her original carrier, and had been lucky enough to get a booking on a later flight to Sofia with a different airline. To our credit, as annoying as this day turned out, we did not lose our sense of humor. By 6:00 pm we reached the glass-enclosed section of the

service counters. A long *roped* off line awaited us in here. An official announcement was made that all contingency flights were now full and nothing was available until tomorrow, which meant all of us had to be put up for the night in Frankfurt. This caused our forward progress to slow down significantly as stranded passengers now had to be booked into area hotels, as well.

Meikel had had enough of this and phoned his wife in Sofia telling her he would not be arriving that day and then decided to go home (he lived in Frankfurt). Our little group was shrinking... *along with my desires to see the Balkans*. Meikel phoned Nino once he left the terminal building to inform us the lines at the ticket counters downstairs were moving much faster. But since we were already nearing the front of the line we opted to stay put. After all, we'd invested a lot of time (and discomfort) standing here, it became almost like a rite of passage to see it through to the end. It wasn't easy, either. Earlier, Anke lost her balance while leaning to her side, collapsing to the floor but thankfully not injuring herself. Ron and I experienced aching pains in our feet and knees, yet we stoically endured, rarely sitting when the occasional seat became available. Nino, angered by the Russian passengers who'd been cutting in front of him all day, decided he would do the same and moved up the line quicker; both he and Svetlana managed to get their bookings ahead of us. By now, my own patience was wearing thin, and I seriously contemplated going back to Miami.

Nearing 8:00 pm, Ron, Anke and I found ourselves (finally!) at the front of the line. We decided beforehand to go up to the counter as a group, making it incumbent upon the service rep that we be booked together since we were on the same tour. The poor rep had a nasty toothache and I can only imagine the horrible day *she* must have endured. Anke gave her some Advil; the very appreciative rep took care of us quickly. She booked us on the 6:50am flight to Munich for the following day where we could catch a connecting flight to Sofia. We were also booked into a nearby Holiday Inn and given 20-euro meal vouchers. We could not retrieve our luggage since it would be sent to Sofia. Luckily, though, I had an extra T-Shirt, socks and underwear in my backpack. Relieved to finally have at least a *temporary* travel plan in place we left the airport terminal and went to the shuttle bus area for our ride to the hotel...*and soon discovered another ginormous line*. Every fifteen minutes a small van with the Holiday Inn logo would pull up and was quickly filled with weary passengers. After watching two of these come and go without making a dent in the queue I suggested we hail a taxi and split the fare. It was a fifteen-minute ride to our hotel and I was excited about seeing a little bit of Frankfurt. To my chagrin, the view resembled the New Jersey turnpike at night. The hotel was adequate, a large, modern Holiday Inn franchise. As we climbed out of the taxi, though, we encountered another line of stranded passengers trying to check-in. *This was one of the longest days of my life*.

I finally made it to my hotel room by 10:30 pm. I agreed to meet Ron and Anke downstairs in the dining room for the buffet dinner. The 20-euro meal voucher was only good at the buffet, which was fine by me until I actually saw the selection. Apparently, the hotel staff – not unlike Lufthansa – was ill-prepared for such an influx of people, and by the time we reached the dining hall the buffet offerings were slim and unappetizing. I

loaded up on what tasted like plain buttered noodles and some kind of soggy imitation crabmeat dim sum. For dessert I had pudding with raspberry sauce. This was pretty much *it* as far as the food selection went. A fitting way, really, to end such a shitty day. I did enjoy Ron and Anke's company, and I discovered they were big Seinfeld fans like me. Throughout the trip, Ron and I traded Seinfeld barbs, making each other laugh like two idiots. I am very grateful to have made their acquaintance; they made this entire ordeal palatable. And I hope I can travel with them again in the future.

I was finally in bed by midnight. But my much-deserved rest was short-lived. We had booked a 4:00am taxi ride to the airport with the front desk, which meant a three o'clock wake-up call. At any rate, I slept soundly...*if only for three hours*. So much for Day Two of my Balkans Tour.

### Day Three

I barely crawled out of bed after the front desk called. I dreamt I was on the Bataan Death March...*no, wait; it was just another airport line!* I took a very hot shower and then put on the emergency T-Shirt I stowed in my backpack for contingencies like this. I prayed my luggage and I would be reunited later that day since I had no clean clothes left. By the time I reached the lobby, Ron and Anke were outside putting their items into the taxi. The first thing out of Anke's mouth when she saw me was, "*The cab driver thinks the strike is still on.*" The sinking feeling in my stomach felt like a whirlpool. We had agreed on a Plan B, which was to see if we could make it to Belgrade by Sunday and catch up with our tour bus there...of course, this was only feasible if Lufthansa's flight schedule was still operational. It was a somber ride to the airport.

When we arrived at our terminal building we were delighted to discover the place practically empty. We were able to check-in quickly and were assured by the counter rep that our flights to Munich and to Sofia would not be delayed. Apparently, the flight attendants' union had made their point, and negotiations were back on track. Relieved, we headed to our departure gate, where the next order of business was locating a cup of coffee at that hour of the morning. We ran into Nino and Svetlana who were also taking the same flight to Sofia.

We reached Munich at 8:00 am and had a two-hour layover before boarding our connecting flight to Sofia. While waiting I was able to sample a sausage loaf called *leberkase* with bread and sweet mustard (which Ron recommended). Our flight to Sofia lasted just under two hours; we touched down at the Sofia International Airport shortly after 12:00 pm. We met Meikel (the young German man from yesterday) near the luggage carousel; he had just arrived on another connecting flight. With Nino and Svetlana nearby it felt like a reunion of sorts.

Ron, Anke and I were booked on our tour's afternoon excursion to see the Rila Monastery, the largest and most famous Eastern Orthodox monastery in Bulgaria (founded in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century), located approximately 117 kilometers south of the capital, deep in the scenic valley of the Rilska River. I was really looking forward to visiting this monastery; my guidebook listed it as a must-see site. The tour bus was scheduled to leave around 1:00 pm and we were still optimistic we could arrive at our hotel on time. But our hopes were soon dashed upon discovering that our luggage had not made the flight. Almost every passenger on our plane had been re-booked as a result of yesterday's strike and our luggage was still sitting in Frankfurt. As usual, we had to get on another long line in front of a small office manned by Swissport, the official cargo and ground support agency used by Lufthansa in Bulgaria, to file a 'missing luggage' report. There were only three Swissport employees to attend to the entire planeload of passengers and their attitudes reminded me of the bored *apparatchiks* one envisioned from the Soviet-bloc era.

As we waited to file our missing luggage report, Anke volunteered to go outside and check the airport lobby for our transfer ride. From the Lufthansa service counter back in Frankfurt we had notified Kompas (at their headquarters in Slovenia) that we would be arriving by 12:30 pm on September 1<sup>st</sup>. I had also called and left a message for our tour director with the front desk of the Radisson Grand Blu Hotel in Sofia about our new arrival time. We *expected* someone to be waiting for us. *Ha!*

By 1:30pm I was finally able to sit at one of the three desks inside the tiny office of Swissport and report my missing luggage. The official who took my report – a young, drab individual who never once cracked a smile or offered an apology – became increasingly irritated with me because I had filled in the wrong address on the form. Apparently, 'address' meant the hotel I was staying and not my *real* address. But since we were leaving on a nine-day trek through the Balkans the following morning – and would be stopping in five different cities over this same time period – I didn't know *which* address to put down. Finally, the official decided to make a photocopy of my hotel itinerary, although this simple and logical step seemed to pain him for some reason, as if photocopy paper cost a fortune in Bulgaria. And judging from the looks of this airport, maybe it did. Ron went next and had to go through the same routine with this bureaucratic hack. We finally made it through customs and met Anke in the airport lobby. As was par for the tour thus far, nobody was waiting for us. *I never felt so unwelcomed in my life.* We had no choice but to flag a taxi and get to the hotel on our own. The temperature was in the mid-90s. It felt like I was back in Miami!

The Radisson Grand Blu Hotel is situated in the downtown area of Sofia, about five or six kilometers from the airport. The cab had no air-conditioning, which was just as well because the driver smelled as if he hadn't bathed in weeks and the thought of his 'aroma' re-circulating through the air vents would have made the ride unbearable. He drove with both hands on the steering wheel, his right armpit just inches from my face since I had opted to sit in the front seat for a better view. I took some photographs of the scenery into Sofia, which included the mountains in the distance, the incredibly brown landscape (due to the region's current drought) and the run down Soviet-style housing units dotting the roadway. But mostly, I tried to cup my nose indiscreetly, trying not to

gag on the driver's body odor, actually *relishing* the stench of stale cigarette smoke lingering in the taxi.

Our hotel was very nice and perfectly located in the downtown area near most of the city's major historical sites and government buildings. While checking in we inquired if there were any messages from the tour guide. Nothing. It was a little disconcerting. After what the Wilckens and I had been through there wasn't even a welcome message from the Kompas tour director. *What a class act!* Kathy Cunningham, on the other hand, had left me several notes letting me know what room her and Alan were in, and what time we could meet later (they were on their way to the Rila Monastery). Ron, Anke and I decided to take our own walking tour of the city – making the most of our short time here – and agreed to meet in the lobby in about 45 minutes. I took this opportunity to wander up Tsar Ivan Shishman Street, adjacent to the hotel, looking for a shop selling T-Shirts. I had no idea how long it would take before I got my luggage back, so I needed to buy something to wear for the short term. Unfortunately, the average Bulgarian is about *half* the size of most Americans...or so it seemed, and it was impossible trying to find a T-Shirt in my size (um, as of this writing a XXL). I did receive a rather nice nylon kit bag from the Swissport employee filled with an emergency supply of toiletries, including deodorant.

From what I read prior to my trip, Bulgaria's economy, like much of Europe's, was not doing so well. This was evident on the drive into Sofia, the country's capital. While the streets were very clean, the buildings themselves in many areas needed upgrading. This is a small country of about 7.5 million people, which relied heavily on economic assistance from the former Soviet Union. When the eastern bloc alliance collapsed, so did Bulgaria's economy, and it's been a long hard economic haul ever since. The only upside is the exchange rate for tourists. While the Bulgarian leva was only 1.5 to 1 against the dollar, prices were relatively cheap compared to back home, making travel to this Balkan country very affordable. The Black Sea resort areas are full of European and Middle Eastern tourists in the summer, and there is a thriving skiing industry in the winter.

Although I was not able to buy any T-Shirts, I did enjoy my first stroll down a Bulgarian street. It was narrow and clean, in that characteristically European way, with many small shops and restaurants opening onto the sidewalk. After several blocks I headed back to the hotel lobby to meet Ron and Anke. We acquired tour maps of the city from the front desk and began our walking tour by crossing the large Tsar Osvoboditel Boulevard in front of our hotel – passing the Nardo Sabranie Circle statue in the process – and came upon the National Assembly building. We admired this historical structure's neo-Renaissance design. Both the National Assembly and the specially designated Grand National Assembly convene here to decide important legislative issues, although the actual offices of the elected officials are housed in the former Bulgarian Communist Party headquarters in the downtown area. We ran into Christine, the American woman who was stranded with us in Frankfurt, but I did not want to spend too much time chatting on the street since we only had a few hours to see the city. I hope Christine did not think it rude of me that I continued up the street – while she was still talking with Ron and Anke – to begin photographing the magnificent Alexander Nevski Cathedral.



The St. Alexander Nevski Cathedral is easily the most famous and recognizable historical structure in Sofia; a cross-domed basilica with an enormous gold-plated central dome that dominates the city's horizon. Named after St. Alexander Nevski, a Russian prince, this Orthodox cathedral was erected to honor the Russian soldiers who died during the Russo-Turkish Wars, which liberated Bulgaria from Ottoman rule. Construction began in 1882, but most of the cathedral was built between 1904 and 1912, in a Neo-Byzantine design, and serves today as the cathedral church of the Patriarch of Bulgaria, holding up to 10,000 worshippers. It is the second largest Orthodox cathedral in the Balkan Peninsula (only the Cathedral of Saint Sava in Belgrade is bigger). I took wonderful pictures of the structure from different angles. Nearby were the National Library Building and the International Art Gallery. I caught up with Ron and Anke and asked them if they wanted to enter the cathedral's crypt museum, containing a large collection of Orthodox icons. They told me they'd seen enough icons on their travels to Europe and decided to explore the surrounding area, instead. I went into the crypt and paid the admission (a few dollars) and spent almost half an hour looking at some incredible icons, paintings and woodworks spanning several centuries, depicting Jesus, the Virgin Mary and Child, the apostles, and various Orthodox saints, all displayed artfully along the walls of a domed white chamber with marble floors.

Afterwards, I met up with Ron and Anke across from the cathedral in a small park where vendors were selling antiques and souvenirs. Some of the stuff on display was quite interesting, including Nazi and Soviet-era memorabilia. I tried shopping for a T-Shirt here, but couldn't find one in my size. We crossed the park and visited the Hagia Sofia Church, the second oldest church in Sofia, built during the 6<sup>th</sup> Century. The city took its name from this church in the 1300's. Hagia Sophia means 'divine wisdom'; it was constructed on the site where several other churches once stood. In fact, this particular spot dates back to when this area was the necropolis (cemetery) of the Roman town of Serdica. The red brick church has quite a history, having been converted to a mosque by the Ottomans before being abandoned after several earthquakes ruined one of the minarets. The Hagia Sophia is a simple cross basilica with three altars. Since the last century it has been restored and now serves as one of the most important Early Christian architectural sites in Eastern Europe. When we were there a wedding was taking place; Ron and I were able to photograph the bride and groom as they stepped out of the portal.

We continued down Georgi Sava Rakovski Boulevard, passing and photographing the Russian Orthodox Church better known as the Church of St. Nicholas the Miracle Maker with its green tower and five gold-painted domes. We briefly popped our heads inside and discovered a baptism in progress. From here we made our way back to Tsar Osvoboditel Boulevard and walked to the heart of the government center, passing the National Ethnographic and Art Gallery Museums which are housed in the former royal palace building. Across the street, about a block further down, is the Archaeological Museum. We were supposed to visit these sites on the morning portion of our city tour. Unfortunately, it was getting late in the afternoon and we just didn't have the time to explore these museums. *Damn you, Lufthansa!*

We crossed the massive boulevard and walked to the Presidency building on Dondukov Boulevard where the Bulgarian president and his executive staff conduct the affairs of state. I took a picture (ala Buckingham Palace style) with the two presidential guards – clothed in traditional white and red uniforms – standing at attention in front of the entrance. Off to one side was a gate, manned by a soldier, which led to the St. George rotunda in the courtyard of the building. At first, we weren't sure if we could go back there, but the military guard smiled and waved us through.

The red-brick Church of St. George is a rotunda (a circular structure) built under Roman rule in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. It is the oldest preserved building in Sofia. First used as a church during the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, it is famous for the frescoes that have been uncovered in its central dome (dating from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries) which were once painted over by the Ottomans when the church was used as a mosque. Adjacent to the St. George rotunda are ruins from the ancient Roman town of Serdica. The entire structure, including the ruins, are surrounded by the Presidency building and the adjacent Sheraton Hotel. There was another baptism going on when we arrived, and we were able to meet the mother and her baby, an adorably good-natured cherubic boy.

From the St. George rotunda we crossed Vitosha Boulevard and visited the Sveta Nedelya cathedral, a medieval church that has been destroyed and rebuilt many times throughout its history. Its name, *Sveta Nedelya*, is an obscure reference that loosely translates into 'Holy Sunday', the common name of the church today. This historic temple is considered a landmark of the capital. We entered the church and found another baptism ceremony being performed. *This was a busy Saturday in Sofia!* I managed to take photos of the ceremony but had to turn off the flash (and endure the unpleasant stares of the Orthodox priest in the lobby). One of the things I found most interesting in these Orthodox churches was the absence of pews. During the succeeding days, our tour director told us the church services can last for hours, which means the congregation has to spend the entire time on their feet. Wow. Now *that* is devotion.

From here, we decided to visit the Sofia Mosque, making our way north along Vitosha Boulevard and coming upon an underground pedestrian walkway lined with souvenir shops. I was able to find two extra large T-Shirts that actually fit me, and gladly forked over the \$20 (I had no levas). Ron and Anke purchased some T-Shirts, as well. We continued north, passing an excavation site of what appeared to be another Roman church or building, and stopped briefly in a (mostly empty) ritzy shopping mall before arriving at the Banya Bashi Mosque. Having been to Turkey just five months earlier, I was not too impressed with this mosque, even though it had an interesting history. It was constructed in 1576 during the time of Ottoman rule over a natural thermal spa, hence the name *Banya Bashi* which literally means 'many baths'. Steam can be seen coming from the vents in the ground near the walls of the mosque. It has a fairly large dome and one minaret. We were not able to go inside, so we took our photographs and then proceeded west on Ekzarh Yosif Boulevard to view the Sofia Synagogue a block away. This synagogue is the largest in the Balkans, and the third largest overall in Europe. It was constructed in the early 1900's by a famous Austrian architect and resembles the old Moorish *Leopoldstadter Tempel* in Vienna. We were not able to enter the synagogue,

either, but Kathy later showed me photos she had taken of the interior the previous day, and the temple is absolutely beautiful. We continued westward along Ekzarh Yosif Boulevard for several more blocks, following the path of the city's tram service, enjoying the quaint tree-lined streets filled with small shops.

By now, we were pretty exhausted, having walked a great portion of the downtown area and decided to have dinner before going back to the hotel. We stopped to browse in a two-level indoor food market, set up like a mini-mall, with vendors selling baked goods, meats and dry goods, fruits and vegetables. At first, we thought about getting something to eat here, but then we opted to continue heading back in the direction of our hotel. We came upon a McDonald's on the next corner and before we could give in to the temptation of their famous fries we spotted a busy outdoor café on the adjacent side street (nestled beneath the tree shade of a city park) and decided to give it a try. We gratefully took our seats under a huge umbrella; a waitress brought us our menus. The specialty of the place was pizza and we ordered two from the long list of specialty pizzas (mine had chorizo and hot peppers on it). Ron and Anke sampled the local beer. I had a Coca Cola light, which is the European version of the popular diet soft drink (I guess with so few overweight people there's no need for the word 'diet' on the label). Later, we asked for an order of French fries and the waitress brought us a large plate piled high with old fashioned hand-cut fries. We couldn't finish it. Stuffed and relaxed, we slowly made our way back to the hotel.

As we walked the long city blocks back to the Radisson Grand Blu, we passed a small park filled with young people, including a teenage girl walking on stilts. She was strolling normally through the park, talking to a young man, making the whole thing seem even more bizarre, and I wondered if she was practicing for some kind of circus act. I took her photograph for my collection. When we arrived at the Radisson Grand Blu Hotel our white tour bus had just pulled up and our fellow travelers were getting off and entering the lobby. I immediately spotted Kathy on the driveway and shouted out to her. She gave me a big hug and asked me how the 'ordeal' went...but before I could launch into my story, the tour director, Silviu, made a beeline to where I was standing with his arm extended for a handshake. I must admit, my first impression of this man was not a very good one (nor did it change much throughout the trip). He resembled a shorter, stouter version of Rodney Dangerfield, with the same kind of bulging eyes and nervous mannerisms. Although his English was very good, he often spoke it with the cadence of a strung out crack addict, a rambling stream of thoughts and information; trying to get a word in edgewise during our future 'conversations' was quite exhausting and I tried my best to avoid engaging him. He referred to me always as "Mr. Rodriguez" and never once apologized to me, or the Wilckens, for the inconvenience we'd been put through, only stating, repeatedly, that the Lufthansa strike was out of his control, as if we were somehow blaming him for this mess. He had a bit of a paranoid streak, this man. I would love to tell you what his first words to me were (besides my last name, which he repeated three times in succession), unfortunately, so many of them came pouring out of his mouth, and in such a rapid-fire order, I actually found myself recoiling slightly from him, wondering, at first, *who is this lunatic?* Without pausing he launched into our departure schedule for the following morning, and then gave us each a Whisper device and ear plug

set that we were to use during our walking tours, reminding us to return them when the tour was over. Silviu assured us he would be in touch with Swissport concerning our luggage and then disappeared into the hotel with such an urgent gait I thought he needed to use the bathroom. When he left, I remember turning to Kathy and frowning. Reading my thoughts, she said, “*Yeah, he’s a little high-strung.*”

It was after 7:00pm already. I wanted to walk over to the Soviet Army Monument and take photos while the sun was still out, so I said goodnight to Kathy and her husband Alan (who had joined us) and the Wilckens, and walked as quickly as I could to the Borisova Gradina Park, just in front of the Sofia University campus, a few blocks away. The Monument to the Soviet Army was built in 1954 to celebrate the liberation of Bulgaria from Nazi Germany; it stands at the entrance of the Borisova Gradina Park as if symbolically guarding the Bulgarian nation. Whether or not the locals view the monument with pride or disdain is hard to tell. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, many communist-era statues and monuments were vandalized throughout Eastern Europe, and this Soviet Army Monument was no exception. There was graffiti everywhere, and the park itself was unkempt and littered. In June of 2011, several unknown artists clandestinely painted over the Soviet soldiers on one section of the monument to look like American cartoon characters (Superman, the Joker, the Mask, Wonder Woman, Robin, Captain America, Wolverine...even a battle-ready Santa Claus and a charging Ronald McDonald!). If you want to see a picture of this hilarious act of vandalism, then Google the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia. It is a hoot and a half. Local officials – and most of the citizens of Sofia (not to mention the Russians) – were outraged and have since cleaned the paint off.

The main part of the monument towers above the park. On the top are statues of a Soviet soldier raising his rifle triumphantly in the air while a Bulgarian man and woman stand next to him. There are several other secondary sculptural compositions, including groups of Soviet soldiers in battle or surrounded by grateful Bulgarians. Actually, it was quite impressive and dramatic. When I got there, the park was filled with young people skateboarding and performing biking stunts off impromptu ramps. This particular section of Borisova Gradina Park seemed to be a magnet for the restless youth of Sofia. I saw many empty beer and liquor bottles and countless cigarette butts. I also witnessed many teenage couples making out along the steps of the monument. I had to stop photographing it all because I was starting to feel like a ‘peeping tom’ geezer. With night rapidly descending over Bulgaria’s capital, I walked back to the hotel, stopping to buy some extra toiletries at an underground supermarket. Back in my hotel room I washed both sets of underwear and socks I had with me (sleeping *au naturel*), hoping they would be dry by morning. I later took an Ambien and watched the international CNN broadcast until sleep overcame me around ten o’clock.

## Day Four

My wake-up call was for 5:30am. I had slept soundly throughout the night. Before showering, I called the front desk and had them send up some extra coffee and creamer packets for the coffee machine in my room. I tried to shave my head (I sport a Mr. Clean look) with the disposable razor that was in my Swissport kit bag, but after painfully scraping one small portion of my scalp I decided to wait until I could use the Gillette blade I had packed in my suitcase. I later dressed in my still damp underwear and put on one of the two Bulgarian T-Shirts I purchased the day before. Ron and Anke donned their newly acquired shirts, as well. I have a tendency to sweat a lot when it's very hot (the temperature would be once again in the mid nineties) and I was praying the local deodorant brand would keep me (and my new shirts) smelling fresh all day. I had no idea how much longer I would need to wash and rotate my limited supply of clothing, *so the deodorant was crucial*; and, I must admit, after getting a whiff of some of the Europeans on this trip thus far, I was a tad skeptical.

I went downstairs as soon as the restaurant opened for breakfast. Neither the Wilckens nor the Cunningham's were there yet and I ate alone. It was a breakfast buffet, like most tours offer, and was quite good. I snuck an apple and a pear into my backpack for later nibbling. I briefly went back upstairs to my room to use the bathroom and brush my teeth, and then boarded the bus at 8:30 am for our drive to Serbia. This was the first time I saw the entire 'gang'. Besides Ron and Anke Wilckens from New Jersey, and Kathy and Alan Cunningham from California, the rest of the Balkans tour consisted of:

Peter Kenny from Australia, Ann Clare Scalf from San Francisco, Dana Marie Trunfio from Washington, DC, Claudia and Robert Ommen (I do not remember where they're from but I do know that Claudia is a fellow postal employee), Elizabeth Cambay and Lehoa Nguyen from Seattle, Javier Davis and Enrique Slodownik from Los Angeles, Linda and James Pratt from Tampa, Florida, Phung Le Huu (Paul) and Huyen Anh Nguyen (Anne) from Montreal, Magda and Andre Asselin also from Mahwah, New Jersey (like the Wilckens), Dorothy Hatch and Margaret Sloan from the St. Louis area (I think), Michael Brink and John Rehar from Pennsylvania, Kimiko Decristoforo and Linda Scoble from California, Terry Brooks from Texas, Linda Brown and Victor Pizzaro (I would like to say one of the Carolinas, but not sure), Tracy Pagtalunan and Eric Schrieber from California. I think this is everyone...please forgive me, fellow travelers, if I omitted any details or got something wrong.

Our bus driver was named Marius. Like Silviu, he was a Romanian. A short man in his thirties – with an enormous pot belly – who kept his black hair slicked back from his forehead with enough styling gel in it to lubricate the bus' chassis. Marius had all the charm of an Eastern European mobster, and was just as temperamental. There were times throughout our tour when he would refuse to open the bus doors for us in the morning, preferring to smoke his cigarettes and drink his coffee and make us wait until the precise time when we were scheduled to leave. When we were in Belgrade, Marius engaged the services of a street shoe-shine cleaner outside our hotel... *and then refused to pay the man after his shoes were cleaned!* When the shoe-shine cleaner followed him into the

hotel lobby to complain, Marius had the concierge throw the poor man out. *This was our bus driver for the entire tour.* I'll be mentioning him again later.

We were supposed to have left thirty minutes earlier, but somehow Silviu locked himself in his bathroom (don't ask me how). Luckily, he had his cell phone with him and was able to contact the front desk and they sent someone upstairs to 'liberate' him from his predicament. We would be driving east towards the Serbian border; our first stop would be the Serbian city of Nis. Leaving Sofia, I was able to see firsthand how the long summer draught had affected the Bulgarian countryside. We passed brittle rows of cornfields colored brown and yellow. In the far off distance we could periodically spot wildfires. This scenery eventually gave way to heavily-forested valleys, a stark contrast. During the ride, Silviu was on the bus mic giving us a lecture on Bulgarian history. Since I always keep journals of my trips, I had a pen and paper ready to jot down interesting notes. Unfortunately, only an incredibly deft court stenographer could keep up with this man. Silviu spoke incessantly; almost, it seemed, without breathing, for there were no pauses in his sentence structures, just a long rambling mesh of historical or current facts, as if he were reading this stuff non-stop from a textbook, ignoring the commas and periods. I tried to keep up but after a while I put the pen down and simply enjoyed the view, trying to block out the sound of his voice.

For the sake of this journal, I will include some historical notes to keep things informative. Bulgaria is about the size of Tennessee, and is strategically located on the Black Sea and surrounded by Serbia, Macedonia, Romania, Greece and Turkey. The original settlers of Bulgaria were the Thracians, an early Indo-European tribe who arrived around 3,500 BC. By the first century AD, the Thracians were incorporated into the Roman Empire. During the decline of Roman rule, various barbaric tribes invaded the region. In 679 AD, a semi-nomadic group known as the Bulgars crossed the Danube from the north and established control of the area. Bulgaria is named after these people, even though Slavic has since replaced the Bulgar language and culture. Boris I, the great Bulgar Czar, converted to Orthodox Christianity in 865 AD and today the country is more than 80% Orthodox. During the succeeding centuries the Bulgars conquered much of the Balkan Peninsula until 1396, when the Ottoman Empire invaded from the south and turned Bulgaria into a Turkish province. Because of its close proximity to Turkey (and its strategic importance) the Ottomans kept a very tight brutal leash on Bulgaria. Eventually, a power struggle with Russia led to the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78), leading to the independence of Bulgaria. But further interference by European powers limited Bulgaria's territory and they ended up fighting several more wars with Turkey. During WW II, Bulgaria sided at first with the Nazis, but when Germany invaded Russia they switched sides. On Sept 9<sup>th</sup>, 1944, a communist coalition seized power and by 1947 a Soviet-style People's Republic was established in Bulgaria. Among the former Eastern European communist countries, Bulgaria became the most loyal to the Soviet Union.

In 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the Union of Democratic Forces (a political coalition known as the UDF) won the majority of the seats in the general elections, ushering in Bulgaria's first non-communist government since 1946. And while power has shifted various times over the past twenty years between political coalitions,

the country has maintained its parliamentary democracy. Much of its political struggles (besides a stagnant economy) continue to be reigning in corruption and elements of organized crime. In 2004, Bulgaria became part of NATO (much to Russia's chagrin). In 2007, the country became part of the European Union. According to Silviu, some of Bulgaria's main export businesses include rose petals (oils), tobacco, electro cars, and other machinery. There was a nuclear plant built by the Soviets in Bulgaria, but after the Chernobyl disaster, the European Union asked that it be shut down as a prerequisite for joining.

By 10:00am we had reached the border-crossing town of Gradina. Silviu instructed us to take out our passports and have them ready for inspection. We would get off the bus on the Bulgarian side of the border, enter the small immigration building and have our passports stamped by the officials and then re-board the bus and drive a few hundred feet towards the Serbian check point. Seemed simple enough. Silviu cautioned us not to take photographs during the border crossing since it is strictly prohibited. Several years earlier, on a tour of Mexico, I met a couple who had taken a trip through Serbia and one of the members on their bus had ignored the guide's warning not to take photographs and was promptly arrested on the spot and taken away by border guards. They never saw the man again. A story like that sticks with you – um, like the tattoo on a biker's forearm – and I made sure to keep my Kodak camera inside my backpack. Little did I know how close I would actually come to being arrested myself!

We queued up behind several immigration booths and when it was my turn I approached the Bulgarian official with my passport (and smile) extended. He smirked in response, accepted my passport quietly and began leafing through it. Almost a minute went by before the official looked up at me solemnly and – with all the warmth of a swift kick to the testicles – said: “*How did you enter the country?*” I thought he meant my Lufthansa flight, and so I told him I didn't remember the flight number, but that I might have my original boarding pass inside my backpack. He cut me off and repeated the question: “No, I mean... *how* did you enter the country?” I stared momentarily at the man wondering if this was a trick question. *How did I enter the country?* I fought the sudden urge to blurt out: “I traipsed in on the back of a donkey...what do you mean, *how*? On an airplane, of course!” Thankfully, common sense prevailed and I said, “I'm sorry, I don't understand.”

The official placed my passport on the counter in front of me as if it reviled him. The smirk was gone from his face. He looked at me the way Hannibal Lecter stared at Agent Starling in the movie *The Silence of the Lambs*, and if I didn't know better, I would have sworn he was reaching down for some fava beans and a nice bottle of Chianti. “Show me where your entry visa is, *please*.” His use of the word ‘please’ made the sphincter muscles in my anus contract uncontrollably. Was it possible the immigration officer back at the Sofia airport neglected to stamp my passport? I smiled weakly, and with a slight tremor in my hands, picked up my passport and started to go through it, praying fervently that this was just a mistake. But I could not find the entry visa stamp, either. *Holy shit*. By now, a uniformed border guard came over and started talking to the official. I do not

speaking the Bulgarian language, but my increasingly paranoid mind could conjure up the conversation. It went something like this:

“*Comrade*, what seems to be the problem?” the border guard asks, eyeing me suspiciously.

“This American *imperialist*” he spits for emphasis, “has apparently entered our country illegally.”

“*I see*. I will instruct the prison warden to begin lubricating the sodomites...”

After examining each page meticulously, I finally found the entry visa stamp. It was partially superimposed over the Frankfurt entry visa, and was not easily identifiable. With much relief, I handed the passport back to the official, pointing to the stamped entry. I think he was a little disappointed. He stamped my passport and handed it back without making eye contact. I wasted little time re-boarding the bus, grateful that on the Serbian side of the border they simply collected our passports while we waited on the bus.

Once in Serbia, we traveled east along a national highway, the scenery changing from heavily forested mountains and rocky formations to farmlands and small villages. The ride to Nis was slow-going due to the two-lane highway; we always seemed to be stuck behind a logging truck. Our driver Marius took this opportunity to curse every vehicle on the road. We finally arrived at Nis around 11:30 am.

Nis is the third largest city in Serbia, with a population hovering close to 200,000. It is by far the largest city in the southern part of the country, and one of the most important industrial centers in Serbia. There are electronic, mechanical engineering and large textile and tobacco based industries here; although, one of our local guides (we had several here) told us the recent economic downturn affecting all of Europe had caused several plants to shut down, forcing thousands to look for work in other areas of the country. In fact, according to our guide, this exodus of workers has resulted in Nis being down-graded to the third largest city...*it used to be the second largest*. We entered the city through a well-to-do residential neighborhood, complete with a Walmart-like superstore and mall. It did not have the feel of an industrialized urban area, at all.

The city has quite a history, too. It is one of the oldest established settlements in the Balkans, having been founded by a Celtic tribe during the 3rd century BC and later incorporated into the Roman Empire in 75 BC. Nis is named after the Nisava River that flows through the center of the town. Constantine the Great, the first Roman Emperor to convert to Christianity, was born here. There were two roads that extended out of Nis, the southern one leading to the great Greek cities of Thessalonica and Athens, and the eastern road leading to Sofia and Constantinople (Istanbul), denoting the importance of this great city in ancient times. During its somewhat turbulent past, Nis has fallen to a host of barbarian tribes and other more established European powers (the Hungarian Ugri, the Greeks, and the Austrians, for example) but was ultimately conquered by the Ottomans. The Serbo-Turkish War eventually liberated the city from the Ottomans in 1878 and made it part of the Serbian state.



Our first stop in Nis was at an unusually macabre monument known as Skull Tower. When we entered the city we stopped by a shopping mall and picked up our local guide, a very attractive blonde woman whose name escapes me, and proceeded to the park where the monument was located. Silviu had the annoying habit of interrupting this woman whenever he didn't like something she said or wanted to add something to her lecture. He also hurried her (and us) along, which became a routine (and irritating) trait of his throughout the tour.

Skull Tower is located on the old Constantinople road, and serves as a monument to the Serbian rebels killed during the 1809 Battle of Cegar (which took place right outside the city). Serbian insurrectionists had risen up against the Ottomans in what is referred to as the First Serbian Uprising (1804 – 1814) and had won all of the major skirmishes up until the Battle of Cegar, when the Turks stopped their advance on the city of Nis. According to legend, the Serbian commander, Steven Sindelic, realizing he was surrounded and outmanned, fired on his own gunpowder depot and blew himself and his remaining men up rather than surrender to the Turks. After the Serbian rebel army retreated, the Turkish commander Hursid Pasha ordered the skulls of all 952 rebels from the Battle of Cegar to be mounted on a tower (with Sindelic's skull at the top) as a warning to those who would defy the Ottomans. This horrible monument had the opposite effect, as you can imagine, with Serbs paying tribute and honor to their fallen countrymen. Today, only 58 skulls remain on the tower, which deteriorated throughout the years; relatives and souvenir hunters also claimed many of the skulls. In 1892, a chapel was built to enclose what remained of the tower. The skull of Sindelic is still there. This morbid tale was told to us by another local guide (an incredibly hot brunette) who met us at the chapel. She then unlocked the chapel door and let us in. Thank goodness it was daylight because this place gave me the willies. Somehow, it didn't seem right staring at the remaining skulls of these poor rebel soldiers who had died so horribly. They were stuck into this dried out mud or cement mound, their teeth (or what was left of them) perfectly preserved. I left Skull Tower feeling awkward. And not just because of the skulls. As we walked back to the tour bus I spotted a swastika and SS graffiti on a nearby park building. You'd think the Nis city government would clean up something like that, considering the importance and sanctity of this monument, not to mention the amount of tourists who visit here annually. I guess hatreds run deep in these parts.

Before re-boarding the bus, Silviu gave the group the option of deciding what site to see next: the Mediana archaeological site or the Crveni Krst concentration camp (one of the few best preserved Nazi concentration camps left in Europe). A few of us wanted to see the camp (I admit, I was very curious, especially after seeing the graffiti), but most of the members of the tour probably thought the camp, coming on the heels of Skull Tower, would be a monumental bummer. Besides, the local guide (the pretty blonde one) suggested we see the ruins at Mediana, saying it was more interesting. A show of hands later and we were on our way to the ruins.

Mediana is the on-going excavation of a luxurious villa located in what was once the wealthy section of the Roman town of Naissus (ancient Nis). The villa, obviously owned by a very wealthy Roman (which was built during the reign of Constantine the Great, so

it is a significant find) has a peristyle (an open colonnaded courtyard), a *thermae* (a large imperial bath complex), a granary (for threshed grain or feed) and a water tower. I know all this because I looked it up on the Internet. From the actual site, I had no idea what I was looking at, other than an excavated courtyard (and far from completed) and the mosaic floor of what looked like a foyer or corridor inside an enclosed area. Another local guide joined us at this site, and once again, Silviu kept interrupting her; I lost interest in the back-and-forth between them and wandered off to take photos of the ruins. I'm sure many of us thought that perhaps it would have been better to see the concentration camp. *Drats.*

We headed into the downtown area to visit the Nis Fortress, saying 'good bye' to the blonde local guide. I think most of us tipped her out of pity (for putting up with Silviu's rude behavior) than for her actual 'guide skills'. The fortress is situated on the right bank of the Nisava River, on a rise dating back two thousand years, the site of many ancient settlements and fortifications. The fortress that stands there today was built by the Ottomans between 1719 and 1723. The Turks used a polygonal floor design, eight bastion terraces and four massive gates to construct this fort, which enclosed approximately 55 acres. Today, only the main rampart stone walls, the northern part of the wide moat, the southern Stambol Gate and the western Belgrade Gate are still well-preserved. Marius parked the bus near the river and we crossed the street to enter the fortress through the Stambol Gate (which stands for Istanbul). Looking at the walls, you could see where modifications had been made. But again, much of the fort is missing, and is used today as a park, with cafes ringing the inside of the Stambol Gate. There is a museum, the remnants of a Turkish bath, the old military arsenal (the other one blew up) and other interesting ruins and artifacts and statues throughout the site. The Nis Film Festival is also held here.

We walked across the Nisava River via the main bridge directly in front of the fortress and headed into the city center for lunch. As we did this, Magda noticed that the doors of our tour bus were open...*yet Marius was walking right beside us!* She immediately brought this to the attention of Silviu, asking him who was watching our things on the bus. And she wasn't the only one worried; everyone had their bags and personal items on the coach. Silviu turned to Marius, who told him Peter was on the bus. Earlier, Peter had stumbled while stepping off the coach and injured his already vulnerable knee and had elected to stay on the bus instead of aggravating it further. Marius wanted to have lunch with us, so he left Peter behind without any air-conditioning, leaving the doors open so Peter wouldn't suffocate from the heat. *What a peach!* A few of us freaked since Peter was in no condition to jump up and stop someone from absconding with our precious bags...not to mention the inconsiderate act of leaving this older gentleman by himself in those hot conditions. Marius didn't seem to understand why we were so upset. Neither did Silviu. Eventually, our tour director, sensing how angry some of us were getting, *ordered* Marius back to the bus. This was the beginning of Marius' crappy attitude towards us.

We continued walking through a lovely pedestrian area of downtown Nis to a local restaurant where I had a delicious lunch of stuffed peppers, mashed potatoes, vegetable

soup, cabbage salad and wonderful bread rolls. I also discovered that the water in the Balkans was safe to drink. I have *never ever* consumed regular tap water in a foreign country since resuming my world travels several years ago. The fact that I have not had an ‘intestinal situation’ abroad I greatly attribute to this precautionary measure. Well, several of our tour members had been drinking the tap water regularly since Sofia, and now they were serving it during our lunch. Hmmmmmm. I guess a bout of diarrhea would not make *this* trip any less inconvenient, so I threw caution to the wind and drank the table water. I remember sitting in my seat and waiting for a reaction, as if an explosive bout of the runs was going to come shooting out of my backside at any moment. But nothing happened. The water tasted fine. I continued to drink it whenever we dined out, only using bottled water when I was in the hotel or on the bus. Live and learn.

After lunch, we got back on the bus and hit the road again, this time traveling on a larger toll highway, heading towards Belgrade, the capital of Serbia. Kathy and I chatted for a while and then I spent some time taking in the Serbian landscape, which pretty much resembled the Bulgarian countryside: flat stretches of farmlands and small villages with an occasional forested valley to break up the monotony. I slowly drifted off to sleep, but not for long. An hour and a half into our road trip we stopped for a rest break (read: pee stop) at a service station where I purchased an ice cream cone. When the cashier told me how much I had to pay, I pulled out this jumble of foreign currency which included Bulgarian levas and Serbian dinars (we changed dollars at the Serbian border crossing), and trying to keep up with the current exchange rate proved to be confusing at times. We had to change our money into three different currencies throughout the trip, so I was always recalculating the rates in my head to see what anything cost.

Back on the bus, we drove for another hour and a half before reaching Belgrade, passing numerous small towns like Cuprija, Ribare, Lapovo, and Grocka. As soon as we entered the Serbian capital I knew I was going to like this city. It had a beautiful cosmopolitan feel to it, parts of it reminding me of New York City *sans* the tall skyscrapers. It was Sunday, and the streets were teeming with people. Our enormous tour bus had to circle around several times when we reached the downtown area because many of Belgrade’s streets only go one way and our hotel was located on Terazije Street, a major thoroughfare. The Hotel Moskva (Hotel Moscow) was built in 1906 but was recently renovated. It is an art nouveau icon, having catered to a wide array of famous artists and personality figures throughout its history, many of their pictures adorning the corridors outside our rooms. The outdoor café has a large terrace facing the busy Terazije Street and offers an internationally-famous dessert made exclusively in their pastry shop called the Moscow Cake (I nearly had an orgasm when I tried it!). I was so excited to be staying here...

...imagine my dismay, then, when I finally reached my room only to discover it was no larger than a walk-in closet. Of course, I’m exaggerating a bit: *a walk-in closet actually has more space!* There was a double bed wedged into a corner and a dresser with a very small table taking up the rest of the room. It was *really* tiny, with a horrible view

of the atrium. I was almost glad my luggage was lost, because I had no idea where I would have laid it down.

The bathroom was the size of my linen closet back home. It had a small V-shaped sink in a corner with a counter built literally on top of it, such that when I washed my hands, I couldn't see them. In fact, when I brushed my teeth, I nearly conked myself on the forehead bending over the basin. The toilet must have been taken from a nearby elementary school; my American-sized ass flopped over the sides of this thing like a muffin top. I had to tilt my legs to one side every time I sat on it to avoid banging my knee against the tiled wall. The shower area consisted of a minuscule corner section with a plastic curtain set up in a semi-circle around the showerhead. When I took my first shower, the plastic curtain would adhere itself to my wet body and cling with all the tenacity of Saran Wrap. I had to shower with one hand soaping my torso while the other pushed this invading plastic monster away. What really pissed me off was that the other tour members had much better rooms. Well, most of the couples, anyway. Ron and Anke were given a duplex...*a two story room!* I've never seen anything like it before; it resembled a small town house. There was a living room area below (with half a bathroom) and then a staircase leading up to what looked like a king-sized bed, with a large bathroom (including a tub!). Using Ron's camera, I took photographs of them while they posed on the second floor, the staircase and the living room area. Meanwhile, I got stuck with a cubicle. *Oh, the indignities single travelers must endure!*

I decided to wash another T-shirt and my socks. The Wilckens luggage re-surfaced, arriving at the Belgrade International Airport that afternoon and later brought to the hotel by Swissport. Ron and Anke were so happy! *My* luggage, on the other hand, together with Anne and Paul's (who'd also been stranded due to the airline strike), was currently sitting in the lobby of the Radisson Grand Blu Hotel in Sofia; it arrived there after we left for Serbia. I'll have to say this about Silviu: he really fought with Swissport to make sure we were reunited with our bags, convincing Swissport to pick up the luggage at the Radisson and send it to Belgrade on the following day's flight. I was very hopeful that my days of washing underwear in a sink would soon be over.

At 7:30pm the gang met outside the lobby doors and walked several blocks to the pedestrian walkway of the Republic Square, the heart of the downtown area. It was already night time, and on a Sunday evening, no less, but the streets were packed with people. In the center of the square we passed the large statue of Prince Mihailo on his horse, pointing in the direction of Constantinople, showing the Turks the way out of the country. (Silviu said this was a good marker in case we got lost because he was also pointing in the direction of our hotel). The statue, erected in 1882, honors the man who finally succeeded in throwing the Ottomans completely out of Serbian territory. He is flanked by the National Theater and the National Museum in the center of the city's busiest shopping district. We continued down the cobblestoned streets of the old bohemian quarter of Skadarlija, where open air cafes were packed with diners and Serbian musicians serenaded the passing crowds. The restaurant where we had dinner was called the *Dva Jelena*, and is considered an historical landmark in Belgrade. It was

first opened as a bakery in 1832, and took its name when a couple of hunters presented the baker with two deers (the name Dva Jelena means Two Deer Inn).

The restaurant looked more like a banquet hall, with bench tables arranged throughout the room according to the size of the dinner parties. Our entire group sat at one long table. Sitting next to me was Michael; we had a nice conversation over the sad state of our educational system back home. It was a little difficult to hear the other tour members because the restaurant's band was set up right behind us and played Serbian songs non-stop. We did not see a menu; instead, we were served a traditional Serbian meal. The first course was an appetizer plate loaded with an assortment of cheeses, spreads, a cheese pastry, baked beans and slices of cornbread. This was followed by a cucumber, tomato and cabbage salad. The main dish consisted of a large plate of grilled meats (chicken, different types of sausages, veal, and hamburger patties) and broiled potatoes. Dessert was an apple pastry with espresso. It was all very tasty, although I doubted whether this was a 'typical' Serbian meal (seeing how skinny everyone was).

Dinner lasted a long time, and as the group slowly called it a night and headed back to the hotel, I stayed behind with Kathy and Alan and we spent almost two hours sitting in the restaurant just talking, catching up on the last few months, reminiscing about our Turkey trip, and enjoying the band who were now cranking out back-to-back Serbian tunes that the mostly local clientele were gleefully singing along with. It was fun to watch. Nearing midnight, we started walking back to the hotel; the streets were finally emptying out. A block from the Republic Square we stopped to buy some delicious gelato ice cream from a street vendor who was just about to close down for the night. When I reached my room – or the 'coffin' as I now referred to it – I spent fifteen minutes blow-drying my T-shirt and socks that I had washed earlier and were still very damp. *Damn you, Lufthansa!*

Prior to going to bed, I flipped through the channels on the remote control and found a local station showing Serbian porn. Hmmmmm. The woman was very attractive, but oddly enough the guy resembled Marius. The thought of watching that bastard fornicating on TV was too much for me to bear...okay, maybe I watched a little bit... *and I'll just leave it at that...*

## **Day Five**

I was up by 6:00 am. Thankfully, the clothes I washed had dried overnight and I now had two more days' worth of 'recycled' items to wear. I took a quick shower, fighting off the plastic curtain monster the whole while, and went downstairs for a delicious breakfast buffet. By 9:00am I met the gang in the lobby for our tour of Belgrade.

I have been taking guided tours for almost five years now. At my age, the idea of being a backpacking adventurer – like during my younger Peace Corps years – is no longer an option. At 52, I'm just too old to be sleeping in hostel-like bunk beds, or squatting over outhouse toilets, or spending half a day trying to figure out a bus or train schedule. And, truth be told, I *like* being pampered. For a middle-aged world traveler, leaving the details to someone else is a great feeling. It is a stress-free way of exploring the planet. That is, if you choose the right tour company. One of the cardinal rules of land tours is to rotate seat assignments on the bus *daily*. Usually, the tour director makes a note of where everyone is sitting on the first day, and then on each subsequent day the tour members simply rotate seats. This makes for an equitable solution as everyone gets to sit in the front of the bus, avoiding conflicts. Given a choice, most people who dish out thousands of dollars to travel will sit wherever they please, so a rotating seat assignment must be strictly enforced by the tour director. Unfortunately, Silviu did not do this, and each morning, as we boarded the bus, it was like a frontier land grab with tour members scurrying to claim their seats. As the tour progressed, this became a point of contention, especially amongst the older passengers who were not so nimble. Believe me, nobody wants to get stuck sitting at the back of the bus for an entire trip!

As we embarked on our tour of Belgrade, Silviu was on the mike giving us some historical information. There are 17 municipalities within Belgrade, containing over two and a half million residents. Historically, this city (which was once the capital of the former Yugoslavia) has always been a prized strategic possession for competing powers stretching back more than three thousand years. It sits on the confluence of the Sava and Danube Rivers making it a gateway between Europe and the East. The Romans controlled the waterways from here, barbarian tribes fought for supremacy here, and the Ottomans and Austrians took turns controlling the city in the latter centuries. Throughout its long history, Belgrade's strategic importance has been both a boon and a curse; the city has endured battles in 115 wars and has been razed to the ground 44 times. In fact, *every* generation that has ever lived in the city has known war, a remarkable, if dubious, distinction (the most recent generation suffered through the Civil War, which led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the NATO bombings of the 1990's).

During WWII the city was fiercely bombed by the Nazis prior to their four-year occupation of Yugoslavia, greatly damaging its infrastructure. Sadly, in order to dislodge the Germans, the Allies also heavily bombed the city. Thousands were killed in these attacks. Much of what we see in the older sections of Belgrade had to be rebuilt following the war, and, according to Silviu, the residents of the city had to use their hands in many instances since there were no bulldozers or heavy machinery for the task. People were paid in food, not money, for this arduous work. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which had been formed in 1929, was replaced in 1945 by Marshal Josip Broz Tito's communist government (and would later be called the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia).

Following WWII, the new Yugoslavia – and Belgrade in particular – grew rapidly. The capital became the industrial center for the country. A new section of the city was created on previously uninhabited lands on the left bank of the Sava River in 1947, which is now known as New Belgrade, just opposite the old city. New Belgrade is the largest

district, with over 200,000 residents, and is fast becoming the financial center of the city with many businesses moving there due to its modern infrastructure and rapid population growth. When we entered Belgrade yesterday, on the outskirts of the city, we passed the newer residential sections created over the past twenty years as a result of the Serbian migrations following the outbreak of the civil war. And even though Yugoslavia no longer exists as a nation, Belgrade – as the capital of Serbia – is still the mega-city it was intended to be. It is a wonderful mix of old and new architecture – regardless of the run-down socialist-era housing units that dominate the less appealing neighborhoods – a dynamically progressive modern city that, overall, still retains its ‘old European’ roots. I personally loved Belgrade and hope to revisit it in the future to see how it has changed. The people were very friendly and festive...and, if I may be so bold, I have never seen such a large concentration of beautiful-looking women in my life! (Kathy wanted me to mention in this journal that the men were gorgeous, too).

We drove over the Sava River via the Brankov Bridge, passing a busy marina, to explore the beautiful tree-lined neighborhood of Dedinje. This district is the wealthiest one in Belgrade, and home to the city’s elite. We saw incredible mansions and villas here. This is also the Embassy Row section of the city; we drove by the Israeli, Russian, Chinese, Turkish, Iranian embassies (to mention a few), and the yet-to-be-completed new American embassy, which looked more like a fortress than an inviting consular building (a sign of the times, I guess). We stopped at the gates of the Beli Dvor (“White Court”), a sprawling royal compound that is the home of Aleksandar Karadordevic, the crown prince of the old Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and his family. Ever since the fall of communism, Karadordevic has been a proponent of re-establishing a constitutional monarchy in Serbia. His family still has large land holdings in Serbia and he sometimes permits visitors to tour his residential compound. Unfortunately, on this day we were turned away. Across the street from the Beli Dvor royal estate, ironically enough, is the current residence of the widow of former Yugoslavian strongman Josip Broz Tito, the man responsible for dethroning Karadordevic.

We spent about an hour driving around this side of the Sava River, exploring New Belgrade’s hilly landscape (as opposed to the relatively flat terrain of old Belgrade). We saw heavily forested mountains nearby where seasonal hunters can shoot a wide selection of wildlife. We passed the beautiful Hajd Park (named after Hyde Park in London) filled with joggers. Along the neighborhood streets of Dedinje we saw rare and non-native trees like cedar, tulip and sophora. We passed by an enormous military complex and hospital compound. And then we headed back across the Sava River to explore the old section of Belgrade. Regrettably, we were not able to see Tito’s museum or tomb because they’re closed to the public on Mondays.

During this portion of the bus tour, Silviu spoke about the former Yugoslavian leader and his falling out with Stalin, when war almost broke out between the two countries. Although Tito was every bit the strongman that Stalin was, he envisioned a separate style of communism than the heavy-handed tactics of the Russians, and as a result, he split away from the eastern bloc alliance and forged his own style of socialism. In 1961, he started the Non-Aligned Movement that would include over 100 Third World countries

not aligned with either of the world's two super powers. Under Tito, Yugoslavia's economy prospered, and its citizens lived better than in most communist countries, with more democracy and freedoms, and a better standard of living. And unlike many former communist rulers, Tito is not vilified and is remembered quite fondly in Serbia. In fact, considering the current economic uncertainties facing the nation, many Serbs are nostalgic for the security the former socialist state provided its workers.

Back in the old section of Belgrade we drove by two soccer stadiums (home to the Red Star Belgrade and Partizan Belgrade teams), the main legislative branches of the city and national government, and even two former military/government buildings which were bombed by NATO in 1999 (their twisted and mangled structures – in the heart of the city – have not been torn down and are a dramatic testament to the horrors of war). From here we visited the Saint Sava Church or Temple. Located in the city's municipality of Vracar, it is the largest Orthodox Church in the Balkans, and amongst the ten largest in the world overall. It is dedicated to Saint Sava, founder of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and is built on a plateau where his remains were believed to have been burned by the Ottoman Sinan Pasha in 1595.

Construction of the church was started around 1905 and is still on-going, being funded exclusively through the public's donations (which is why it is taking so long to complete). St. Sava Church has the form of a Greek cross, with a huge central dome (230 feet high) sitting on four massive pendentives and supported on each side by a lower semi-dome over an apse. Underneath each semi-dome is a gallery supported by an arcade. In order to raise the 4,000 ton central dome, it had to be constructed inside the church and then slowly lifted by specially-designed hydraulics over a forty day period. The outside of the church is almost fully completed, but the inside is not. Many sections were fenced off and scaffolding equipment was everywhere, so we could not approach the main altar, although there was a side gallery with a smaller altar (and numerous religious icons) where church services are conducted for the time being. The structure is very impressive, and when it is completed will be a sight to behold, complete with marble columns and mosaics covering much of its walls.

From the Church of St. Sava we drove to the downtown area of old Belgrade to visit the Belgrade Fortress (also known as the Kalemegdan Fortress). Sitting atop a cliff-like ridge overlooking the confluence of the Sava and Danube Rivers, this fortress – or, more precisely, this parcel of land – is the oldest settled area of Belgrade. The first *records* of people living here are of the Celtic tribe known as the Skordisci, who established a settlement on this site (called Singidunum) in the 3rd Century BC after defeating Thracian and Dacian tribes (who were already living in the area). The actual history of Belgrade was forged here since all of the early settlements and subsequent cities of Belgrade originated in or around the fort and then spread outwardly. Because the Sava and Danube Rivers meet directly in front of the Kalemegdan ridge, this land held strategic importance to a host of European powers that wanted to control the waterways between the east and west. The Roman Empire conquered this city-fortress, using it as a military barrier for centuries against the barbaric tribes of Central Europe. Invading Goths and Huns repeatedly destroyed the fortress, but it was rebuilt each time. Following



the fall of the Byzantine Empire, Slavs and Avars took over the area, and the fortress switched hands numerous times, becoming part of the Hungarian Empire. By 1521 the Ottomans had conquered the region and held onto the fort for the next several centuries. The Austrians had brief control of the fortress (from 1718-1738) and made major modifications and improvements to its defensive walls.

The park which surrounds the front of the fortress is called Kalemegdan Park, the word stands for fortress (*kale*) and battlefield (*mejdán*). This is the most popular park in Belgrade, with winding pathways, shady benches, interesting statues and a wonderful view of the rivers. The park is divided into two sections on the eastern and southern corners of the fortress.

Our tour bus pulled up at the entrance of Kalemegdan Park and we were met by Milan, a young local guide who was very entertaining. We followed him into the fortress and listened to his lecture through our Whisper devices, passing several defensive barriers (the areas between the walled gates are filled with artillery weapons from both World Wars) before entering the fortress. There is an Ottoman cannon that greets all visitors just beyond the entrance gate that was fished out of the Danube River and was once used to shell the fortress. We also saw the tomb of the Ottoman Pasha who once commanded the fort. From here, Milan led us to one of the top terraces of the fortress known as Gornji Grad, the point over-looking the confluence of the Sava and Danube Rivers, rendering a beautiful panoramic view of the waterways. There is a tall statue near the edge of the Gornji Grad called the Statue of the Victor – which can clearly be seen from either side of the connecting rivers – of a naked, muscled Serbian warrior holding up a falcon (for peace) in one hand and a sword (for war) in the other. It was built to commemorate the wars waged against the Ottomans and later the Austro-Hungarians, and is a symbolic gesture meaning that for those who come in peace (falcon) they shall be received, and for those who come in war (the sword) they shall be engaged. Beneath the fortress, Milan told us, were many kilometers of yet to be explored or excavated corridors and tunnels. Across from the Danube River, directly in front of us, we had a fantastic view of the Great War Island; a small isle now used as a protected wildlife sanctuary, but was once the staging point for many of the assaults on the fortress.

Our bus tour of Belgrade ended with the visit to the fortress and we were dropped off at our hotel shortly afterward. The rest of the day was free for us to explore on our own. I went briefly to my ‘coffin’ for a quick wash-up, and then collected Kathy and Alan and headed back to the Republic Square. After taking some photos in front of the fountains in the square we stopped by the local Tourism Office and picked up some city maps (unfortunately, everything was written in Serbian), but we were able to get our bearings quickly enough (besides, Kathy had a great memory for directions, and was able to guide us back to the Skadarlija bohemian district for lunch). We stopped in front of several restaurants in the Old Quarter and perused their menus before settling on an outdoor eatery with a roofed terrace called the Respect Restaurant. The waiter suggested a three course meal similar to the one we had consumed the previous evening (only this one contained even *more* grilled meats). I guess Serbians *do* eat this way! The cost came to

about 1400 dinars apiece (approximately \$15). Stuffed to the max, we lumbered back to the hotel, running into Ron, Anke, Magda and Andre along the way.

Earlier, Silviu had informed us that the remaining missing luggage was scheduled to arrive on the eight o'clock flight from Sofia. Since Swissport's office would be closed and unable to send the luggage to our hotel until late the following morning – when we'd be on the road heading to Romania – the plan was for me, Silviu and Anne to hire a taxi and go to the airport and retrieve the bags ourselves. When I got back to the hotel I ran into Silviu in the lobby and we got into an argument over this whole mess. I was merely thinking out loud when I mentioned how the airline strike was really ruining this trip for me (I had no idea how attached I was to my luggage), and Silviu started in again about how this was not his fault, and then, exasperated, I told him I was not blaming him...but our voices started to get louder and the front desk clerk seemed concerned. Finally, in the middle of this 'conversation', Silviu said something really funny which defused the tension between us: "You know, Mr. Rodriguez, my friends think I have such a great job...hotels, eating in restaurants, meeting foreign tourists...and look at this! If it's not you, it's somebody *else* with another problem...*the headaches never end!*" He sighed and I burst out laughing. He was right. Being a tour director was no easy task. I agreed to meet him in the lobby at 9:00pm; he would call the airport again to make sure our luggage had indeed arrived before we ventured out there.

I met Ron and Anke for dinner. We ended up eating in the hotel's terraced restaurant facing Terazije Street. Later, Magda and Andre joined us. Actually, I was still full from lunch, so I decided to just have some coffee and a piece of the famous Moscow Cake. By nine o'clock I asked the waiter for my check so I could go meet Silviu and Anne. The bill came to more than double what I expected due to the inclusion of a 'table charge'. This was my first European tour and according to the others a 'table charge' is quite common in many of Europe's touristy areas. Personally, I found it offensive, especially since Americans are known for their tipping.

By 9:30 pm, Silviu was able to confirm with Swissport that our luggage had arrived and was with airport security. Together with Anne, we crossed the street in front of the hotel and hailed a taxi. Silviu asked the driver if he would take us to the Belgrade International Airport and wait for us to pick up our luggage and then bring us back. The taxi driver was a very nice middle aged man who not only took us back and forth to the airport (a thirty minute drive each way), but he also went inside with us (through the security checkpoint) to help carry our bags to the cab. I was so delighted to finally be reunited with my cheap beige-colored K-Mart luggage that I gave the taxi driver the rest of my dinars, 3500 for a 2900 dinar cab fare. To his credit, this incredibly honest man at first refused to accept the money, telling Silviu it was too much, which only endeared me to him more. Even Silviu was impressed and asked the driver for his calling card.

I was back in my hotel room shortly after 11:00 pm but was too tired to even open my suitcase and check its contents. Instead, I went straight to bed.

## Day Six

I had a 5:30am wake-up call. I took a shower and finally dressed in a new set of clothes! I went downstairs for breakfast and by 8:30am our group was back on the bus ready to leave Belgrade. As we approached the main highway out of the city, Silviu asked everyone to make sure they had their passports handy (we would be crossing into Romania that afternoon). A few minutes later, a panicky Dana Marie told Silviu she couldn't find her passport. Marius pulled over on the highway and Dana Marie's bag was extracted from the bus' luggage compartment; she rummaged through it on the side of the road but still could not find it. We had to leave our passports with the hotel clerk upon arrival in Belgrade and now Dana Marie was not sure if she had retrieved it when she checked out. As you can imagine, she was quite worried. The two things I fear most about traveling abroad are misplacing my camera... *and losing my passport*. I could feel her anxiety level rising. Everyone on the bus said encouraging things to her while Silviu called the Hotel Moskva on his cell phone. Luckily, the front desk had Dana Marie's passport (which, according to an annoyed Silviu, they were responsible for returning when she checked out). Because it would have taken us too long to make a U-turn on the highway, the hotel sent one of their clerks over in a taxi. We waited about thirty minutes by the side of this incredibly busy roadway for the passport to arrive. Afterwards, Dana Marie was the object of much playful ribbing; each morning someone would ask her if she had her passport.

Back on the highway, we traveled north towards the city of Novi Sad, passing large tracts of relatively flat farming areas reminiscent of the southeastern plains of Nebraska. The fields were brown and yellow due to the five month drought that has devastated the region. Between these farming valleys were stretches of thick forests. Along the way, we passed several municipalities, including Zemun, one of Belgrade's outlying suburbs (and home to one of the countries most notorious criminal organizations), and smaller towns like St. Pazova and Indija. We arrived in Novi Sad before noon.

Novi Sad is the second-largest city in Serbia, with a total population of over 300,000 inhabitants. It was founded in 1694 by Serbian merchants who set up a colony opposite the Petrovaradin Fortress (across the Danube River) and quickly became an important trading and manufacturing center. Besides its economic importance – during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries – Novi Sad also became the cultural hub of the country, being dubbed the *Serbian Athens*. Novi Sad means “new plantation”. During the early rule of the Hapsburg (Austrian) Empire in Serbia, ethnic folks who were of the Orthodox faith could not reside in the areas of Petrovaradin Fortress, so a small settlement was established which later received official royal status as the free city of Novi Sad in 1748.

Novi Sad grew to encompass a fairly diverse ethnic and religious mix of minorities, who lived peacefully amongst the Serbs, forging its status as a cultural center. Following the Revolution of 1848-49, the Austro-Hungarian army occupying the Petrovaradin

Fortress bombed the city of Novi Sad, destroying much of it, and more than half the original residents fled. During the next two decades, the city became a separate Austrian crown land, and was located within the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Hungarian administrative laws drastically altered the demographic make-up of the city, and by the end of the 1800's, Novi Sad was an ethnically-mixed township of Serbs, Hungarians, Germans and Slovaks, each speaking their own language. This led to a more harmonious urban population that, despite the anti-Semitic horrors of WWII and the terrible NATO bombardments during the Kosovo War of 1999, seems to have kept the town together. There is more tolerance in Novi Sad than probably any other city or town in Serbia. Here, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and Jewish temples are a mere walking distance from one another, and various ethnic groups (and languages) co-exist peacefully. The old downtown square area is simply beautiful.

Our first stop in Novi Sad was at the Petrovaradin Fortress. We were met by our local guide Milos who took us up the long stone steps to the fort entrance and gave us a tour of the site. Situated on the right bank of the Danube River, across from the actual city of Novi Sad, the citadel was built on a strategic piece of volcanic slab rising 40 meters high over the famous waterway. Recent excavations seem to indicate that – besides the Roman fortress and Bronze Age settlements which existed on this site prior to the fort – Stone Age peoples as far back as 19,000 years ago called this place home, making this mound a precious historical landmark. The stone fortress that is there today was constructed by the Austrians between 1692 and 1780, using slave labor, and consists of two levels. The Upper Fortress has a network of 16 kilometers of underground tunnels and galleries and the Lower Fortress is where the officers' quarters and soldiers' barracks were located, along with the hospital, the arsenal and the administrative buildings of the old town. Just below the fort, where we began our ascent, is the 18<sup>th</sup> century Catholic parish church of St. George.

There were no rest stops along the highway from Belgrade to Novi Sad and many of us needed to use the bathroom. Milos told us that we could use the public facilities once we reached the fortress. Our group climbed the long steps to the entrance, and then additional steps to where the bathrooms were located in the Upper Fortress area...*only to find them locked!* Good Grief, I thought my bladder was going to explode. And I wasn't the only one judging from the gait of some of my fellow travelers. I was certain that if we didn't find a bathroom soon, some of us were going to start 'buccaneering' off the side of this fortress. Milos led us on a bathroom quest that took longer (or so it seemed) than an actual siege. Eventually, we returned to the restaurant on the Lower Fortress level and purchased some bottled water so management would allow us to use their facilities. Whew, I just barely made it. *Damn my middle-aged prostate!*

We spent some time on the fort terraces overlooking the Danube River, taking photos of the landscape, especially of the old town just below. From here we drove to the other side of the river, to the actual city of Novi Sad, parking along the banks of the Danube and then walking to the town square. An interesting side note: all three bridges in Novi Sad were completely destroyed by the three-month long NATO bombing campaign of 1999. Ironically, the local government here did not really support the violent ambitions of

Slobodan Milosevic (the former Serbian strongman) in putting down the Kosovo uprisings, but they nonetheless suffered heavily for it via the bombings, which devastated the city's infrastructure and industry. The bridge we crossed was only rebuilt in 2005.

The heart of Novi Sad's old town is the Freedom Square (*Trg Slobode*) where two important buildings face each other across a wide open area: the Name of Mary Catholic Church (known as the 'Cathedral' by the locals), built in 1894, with its gothic arches and impressive tower, and the old City Hall building (constructed around the same time) which is an exact copy of the city hall in Graz, Austria. In front of this government building is the large statue of Svetozar Miletic, a 19<sup>th</sup> century mayor of Novi Sad who championed the political rights of the Serbian people. Surrounding the square are more historical buildings, including the Vojvodina Hotel (built in 1746). Radiating out from the square are several pedestrian zone streets lined with open-terrace cafes and pastry shops (and some awesome pizza parlors!).

We slowly made our way from the banks of the Danube River, passed Dunavska Park (a small but very popular tree-lined park with a man-made pond and a giant weeping willow tree planted after the death of a cherished Serbian queen) and strolled up Dunavska Street, a pedestrian walkway. Milos pointed out historical landmarks along the way, including the oldest structures. Some of the higher windows had box-like frames that jutted out from the buildings. Milos called these the original 'television sets' of the past; people would spend hours gazing from the windows at the bustling activity below, spying without ever having to lean over the ledge. Dunavska Street is filled with shops and cafes, and side streets containing even more stores, bars and out of the way eateries. One could easily get lost for hours here just browsing and exploring. We made a right onto Zmaj Jovina Street, the main promenade and commercial center of the old town, and walked to the Freedom Square. The entire area had the feel of an Austrian city (not surprising since much of it was built by them). Silviu gave us an hour for lunch, and I teamed up with Ron, Anke, Dana Marie and Terry for some delicious pizza along Modene Street.

After lunch, we said our goodbyes to Milos, stuffing his hand with tip money, and re-boarded our bus. We got on a local two-lane highway and headed northeast towards the border of Romania. Once again, the landscape consisted mostly of flat farming terrain interrupted by the occasional forested valley. We passed rows of sunflower plants and fruit trees, and one tiny village after another (including one, oddly enough, with a Rocky Balboa statue). The only major city we saw on the road was Zrenjanin, which is the sixth largest in Serbia, and named after Zarko Zrenjanin Uca, a communist and partisan leader during WWII who had the misfortune of being captured and tortured by the Nazis for months before being released, only to be killed by them later on.

By late afternoon we had reached the border-crossing town of Jimbolia and were now officially in Romania. About an hour later we pulled into the city of Timisoara, the third largest in Romania, located on the southeastern edge of the Banat plain in the Pannonian Basin, a rich black soil region with a relatively low water table that makes for excellent agricultural conditions. And while one would think that the main business of Timisoara

would be agriculture, the city derives much of its income from foreign investments. Besides European countries that have companies here (and it's a veritable *who's who* of firms), such American giants like Proctor and Gamble, Smithfield Foods and Flextronics have plants here, as well.

It was after 6:00pm when we checked into the Hotel Timisoara, situated right on the main square. I washed up in my room and then went downstairs to meet up with some of the others for a quick look around. Since we arrived late, and many of us were exhausted, Silviu suggested we leave the street tour of the downtown area for the following morning. We all agreed and then branched out on our own to photograph the beautiful town center (the main square area). I hooked up with Andre and Magda near the Timisoara Orthodox Cathedral on the other end of the town center. We took turns photographing each other in front of this marvelous church. Slowly, we made our way back through the main square, visiting a small park on the other side of our hotel, before doubling back to the Casa Cu Flor restaurant on Alba Lulia, a pedestrian street, for dinner. This is one of the most famous restaurants in the city, offering excellent Romanian dishes with great service and at reasonable prices. Our dinner here was included as part of the tour package. Silviu had told us the menu selections earlier on the bus and wrote down our preferences; he then phoned in the order to the restaurant so that everything would be ready when we arrived. The meal consisted of bread rolls, duck soup, salad and a main course of either grilled salmon or baked beef. I opted for the salmon.

The Casa Cu Flor restaurant is inside a very old three story building. There is a rooftop terrace adorned with flowers (hence the name). When Magda, Andre and I arrived, we climbed the stairs to a second floor private dining room where all of the other tour members were already seated and waiting for us. They applauded when we entered; Silviu had told the staff to wait until we arrived before starting to serve the meal. *How embarrassing!* We walked down the aisle of the dining hall and took our seats at the far end table next to the bar together with Marius, our driver. It was the only table left. Behind Andre was a door leading to a smaller dining hall occupied by a group of Italian tourists. This door was closed for privacy.

The first segment of the meal went well. Several of the tour members had ordered beer or wine (Silviu had vodka, I think), and everyone was in a festive mood. At our table, separated from all the others, Magda, Andre and I had a nice conversation, which at times included Marius who was, up until then, on his best behavior. The room had a very high ceiling and although the central air-conditioning unit was turned on full blast, it felt very warm. Several people began complaining to Silviu about this. By now, with several shots of vodka under his belt, Silviu was starting to feel a tad agitated. He came to a boil a short time later when the main course was served. Apparently, the people who had ordered the baked beef took one look at the grilled salmon and changed their minds on the spot, telling the waiters they wanted the fish. Since the orders had already been phoned in earlier, the restaurant ran out of salmon dishes. The manager complained to Silviu, who was already in a 'tense' mood, and he stood up in the middle of this crowded dining room and literally began scolding us like we were school children. He spoke loudly, chastising us about not being honest with him and how he was always honest with

us, and on and on and on...gosh-only-knows what the restaurant staff thought of all this! Most of my fellow travelers (um, especially those who were guilty of the ole salmon-baked beef switcheroo, looked away in embarrassment). It didn't help any that the dining room now felt hotter than ever. Silviu took his seat, all huffy and puffy and sweaty, and the overall mood of the group changed dramatically.

By now, it was so warm in the restaurant that beads of perspiration were forming above Marius' brow. Suddenly, someone from the smaller, adjacent dining room stepped out momentarily; a blast of arctic-like air came over us. Immediately, we stared at each other and thought the same thing: *wow, that dining room is freezing!* Marius, who was slowly roasting in his seat, stood up and opened the door to the smaller dining hall to allow the cool air to filter into our side. But no sooner than he sat down, a member from the Italian tour got up and re-closed the door. At first, Marius seemed good-natured about this, smiling at us mischievously as he stood up again and re-opened the door. And, once again, the same tour member got up and re-closed it. Marius then complained to one of the waiters, asking him to leave the door open. The waiter replied in Romanian, and from the hand gestures I think he said, "Sorry, I can't do that, it's a private party". Marius was now more upset than Silviu, repeatedly getting up and re-opening the door only to have it shut closed each time. I remember looking over at Magda and Andre, wondering how much longer this childish routine was going to continue. Finally, one of the Italian tour members had had enough of this and confronted Marius at the door, telling him to stop. The Italian was taller than Marius, but our bus driver had the look of an angry hooligan, and basically told the man to go take a hike. This prompted the Romanian tour guide of the Italian group to intercede, he and Marius proceeded to exchange heated words by the doorway. Marius' demeanor indicated he was ready to fight; in fact, he seemed as if he was looking *forward* to it. The other man, a thin, non-threatening type of individual, backed down and walked away. Marius smiled triumphantly, and, leaving the door wide open, took his seat.

Within seconds, though, the skinny tour director reappeared, this time accompanied by two burly men, one of whom looked like he had just been kicked off the Romanian Olympic weight-lifting team for abusing steroids. Marius' mischievous grin disappeared faster than the salmon dishes. He glanced momentarily at me as if to say, "You got my back, right?" and then grabbed his knife off the table and held it by his side in a defensive posture as he turned in his seat to argue with the tour director. It was a very tense moment. But, then again, a bloody knife fight would be nothing more than a punctuation mark on what had already been a chaotic trip for me. I watched the unfolding events with keen interest, wondering which way I should flee. Luckily, a young waiter stepped in before things escalated and convinced everyone to return to their seats. One of the burly men closed the door for the final time, giving Marius a look that froze the perspiration on his forehead. That was the end of the open-the-door/close-the-door parlor game. We ate dessert quietly. Afterwards, when I retold the story to the group, Magda did not think Marius was serious when he grabbed the knife, assuming he was just 'fooling around'. Well, as a guy, I have witnessed some pretty violent altercations in my life (none of which involved me personally), and these men were deadly serious. Whether anyone suspected it or not, we were within seconds of a full-blown public brawl.

Dinner at the *OK Corral* ended after nine o'clock. I joined Andre and Magda for a walk to the main center of town, purchasing a large bottle of water. The air was cooler, more comfortable. Or, at least it *felt* this way after being inside that restaurant! When we arrived at the hotel we ran into James and his wife Linda, Dana Marie, Terry and the two California girls, Linda and Kim, sitting outside having drinks from the bar. Somebody had purchased a quadruple shot of vodka for Silviu; they were waiting for him to arrive to get him drunk. Possibly to calm him down. As for me, I had had enough 'excitement' for one night and went upstairs to my room for a good night's sleep.

## Day Seven

I awoke at 5:30am. I took a very invigorating shower since there was no hot water. By 6:30am I went downstairs for breakfast and sat with Peter (we were later joined by Robert and Claudia). I learned that Peter is a literary buff on JRR Tolkien and frequently attends world-wide Lord of the Ring conventions, lecturing on Middle Earth or whatever it is they discuss at these gatherings. In fact, he was heading to Austria from here to attend such an event. Interesting.

At 8:30am we gathered in front of the hotel for a walking tour of the downtown area of Timisoara. The city is currently the third largest in Romania, and serves as the main social, cultural and economic center for the western part of the country. Because of its once strategic location on the Timis River, overlooking the fertile Banat Plain, the city became a highly prized possession for various competing European empires throughout its history. The Ottomans held onto it for 160 years, from 1552 until 1716, transforming the city into a special Muslim enclave controlled directly by the Sultan. The Austrians later wrestled control of the region from the Ottomans, and the city remained mostly in their hands until the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Much of the architecture in the main center is Austrian. Eventually, Timisoara was de-fortified and hydrographic projects (for agricultural purposes) shifted the city from the Timis River to the Bega Canal. Over the succeeding centuries, the town grew into an important commercial and industrial center, and still occupies that position today. It is also a city of *firsts*: In 1869, Timisoara became the first European city to introduce horse-drawn trams, and in 1884, it became the first European city to be lit by electric streetlights.

Our brief walking tour began in the main center right in back of our hotel, known as Victory Square, a long pedestrian walkway surrounded by elegant Baroque buildings, stretching from the National Opera House on one end all the way to the Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan Cathedral on the other. Along this square, Silviu pointed out several buildings of importance: the 18<sup>th</sup> century Baroque Palace on the square's south side, formerly the governor's residence but now housing the Museum of Fine Arts; the



Scout Bank building, a typical Hungarian-style art nouveau structure from the early 20th century; the Polytechnic University building next to the National Opera House (in the open space known as Liberty Square). We walked down Lucian Blaga Street to see the 14<sup>th</sup> century Huniade Castle, which was redesigned by the Hapsburgs during the 18<sup>th</sup> century (it looked more like a mansion than a traditional castle). Huniade Castle houses the Museum of Banat, containing the largest collection of archeological artifacts from the region. Across the town center is the picturesque Union Square, offering an imposing view of the Roman Catholic Cathedral and the yellow Serbian Orthodox Cathedral facing each other (hence the name, *Union Square*). We entered the beautiful Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan Cathedral – the dominant structure overlooking Victory Square on Loga Boulevard – and discreetly photographed the inside. In front of the cathedral is a monument honoring those who died in the 1989 revolution that overthrew the communist government.

Timisoara played an important role in the fall of former communist strongman Nicolae Ceausescu's government. It began when an unassuming pastor from Timisoara named Laszlo Tokes, from the Hungarian Reformed church, began vocally criticizing Ceausescu's policy of *systematization*, a program that had been forcibly resettling Romanians since the 1970's with complete disregard to cultural and economic considerations, creating huge hardships for the rural populations. As punishment, Ceausescu ordered that the pastor be evicted from his apartment, and when the local government in Timisoara tried to carry out that order, a massive protest broke out on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1989. By now, many Romanians were aware of the fall of other communist governments in Eastern Europe via the Western media (primarily Radio Free Europe) and the demonstrations in Timisoara, carried out in the square where we just toured, immediately spiraled out of control, with hundreds of thousands of protestors streaming into the city, battling police and army units. The protests quickly spread throughout the rest of the country, and within days Ceausescu lost control of the military and had to flee Bucharest. Both him and his wife were captured days later and executed after a very brief military tribunal. As I stood in this serene square, with its statues, quaint water fountains and elegant historical buildings, watching young mothers pushing baby carriages, it was hard to imagine that only 23 years earlier this was the violent scene of an uprising that changed the course of Romania's history.

After our walking tour, we went back to the hotel (to use the bathroom) and then boarded our bus and left Timisoara behind. We would be traveling eastward for several hours, towards the central Romanian city of Sibiu. At first, the Timis countryside resembled the flatlands of Serbia, but after passing the town of Lugoj we came upon hilly, forested areas interspersed with farming valleys. During the drive, Silviu lectured incessantly, droning on about Romanian history, jumping from one topic to the next without so much as a pause. I did manage to catch something about the history of Jews in the country. Over the centuries, many Jewish settlers came to Romania (having been expelled from western European countries) where they were allowed to own land. They set up businesses, a banking industry and pretty much flourished, establishing large communities within the country. At one point, hundreds of thousands of Jews lived in Romania. But following the horrors perpetuated upon them during WWII, many of the

Jews left for the newly created state of Israel. Today, fewer than 10,000 Jews live in Romania according to Silviu.

We stopped in the city of Deva – in the heart of the Transylvanian region and birthplace of gold-medal gymnast Nadia Comaneci – for a quick rest stop, and then continued on to Hunedoara, passing a town known for its steel and iron mills. In Hunedoara, we visited the magnificent medieval Hunyad Castle (known more commonly as Corvin Castle, for Matthias Corvinus, one of the most important kings of his time); it is perhaps the most splendid gothic structure in Romania. When I first saw it my jaw dropped. Situated next to the Poiana Rusca Mountains, part of the Carpathian mountain range, the castle rises on a strategic ridge above the Zlasti River and resembles something out of a Harry Potter movie. The castle was originally built by King Charles I of Hungary in the early 1300's, and later given to the Hunyadi family (a powerful Romanian noble clan) in 1409. Over its lifetime, the castle has been restored several times, but it is mainly built along a Gothic-Renaissance style, with tall defense towers, an interior yard with a 30-meter deep well and a long drawbridge. John Hunyadi, who became the political leader of several counties in Transylvania during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, led several successful military campaigns against the Ottomans. He was responsible for restoring and reinforcing the castle during his reign. His son, Matthias Corvinus, became the King of Hungary, adopting the principles of the Italian Renaissance, ushering in a new Age of Enlightenment to central Europe. Matthias established educational institutions, patronized the arts and sciences, and introduced a new legal system. He further improved the castle, making it one of the grandest in all of Europe at the time.

We spent more than an hour touring the inside of Corvin Castle. The gallery and the 'keep' (one of the defensive towers) and the Capistrano Tower (named after a saint who fought at the Battle of Belgrade) have remained unchanged since the 1400's. We saw the *Knight's Hall*, a great reception area where the king held court and banquets were held, and the *Room of Knights*, a wide corridor filled with knightly displays: coats of arms, actual knight's armor and weapons, and even long spiking instruments used to impale criminals and enemies. We checked out the *Diet Hall* (which once served as a legislative room, containing paintings of other central European rulers), the *White bastion* (where the castle's food supplies were stored), and the *Dungeon* (where Vlad Tepes, the famous Dracula, was supposedly imprisoned by John Hunyadi when he was deposed; later, Vlad Tepes made a military deal with Hunyadi – marrying a relative – and they became allies once again). In one area of the castle called the *Mantle* we saw paintings inscribing the legend of the raven and the ring, the royal symbol of the castle. The legend goes that a raven (the origin of the word 'Corvin') stole young Matthias' royal ring; he chased the bird down, killed it and retrieved his family heirloom.

This was one of the highlights of the trip for me. Even as we returned to the bus, I couldn't stop photographing this amazing building. We drove a few minutes to a nearby restaurant for lunch. Silviu told us we were running a little late and that we could not spend more than an hour here so to please not order anything complicated since the kitchen cooked their main dishes from scratch. He suggested either a salad or one of the soups (which were already made). Jim and I immediately ordered the dumpling soup with

a passing waitress. And then, for some unknown reason, Silviu launched into this long explanation of the menu. He went on about the chicken, the meats, the various dishes, how they were prepared, what side dishes accompanied the main dishes...*this went on for more than half an hour!* Apparently, he forgot about his own time constraints, and a monumental confusion erupted over *who* wanted *what* and how many orders of *that*...well, to make a long story short, we spent nearly two hours in this joint! The worst part was that I had already ordered the soup because our idiot tour director suggested it. Imagine my chagrin as I slurped down this bland watery bowl (which contained *one* dumpling) while my companions were feasting on grilled chicken with all the trimmings. My stomach growled all the way to Sibiu!

As we left Hunedoara we had another 'lost' passport scare. This time it was Alan. He had left his shoulder bag on the seat in the restaurant. Once again, we pulled over on the side of the road while Silviu called the restaurant to see if the bag was indeed there, then he and Alan flagged down a taxi and went back to get it. I do not recall why we didn't just drive back there in the bus, but I'm sure there was a perfectly good reason. Perhaps we would have ordered more food and stayed another two hours! *My stomach continued to growl.*

We drove for several more hours towards Sibiu, the beautiful Carpathian mountain range opening up on our right hand side. We passed the little villages of Costesti, and the historical towns of Sebes and Sibiel, nestled within the valleys. Meanwhile, Silviu went on and on and on about...*God only knows what.* I was so hungry I tuned him out. We arrived at the Sibiu Ramada Inn by 6:30 pm. Our quick check-in was hampered by the fact that there was only one working elevator; it took forever to get the luggage to our rooms, making the group grumpier by the minute. By 8:00 pm I met the group downstairs in the hotel restaurant for dinner. Through the elevator's glass doors, which on the upper levels rendered a panoramic view of the town, I could see the red rooftops this city is famous for (it is nick-named the 'red city'). I sat with Ron, Anke, Dana Marie, Terry, and two other members who I cannot recall (sorry). I *do* remember that the meal was very good; I had the chicken schnitzel. After dinner, I went back up to my room, watched some BBC news on TV...um, okay, I tried to find that porn channel from the other night, *without any luck*...and then got some much needed sleep.

## Day Eight

I woke early, shortly after 5:00am, but feeling very well rested. My mood quickly changed, though, when I turned on the TV and saw a news program on the BBC talking about the ongoing union problems at Lufthansa. Apparently, the flight attendants were going to strike again on Friday, two days prior to my leaving. According to the broadcaster, it was not certain if the strike would be of short duration like the last one. *Damn, I thought, I'm gonna get screwed coming and going on this trip!* I went downstairs for breakfast and sat with Bob and Claudia. We talked about the current state

of the U.S. Postal Service (Claudia is also a postal employee) and trashed the Republicans. This made me feel better.

At 8:30am, the group gathered in the lobby for a walking tour of Sibiu. This is a beautiful city, straddling the Cibin River, a tributary of the Olt River (which flows exclusively through Romania) and is within 20 kilometers of the Fagaras, Cibin and Lotrului Mountains. Sibiu is situated in the geographical center of Romania and is a major transportation hub with important roads and railway lines passing through it. At one time in its history it was the capital of the Principality of Transylvania. The city was founded by German Saxon settlers, and constitutes one of the seven ethnic German cities that gave rise to Transylvania from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onward. The Saxons were sent to the region by King Geza II of Hungary to defend the southeastern border of his kingdom, and they built seven fortresses (which later became seven Transylvanian cities). In fact, the German name for Transylvania is *Siebenburgen*, which means ‘seven fortresses’. Following the 1918 Treaty of Trianon, Transylvania became part of Romania, and the German Saxons (and other German-speaking peoples of the region) became a minority within this new political structure. As a result – both during and after WWII – many of the ethnic Germans began emigrating back to Germany and Austria, a trend that intensified once communist rule was established in Romania. Very few Saxons still live in the country today. But their impact is still visible; the older sections of these cities were built by the Saxons, and many resemble German towns.

The area of the city we toured is known as the Upper Town, which is organized along three squares and has smaller streets radiating out to the main hill along the Cibin River where the Lower Town is located (the original fortress city). This Upper Town is where the Saxon burghers (middle class) conducted much of their activities and contains the most interesting sites in Sibiu. As we made our way down the medieval streets, a stray dog joined our group and never left our side until the tour was finished, at times barking at other dogs to keep their distance (the country has a large stray dog population). Silviu cautioned us not to pet our ‘guide dog’, but I found this mutt irresistible; whenever Silviu wasn’t looking, I took the opportunity to scratch the pooch’s ears.

We walked down a narrow medieval street and visited the beautiful Orthodox Cathedral. We continued down this street, passing some long narrow arched pathways connecting different parts of the city (according to Silviu, these were designed so that soldiers could easily run back and forth to defend different areas of the city while under attack). From here we came upon the Lesser Square where we saw the pedestrian Liar’s Bridge, so-called due to the local legend that if you told a lie and tried to cross the bridge it would collapse. Built in 1859, this structure was the first cast iron bridge in Romania. Next to the bridge is the House of the Arts building (an arched structure once belonging to the Butchers’ Guild) and the Luxemburg House (a Baroque building once belonging to the Goldsmiths’ Guild). We saw the majestic Evangelical Lutheran Cathedral in the Huet Square, surrounded by several Gothic buildings.

In the largest square, the city’s Grand Square, we saw the Brukenthal Palace, built in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century; an impressive Baroque structure that served as the residence of

Samuel von Brukenthal (the governor of Transylvania back then) and now houses the Brukenthal Museum. Next to it is the Blue House, a dwelling from the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the original coat of arms of Sibiu on its façade. On the north side of the Grand Square is the Jesuit Church and its residency buildings, next to the church is the Council Tower, a fortification tower erected in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and now a symbolic landmark. Along the southern and eastern sides of the Grand Square are houses built between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, mostly in a Baroque style, with tall attics containing small windows known as ‘evil eyes’ or ‘city’s eyes’. These tiny windows appear to be staring at you from any angle. *A paranoid person could go crazy here!*

From the Grand Square, Silviu took us through some smaller medieval streets and through one of the gates of the original fortification wall once ringing the entire city. Actually, Sibiu had numerous such defensive walls throughout its history – this one being the best preserved – made out of clay bricks and connected by towers. We walked along the outside remnants of this defensive wall and headed back to the Ramada Inn. Oddly, our ‘guide dog’ sensed this was the end of the walking tour and scampered away just before we reached our hotel. I was sorry I didn’t have a bone to tip the dog, seeing as how he had a better disposition than our actual guide.

By 10:15 am we boarded our bus and left Sibiu. But it wasn’t easy. For some reason, the streets were closed off in sections – creating a formidable maze – and an increasingly irritated Marius had to make a dozen u-turns looking for an exit out of the city. Once we were on the national highway things slowed down even more; it was a two-lane roadway which was in the process of being expanded and repaired in stretches, and we found ourselves either stuck in traffic near the construction sites (up in the hilly areas) or behind slow cumbersome logging trucks. I thought Marius was going to blow a gasket; he cursed everything on the road.

We traveled north along this highway – towards the medieval city of Sighisoara – surrounded by the forested hills of the Carpathian mountain chain. We passed small farming villages nestled in the valleys, some of the locals getting about on horse-drawn carriages. The horses had pieces of cloth tied around their strong necks, and Silviu told us this was to ward off evil spirits or curses. Strange, I thought, who would curse a horse...*a jealous horseless neighbor?* We made a brief rest stop in the town of Medias before continuing on to Sighisoara.

During the drive, Silviu lectured about the gypsies in Romania, not hiding his apparent contempt for these people. The Romani, or Roma (what most people in Europe call gypsies), are an ethnic group originating in the Indian subcontinent that traveled (and settled) in small bands throughout Europe starting around the early 14<sup>th</sup> century. They adhere to a very distinct clannish culture (each group has a leader, counseled by elders), observing traditions that have been passed down through the centuries. They often marry their children young (just barely into their teens) in pre-arranged marriages. Gypsy men dress in traditional garb: black pants, usually a red shirt and a black hat that looks like a cross between a bowler and a Mexican sombrero. The women all wear colorful skirts and wraps. They pretty much keep to themselves, and, according to Silviu, sometimes commit

petty crimes in order to survive, which does not endear them to the greater population. They don't believe in I.D. cards, and crisscross European borders without passports. If arrested, police have a difficult time trying to identify them since they do not carry identification. Their children often do not attend public schools. There are two types of gypsies, those who are nomadic and wander from place to place, and those who settle down and form a community. During Ceausescu's rule, the nomadic Roma were forced to settle down into more permanent communities, and many have prospered in business and have moved up into the middle class. But there is an increasing minority of them, due to economic hardships, which have fallen back on their wandering ways. I must include my own disclaimer here: I know nothing of the Roma people personally, and have merely repeated what the tour guide said. We passed a small village known for its gypsy population, photographing them along the side of the road selling copper pots. Although a few waved at us, the majority did not seem too pleased by the attention.

As we approached Sighisoara, we passed the former home of Hermann Oberth, the Romanian-born German scientist who helped create the world's first rocket. There is a missile replica on the front lawn. We arrived in Sighisoara shortly after 12:00pm. Marius parked the bus at the bottom of a hill and we walked the cobblestone road up to the medieval town. Sighisoara lies on the banks of the Tarnava Mare River, in the heart of the Transylvania region. The medieval section of the city, which sits atop the hill (known as the Citadel), was founded by German Saxons during the end of the 1200's and is one of the 'seven German fortresses' of the original Transylvania. This place was another highlight for me; walking its narrow cobbled streets, among structures built during the late Middle Ages, gave me the illusion that I had been transported back in time. Sighisoara is one of the few historic fortified cities still inhabited in Eastern Europe; it is a Unesco World Heritage site and considered by many to be the best-preserved medieval citadel on the continent.

The citadel is surrounded by a 14<sup>th</sup> century defensive wall, which was later fortified with 14 towers (nine of which still exist today) and 5 artillery bastions. We walked through a massive stone gate into the city, and made our way to the *Piata Cetatii*, the small town square where medieval merchants set up shop and public executions were once held. As with any old settlement, the citadel has a very colorful history, having survived military occupations, fires and plagues throughout the centuries, but perhaps the biggest selling point – in terms of the bustling tourism trade that goes on here – is the fact that Sighisoara is the birthplace of Vlad Tepes Dracul (III), better known as Vlad the Impaler, the prince whose cruel bloodlust was the inspiration for Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Vlad's father, the future prince of Wallachia, had been exiled to Sighisoara, and his son was born in what is now a three-story corner house on Cositorarilor Street during the winter of 1431. He supposedly lived inside the citadel until the age of four. The corner house is now a restaurant called Casa Dracula, which really plays up its history, complete with a scary Dracula sign and an actor dressed like a medieval vampire who sits at one of the open tables outside the establishment welcoming new patrons. On the other side of the small square fronting the house – just behind the 13<sup>th</sup> century Church of the Dominican Monastery – is a large bust of Vlad the Impaler.

We spent several hours exploring the citadel. Our first stop was the seven-storey *Clock Tower* that dates back to 1280. This imposing structure serves as the most important landmark in the medieval city. The entire thing is a museum, and we slowly climbed our way up a series of stairways (viewing the tower artifacts displayed on each level) until we reached the lookout at the top, getting a commanding view of not only the citadel, but of the pastures and forests flanking the city, leading to the Saxon villages beyond. From this vantage point we took turns photographing one another against the backdrop of the medieval city. The young couple, Eric and Tracy, took a gazillion pictures, posing along every inch of the tower!

From the *Clock Tower*, the group split up and began venturing on our own. Silviu gave us approximately one and a half hours to have lunch and explore the rest of the medieval city before meeting back at the main square. I walked down some of the narrower side streets, photographing and admiring the homes, some of which were craftsmen's houses built half a millennium ago. Throughout the citadel there are small museums and art shops where you can see medieval artifacts or purchase locally-crafted artwork. The large crowds of tourists made it almost impossible to sit at any of the many cafes for a quick meal, so I decided to skip lunch and continue exploring this fascinating city.

I met up with Javier and Enrique, who wanted to climb the *Covered Staircase* to the highest point of the citadel. The staircase was built in 1642 of wood and stone, with a wooden roof along its entire span. There are approximately 175 steps, carefully preserved. It was originally constructed so students could have easier access to the *Hill School* that sits on the very top. I was completely out of breath by the time we reached the summit, but the arduous climb was worth it. Beside the school (which is still used today), we were able to explore the *Biserica din Deal* (the Church on the Hill), a Gothic-style Saxon temple dating back to the 1300's with some very unique frescoes, including one in the archway that portrays the Holy Trinity as a three-faced entity, with a female Holy Ghost. There is a crypt beneath the church containing 30 tombs that we did not get to see, but right across from the church door is the Saxon cemetery, dating back more than 700 years. The tombs and gravestones, as one can imagine, were extremely weathered, some appeared as if they'd been moved or opened and the atmosphere, even in the daylight, was more than a tad creepy. I don't want to sound like a pussy here, but something about an isolated centuries-old cemetery in the heart of Transylvania – above the town where *Dracula* was born, no less! – makes for some very spooky imagery. And despite the large crowds below, there was hardly anybody up there except us. Um, I descended the *Covered Staircase* with some bounce in my step.

We still had about half an hour before meeting up with the rest of the group, so I took this opportunity to shop for souvenirs in the art stores lining *Piata Cetatii* (the main square). In an underground gallery I found a beautiful icon of St. George 'slaying the dragon' (a Romanian legend) made by a local artist and purchased it for \$65. It now hangs on my apartment wall. I was also able to buy some decorative hand-painted eggs (famous in these parts) to dole out as souvenirs back home. By 3:30 pm the group met in the square and we walked back to our bus.

We headed in a southeasterly direction towards the city of Brasov. We drove for several hours on a two-lane national highway through the Transylvania region. The leveled farmlands gave way to rolling hills with sheep and cattle grazing in the distance. We passed numerous small farming villages, many of the roadside homes displaying the large iron gates that are a characteristic feature of the dwellings in this country. Silviu told us these gates became popular due to the German Saxon settlers who apparently led more prosperous lives than the locals and built these tall gates to keep prying (or covetous) eyes from seeing how they lived. Eventually, this style caught on; we passed many small towns with rows of houses whose properties were obscured by these iron gates. Along the way, we also came across a once thriving industrial center which produced lorries and tractors, employing over 80,000 at one point; but the fall of communism and the subsequent economic hardships which befell Eastern Europe (combined with the economic downturn of the past five years) forced the factories to close.

By 5:30 pm we pulled into the downtown area of Brasov, a beautiful resort city in the center of the country surrounded by the Southern Carpathian Mountains (also known as the Transylvanian Alps). The skies were overcast when we reached the old city's *Piata Sfatului*, one of Romania's finest town squares. Lying at the foot of Tampa Mountain (with its large Hollywood-esque BRASOV sign visible for miles), this wide open center is a classic example of a German Saxon square, surrounded by Baroque-style buildings and Gothic churches from the late Middle Ages. We walked to the First Romanian School museum – located on the grounds of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Church of St. Nicholas – for a private tour. The caretaker, curator and guide of the museum (for more than 40 years now) is a scholarly man named Vasile Oltean who met us at the door and let us into the two-story school building. We took our seats in a very old classroom – or, should I say, we squirmed our way into the narrow and confined wooden bench-like desks – and listened to Mr. Oltean's brief lecture on the history of the school. He also read from an early (and severely outdated) book on American history for some reason. Mr. Oltean spoke in Romanian while Silviu interpreted.

The school was first constructed in 1495, but rebuilt in 1597. According to the curator, he believed this place was already a learning center long before the building was even erected. It was the first designated school in the Transylvania region. No one is sure how the school was originally founded, but the grounds were recognized by a Papal Bull in 1399 as a place of orthodox education and worship in Schei (the old ethnically Bulgarian and Romanian part of Brasov). Since it was the only school in Transylvania, the students came from all over the region, particularly from the southeast. Villages would pay to send one student to the school; they would later return home and teach their knowledge to others. More than 1700 students attended this school, which closed in 1941. Since 1933, the school's artifacts and books have been collected. The museum that exists today opened in 1964.

After our classroom lecture, Mr. Oltean led us on a tour of the school. He demonstrated how books were printed back in the late Middle Ages using the *actual* first



Romanian printing press. This particular artifact created 39 books back in its day, which doesn't seem like much until you see how slow and cumbersome the process of medieval printing was. A wooden plate had to be carved with the words of the page on it, this was inserted into the press and held in place, ink was lathered over it, and then paper, made from any number of substances, was pressed against the wooden print. The paper had to adequately dry before it was then molded into a book form with other pages. Gosh only knows how long it took to crank out one entire volume using this method. From here, we walked upstairs to view the various books produced by this press. Although the volumes were not many, they were incredible due to their historic significance: the first Romanian letter was printed by this press, along with the first Romanian school book, and the first Romanian bible, a massive 15 pound volume made on goatskin. On display were numerous books (many of them bibles) with ornate silver covers dating back centuries, including the first Romanian almanac and calendar, copies of the first Transylvanian newspaper, actual royal decrees, various mannequins dressed in traditional Romanian clothing, historical Romanian artifacts like desks, tools and pots, and various paintings of historical figures like Andrei Saguna, an Orthodox bishop who championed the cause of higher education in Romania during the 1800's.

Mr. Oltean has been single-handedly running this museum for decades. He is a professor and a scholar on early Romanian literature, and has written numerous texts analyzing and describing the works found inside the museum. Sadly, the new Romanian government doesn't seem concerned with preserving this important part of the country's history and no public funds are available to protect or upkeep the museum. Mr. Oltean does this exclusively through donations and volunteer work. On several occasions, thieves have broken into the museum and have made off with priceless volumes, which were later sold on the black market in Western Europe. Fortunately, much of what was stolen in the past has been recovered and returned to him. None of the very old books are enclosed in hermitically sealed cases with temperature control devices that retard aging, so the books are in real danger of disintegrating with time. The curator cannot afford the proper equipment to ensure the museums artifacts are fully preserved. Silviu did all the interpreting, but let me tell you, I could feel this man's passion...*and desperation*. There were some in our group who found this visit boring, and thought perhaps we should have skipped it and spent more time exploring the old town. I was completely amazed by the works I saw here and when we were leaving I pressed a \$20 bill into Mr. Oltean's hand (my very small role in helping to preserve this place). He was so moved he grabbed me by the shoulders and kissed both my cheeks. Um, I was not expecting that and was quite embarrassed. I hope those of you who are reading this journal and are contemplating going to Romania in the future will make an effort to stop by the First Romanian School museum and support this man's work, because history is literally fading away here.

From the school we had planned on a walking tour of the old city but it had started to rain, so Silviu postponed it until tomorrow morning. He called Marius on his cell phone and the bus pulled up just as the rain became heavier. We headed over to our hotel, the Hotel Aro Palace on Eroilor Street, a very nice establishment, and checked-in. At 7:15pm we gathered in the lobby and walked about five minutes back to the town square to have dinner in a place called the Sirul Vamii. This restaurant was very nice, imbuing a rustic

atmosphere with lit candles at each table. We descended to the basement level dining room, which included a full bar. Earlier that day (on the bus) Silviu told us the menu selections for dinner and jotted down our preferences, phoning in our orders to the restaurant. Ever since the Salmon-Baked Beef fiasco back in Timisoara, everybody stuck to their ordered dishes. I had the Hungarian goulash, which was served in a bread bowl. We were served a seafood salad appetizer and ice cream for dessert. I sat next to Ron and we kept making each other laugh with obscure references to the TV show Seinfeld. After dinner, I joined Kathy, Alan and Dana Marie for a nightly stroll around the *Piata Sfatului*. It had stopped raining and the air was nice and cool. We momentarily lost our bearings while walking down *Republicii Street*, even though we were only two blocks from our hotel. Kathy and Dana Marie asked a local policeman sitting in his patrol car for directions. Like typical tourists, this moment turned into a photo op, and they started posing with the policeman. Back at our hotel, Kathy and I stayed in the lobby until almost 11:00 pm, laughing ourselves silly over one thing or another and sending emails via Kathy's smart phone. I sent a brief missive to my (now ex) girlfriend Maria, and Kathy sent Helene (a member of our previous tour to Turkey) an email telling her about the 'adventures' we had encountered thus far. Afterwards, I headed up to my room for a good night's sleep.

## Day Nine

I was up by 5:30 am. The hot water in the bathroom was scalding, and I decided to take advantage and make several cups of instant coffee with it. By 7:00am I was downstairs for breakfast. An hour later, the gang met in the lobby for a one hour walking tour of the old district of Brasov. We began by slowly making our way down the narrow Muresenilor Street adjacent to our hotel, to the *Piata Sfatului* (the main square). In the distance we could see the cable-car tracks which take visitors to the top of Mt. Tampa where they can get a panoramic view of this medieval town and avail themselves of the many hiking trails throughout the mountains. In the morning light, with the crowds gone, the square looked even more expansive and impressive than usual. There were many pigeons flying about the center of the plaza. Silviu pointed out the historical buildings, some of which seemed almost camouflaged by the adjacent shops and cafes, like the Romanian Orthodox Cathedral (built in 1896) sandwiched between a fast-food restaurant and another building (an unusual sight for such a religious structure).

Brasov was one of the original 'seven fortresses' established by the Teutonic Knights in Transylvania to defend the Kingdom of Hungary's borders during the early 1200s. In fact, from our hotel we could see the Brasov Fortress perched atop a hill overlooking the city. The knights originally built a German town called Kronstadt ('City of the Crown') here, and while the crusaders were later ousted in 1225, the German colonists remained – together with the local inhabitants – establishing more settlements and expanding the city outward from the fortress. Because Brasov was on an intersection between the trade

routes connecting the Ottoman Empire and Western Europe, the German settlers here became wealthy traders and craftsmen, exerting quite a bit of political influence in the region. These successful German Saxons built the town up, erecting defensive walls (which also kept the local Bulgarians and Romanians out) and constructed many of the important architectural structures that still exist today. In the town square is the old mayor's office or Council House (Casa Sfatului), a structure dating back to 1420. This building, which once served as Brasov's administrative center for 500 years, is now a museum and tourism office. It was here where prisoners were tortured and witches burned at the stake. Nearby is the Hirscher House (from the 1540's), an elegant Renaissance-style building built by the widow of a Brasov mayor and donated to the city's Merchant's Guild. There are many such houses throughout the square and adjoining streets. The varying architectural designs to be seen here will truly astound: from the Gothic to the Renaissance, from the Baroque to the eclectic. Each street, it seemed, offered a new experience. And all of it surrounded by the Carpathian Mountains. Brasov is simply beautiful.

We continued down George Baritiu Street to visit the towering Black Church (*Biserica Neagra*), an awesome-looking Gothic structure (Lutheran) built during the 1400's that is considered *the* historical landmark of Brasov. Unfortunately, it was closed this early in the morning, but inside is a six ton bell, a 4,000 pipe organ and one of the biggest collections of carpets from Asia Minor in the world (donated by the town's merchants). This is also the largest Gothic church in Romania. It was named the Black Church after the great fire of 1689 blackened its walls (but did not destroy the building). Today, the church is not as black, having been scrubbed down over the centuries. We saw many other wonderful religious structures in this city: *St. Nicholas Church* (next to the First Romanian School with its numerous pointed towers resembling a Disneyland castle), the *Franciscan's Monastery* (from 1725), the *Roman Catholic Cathedral* (a Baroque structure built between 1776 and 1882), and even the *Brasov Synagogue* (built in 1901 in the neo-Roman/Moorish style).

We passed through the old Schei Gate, with its classical triumphal arch, built in the 1820's and containing three openings; a large middle arch for traffic and two smaller arches on either side for pedestrians. Near the Schei Gate we saw Catherine's Gate, the only surviving city wall gate from medieval times. It was constructed by the Tailor's Guild in 1559 for defensive purposes and named after a monastery that used to exist in Brasov during that time. The city's coat of arms is displayed above the entrance. When this gate was built, German Saxons did not permit the native Bulgarians and Romanians to own property within the city of Brasov, and so they established their own community called Schei just outside the city walls. The locals had to pay a toll to enter the city.

Today, Brasov is perhaps the most popular holiday center in Romania. In the summer time, tourists flock here for the historical sites, the open cafes and club nightlife, and the surrounding natural beauty, with numerous hiking and camping trails. In the winter time, the nearby Bucegi Mountains transforms the region into a major skiing resort. From this strategically located city, one can visit many other famous Transylvanian sites like Bran Castle and the Rasnov and Prejmer Fortresses. So if you travel to Romania, do not miss

Brasov... *just be careful of the bears.* There are an estimated 6,000 black and brown bears living in the forested hills of Romania, many right outside of Brasov, who often wander into the city looking for food. The animals are protected, and some travel agencies specialize in 'bear-watching' tours that result in humans feeding the bears. This unnatural act has dire consequences, as bears lose their fear of people. Each year, there are horrendous stories in the press about hikers or townsfolk being mauled to death.

By 9:45am we left Brasov and headed south towards Bran Castle. I was very excited; visiting Bran Castle was the reason I had originally booked this tour. Along the way we rose through the forested hills of the Carpathians, filled with blue spruce and pine trees, passed more farmlands, saw the formidable Rasnov Fortress (built by the Teutonic Knights in 1215), and drove by numerous small villages. Many of the homes in this region had crosses etched into their facades, and my mind conjured up images of vampires lurking about at night. When asked, though, Silviu told us that a cross on a Romanian's house meant they were members of the Orthodox faith...*and not trying to fend off blood-suckers.* Darn.

The town of Bran lies approximately 30 kilometers from Brasov and is composed of five small villages. Teutonic Knights once built a wooden fort here in the early 1200's that was later burned down by the Mongols. In 1377, the King of Hungary ordered the German Saxons of Brasov to construct a stone citadel in this area – atop a steep cliff – to protect the trade route between Transylvania and Wallachia. This citadel became known as Bran Castle. Between 1438 and 1442, the castle played a major defensive role against the Ottomans. Shortly afterwards, the ruler of Wallachia briefly held the citadel, turning it into a customs post. The castle would change royal hands several times throughout its history, and be restored on numerous occasions. It is one of Romania's greatest tourist attractions for one simple reason: *Dracula.*

In 1897, Irish novelist Bram Stoker wrote a book about a vampire Romanian prince named Count Dracula. His inspiration for the character was Vlad Tepes (Dracul) III, a Wallachia prince who used to impale his enemies on wooden stakes. Although there is no indication that Bram Stoker knew of Bran Castle, his description of Dracula's castle in the novel is quite similar to the physical appearance of the citadel, and clever marketers in Romania began 'selling up' the notion of Bran Castle as Dracula's Castle. There is no historical indication, either, that Vlad Tepes III had any association with the fortress, other than possibly a few brief stays while passing the Bran Gorge, but this hasn't stopped the throngs of tourists (including me) who visit the site yearly. Just before you enter the actual castle grounds there are dozens of merchant stalls selling trinkets, locally woven clothing, T-shirts, souvenirs and artwork, much of it with a Dracula theme. It's very kitschy, but irresistible; my favorite T-shirt had a blood-faced vampire sitting on a throne inside Bran Castle saying: "*Send more tourists!*"

During the 1920's, Bran Castle served as an official residence of the Romanian royal family until the communists expelled them in 1948. During that time, it was the favorite retreat of Queen Marie, who restored the inside of the castle to what it is today. In 2009,

descendants of the royal family regained possession of Bran Castle, refurbishing it some more and opening it to the public as the first private museum in Romania.

Upon entering the grounds, you access the castle by walking up a steep, boulder-paved road. Bran Castle sits on a rocky outcrop, strategically positioned between the Bucegi and Piatra Craiului Mountains, just at the entrance of the Rucar-Bran Pass. It has a commanding view of the valley below it and proved to be an impenetrable obstacle to those who would try to breach the area from the outside. The original fortress contained an exterior defensive wall (eventually there were two walls but neither exists today), a donjon (the fortified main tower), the round tower and the gate's tower. Over the centuries, additional towers and turrets were added for more fire power. Although relatively slender in size – as far as castles go – it was an imposing military fortress.

We spent an hour or so going through it, Silviu lecturing as we went. A series of narrow winding staircases leads to about 60 timbered rooms throughout the castle, many connected by underground passageways and secret stone staircases (that are *truly* creepy). The rooms house a collection of furniture, weapons (including mini cannons) and armor dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. We were able to see Queen Marie's bedroom including a display case containing one of her crowns. There were only two small rooms dedicated to Vlad the Impaler (most of the displays had to do with his royal lineage and not so much about the man himself). The hallways were also very narrow and at times low-ceilinged to the point where I had to hunch over to avoid conking my head. We circled the castle's courtyard via wooden balconies and made our way back downstairs. The place was packed with tourists. Overall, I have to say I was a little disappointed. Don't get me wrong, Bran Castle was very fascinating, but it did not conjure up the Gothic medieval feeling that Corvin Castle in Hunedoara had. Maybe they should put a coffin in one of the towers with a guy dressed like Dracula in it...*I'm just saying.*

Silviu gave us about an hour to shop and eat lunch in the outdoor souvenir market beyond the entrance gate. I was able to buy a nice hand-woven peasant blouse for my (now ex) girlfriend, and some other souvenirs including some funny T-shirts. For lunch, Ron, Anke and I bought chicken gyros from a kiosk vendor that turned out to be very tasty. We were back on the bus by 12:30 pm and heading south along DN1, the national highway that connects Bucharest with the northwestern part of the country. Our next stop was the town of Sinaia, in the Carpathian Mountains, to visit the famous Sinaia Monastery and the even more incredible Peles Castle, the summer palace of King Carol I, sovereign Romania's first ruler. We would travel this two-lane highway through the picturesque Prahova Valley – the historic corridor connecting Transylvania and Wallachia – where the Prahova River separates the Bucegi and Baiu Mountains. There are many skiing resort towns situated along this route. As we climbed through the mountains we stopped in the resort town of Busteni to take pictures of the majestic snow-covered Caraiman Peak, a part of the Bucegi Mountains. Atop this peak is the Heroes Cross, a massive cross memorial dedicated to the soldiers of World War I, commissioned by Queen Marie in 1926. At night it is lit up and can be seen for miles around.

On the way to Sinaia we heard a loud *ka-thunk* sound from somewhere on the bus. Throughout our trip, some of the armrests would disengage and fall off unexpectedly. To make matters worse, Marius did not clean up the bus after each day's journey, and the small plastic trash bags he had hung from the bottom of each aisle's seat were now full. The interior of the bus began to resemble a recycling plant. Some of us complained to Silviu about it, but apparently Marius had not signed up on this tour to break a sweat. He seemed to abhor labor of any kind, and didn't hide his displeasure at having to store and remove our heavy bags from the coach's luggage compartment daily. In his defense, though, I'm sure his *protruding* gut made these chores more difficult.

When we entered the beautiful mountain town of Sinaia, we passed the historic Hotel Palace on our left, once the establishment of choice for Europe's royalty and elite. Today, regular tourists can book a room here, although the reviews I read online seem to indicate the place needs some serious upkeep. We continued driving through the beautiful quaint streets of the town until we reached the Sinaia Monastery.

The town of Sinaia is named after this monastery, which in turn took *its* name from the great monastery atop Mount Sinai in Egypt. Prince Mihail Cantacuzino, a member of a Romanian aristocratic family, founded the monastery (which was built between 1690 and 1695) after returning from a pilgrimage to Mount Sinai. The monastery had a dual purpose: besides being a religious site, it also served in its early days as a fortified stronghold to protect the trade route from Brasov to Bucharest. Initially, there were twelve monks who resided here (to imitate the Twelve Apostles) but their ranks later grew. Up until 1850, Sinaia was nothing more than the walled monastery and a series of rather crude homes. But after 1864, a hospital and several mineral spring baths were opened in the area and a real town began to emerge.

The monastery grounds consist of two courtyards surrounded by low buildings. In the center of each courtyard is a church: the Old Church (*Biserica Veche*, built in 1695) and the Great Church (*Biserica Mare*, built in 1846). There is also a library that contains valuable jewels from the Cantacuzino family and the earliest Romanian-translated bible (circa 1668). Today, the monastery is under the patronage of the Archdiocese of Bucharest. The order of monks who administer the grounds wear their hair and beards long, and dress in traditional robes.

We entered the walled complex through the Bell Tower – completed in 1892 and containing a 3,700 ton bell – and made our way to the Old Church first. The entire interior of this fascinating temple was covered with murals and frescoes painted by Parvu Mutul (known as Mutu), the famous 17<sup>th</sup> century Romanian muralist and church painter. The small, chapel-like structure was built in the Brancoveanu style, a Romanian type of architecture popular in Wallachia during that time which incorporated Baroque influences. The carved stone portal into the church is covered by murals portraying Moses holding the Tablet of Law, and next to him is his brother Aaron with his walking stick, and between them is the coat of arms of the Cantacuzino family. There is a Judgment Day-like depiction of Heaven and Hell, with some poor sinners being cast into the Pits, and a series of paintings of various Orthodox saints. In the church's narthex are

votive paintings of the founder and his family, with their hands spread out in Christian compassion, and more religious depictions on every inch of the walls. I saw several large pure-silver icons of saints. The church interior is quite small, but the artwork reminded me of the early cave churches I saw in the Cappadocia region of Turkey.

We then walked over to the Great Church, another amazing religious temple. A green ceramic belt, formed by three lines that twist in sections, encircles this church, representing the unification of the Holy Trinity into one God, and the unification of the three Romanian provinces (Transylvania, Wallachia and Moldova) into one country. The large votive paintings as you walk into the church depict King Carol I (who built the nearby Peles Castle), Prince Mihail Cantacuzino (the founder of the monastery), several other royal figures and the Bishop who re-blessed (or re-opened) the building in 1903. The inside of this beautiful church resembled many of the great Orthodox churches and cathedrals I had already seen on this trip, amazing murals and frescoes covered the high-ceilinged structure, with ornately carved wooden chairs and furnishings along the walls. The narthex contains the gold-plated royal chairs of King Carol I and his wife, Elizabeth, who lived at the monastery during the summer months while Peles Castle was being constructed. The king's throne displays the royal coat of arms and the motto *Nihil sine Deo* (Nothing without God); the queen's throne is embossed with her initials E.D. There are also two large icons of St. Serghei and St. Nicholas that were given as gifts by Tzar Nicholas II of Russia.

An unusual feature of this monastery are the crosses, there are five unique styles. The dome over the Old Church has the cross of Stephen the Great, whereas the Great Church has four different types: the Greek cross (with equal arms) sits atop the entrance, the Latin cross (with unequal arms) stands on top of the exonarthex towers, the Slav cross (with many horizontal arms) is perched on the central cupola, and the Latin cross (with a sun image) is on top of the belfry. I have no idea why, other than to venture a guess that perhaps this is symbolic of the inclusiveness or unity of the church.

After our visit, we piled back on the bus and drove the short distance to the Peles Castle. Anyone who ever doubted the phrase "it's good to be the king" has never visited *this* place. I have never, at least in my travels thus far, observed a more conspicuous display of opulence than Peles Castle. Built between 1873 and 1914 – for King Carol I, sovereign Romania's first monarch – it cost the staggering equivalent of 120 million dollars in today's money. Supposedly, this site was chosen when the king visited the area in 1866 while he was the ruling prince of the Romanian United Principalities and fell in love with the mountain scenery. Nestled within the southeastern Carpathian Mountains, the castle is an architectural mix of neo-Renaissance and Gothic Revival, with some Saxon *fachwerk* (half-timber design) evident in the interior courtyard facades. The inside decoration is mostly Baroque, with different types of heavy carved woods and exquisite fabrics. And although it is called a castle, by form and function it really served as a palace. Today, it is a priceless national monument.

The castle grounds are huge, and have a stunning view of the surrounding mountains from any angle. There are seven Italian neo-Renaissance terrace gardens adorned with

fountains, pathways, decorative pieces and statues made mostly of Carrara marble, including a very large one of King Carol I (created by Italian artist Raffaello Romanelli) overlooking the main entrance. We queued up at the tour entrance door and waited for our official guide. All tours of the castle are conducted by staff guides. There were two types of tours available when we arrived: one that takes nearly three and a half hours to complete and must be booked in advance, or the smaller, more popular one (which we took) that entails a 45-minute walk through some of the more important rooms of the ground and first floors of the palace. Photography is not permitted unless you pay a separate fee (32 Romanian lei); Silviu suggested we buy the official guidebook (containing tons of pictures) from the souvenir shop for only \$6. But once we actually entered the castle, I could have kicked myself for not paying the photography fee. This place has to be seen to be believed, no amount of words can describe the ostentatious display of wealth within these walls.

Peles Castle has a 34,000 square foot floor plan, with over 170 rooms, most of them with a dedicated theme or function (offices, libraries, art galleries, armories, theaters, dining halls) and styles (Turkish, Moorish, Florentine, French, Imperial). They are all lavishly furnished and intricately detailed. One of the largest collections of art in Eastern or Central Europe can be found here: furniture, paintings, gold, silver, hand-painted Swiss stained glass, fine china, ivory, tapestries and rugs. I had so many questions I wanted to ask our tour guides (there were several walking with us due to the size of our group) but they wore crested suit jackets that smelled worse than the taxi cab back in Sofia, and I opted to keep my mouth shut and my distance a good *smell's length* away.

We started out in the Honor Hall, which raises over three floors, and has a retractable stain-glass roof panel. The walls are decorated with exquisite wood carvings. From here we saw several important rooms, climbing a massive staircase to what is considered the first floor. The castle was fully electric when it was completed and has original elevators that are still operable today. The sumptuous Imperial Suite has a rare five hundred year old Cordoban tool leathered wall cover. The Grand Armory (or Arsenal) has an amazing collection of weaponry and armor from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including various big game hunting trophies; the adjoining Small Armory contains weaponry and armor primarily from the East ( Ottoman, Arab and Indo-Persian). We saw the Playhouse, a sixty seat theater complete with a royal box, and the king's personal study and library with an incredible book collection, and the queen's music room where she enjoyed entertaining guests. The main dining hall could fit a small army. And while every new room we entered made us 'ooh' and 'aah', deep down a part of me made me wonder what kind of self-absorbed person was this King Carol I? I'm certain the amount of gold spent on building this palace could have lifted the newly minted Romania out of the agricultural era and propelled it into the industrial age. What a waste of the national treasury!

Our tour of the castle ended when the main guide stated – rather unceremoniously, I might add – that all the Gate 1 members had to leave. Apparently, the tour was going to continue, but without us. I guess our time schedule did not permit for a longer visit. We spent about thirty minutes walking the grounds and taking photographs of the palace



exterior and the gorgeous landscape, and then boarded the bus and drove for the next two and a half hours to Bucharest, the nation's capital. Along the way we passed the city of Ploiesti, once famous for its large oil fields and refineries (and the reason Romania was targeted during both World Wars). Today, this city – the ninth most populated in the country – is an industrial center, and while oil production has declined markedly, it still operates four major oil refineries. Just outside the capital we stopped at a Carrefour super store (the European version of Walmart) to use the bathroom and buy some snacks. The bathrooms were actually storage containers placed in the parking lot that had been modified with sinks and toilets. Pretty clever.

When we entered Bucharest it was so late that instead of checking into our hotel we headed straight to the Bistro Jaristea for dinner. It was a very nice restaurant with an underground dining room and a piano player in one corner. I sat with Kathy and Alan at a table that included the two Vietnamese couples. They served this wonderful hot bread and a tasty potato appetizer, followed by rolled beef stuffed with ham and a side of sliced baked potatoes. Some of my fellow tour members complained about the dryness of the meat, but I thought everything tasted delicious. From here, we drove directly to the JW Marriot Bucharest Grand Hotel situated near the Parliament Palace, probably one of the best hotels in all of Romania. The place bills itself as “a city within a city” and has all the modern amenities, including a casino. It took us a long time to check in, though, since they required a completed registration card, our passports and a credit card (in case we incurred any additional expenses).

After putting my luggage away, I joined Kathy and Alan for a 45 minute stroll around the hotel. The only drawback to staying at the Marriot, we soon discovered, was that it is located in an area far from the interesting parts of the city. We saw nothing but office buildings and a few closed stores. They invited me up to their room for what Kathy called ‘coffee and crumpets’. I stayed with them until midnight, chatting away until exhaustion overtook me. It had been a very long (but rewarding) day; I returned to my room and quickly fell asleep.

## **Day Ten**

I was up by 6:00 am. I showered, shaved and made several cups of coffee in my room. Two hours later I went downstairs for a delicious breakfast buffet, sitting with Dana Marie and Terry. The chef made me a wonderful omelet and I served myself a pile of pancakes with syrup and whipped cream; it was like eating at a Romanian IHOP. This was our last day on the Balkans trip before heading back home (for me, anyway, several of the others had booked additional days in Bucharest). At 9:00am the gang boarded the bus for a four hour tour of the capital. Almost immediately an interesting story began circulating amongst the group. One of the older female members had arrived at the bus very early, hoping to secure the seat directly in back of the driver. Marius was already ensconced behind the wheel when this woman boarded, he was perusing a pornographic

magazine and didn't even bother to put it away when the tour member said "good morning". Supposedly, he smiled back and continued doing his 'research', the naked bodies on the pages clearly visible to the shocked woman.

Bucharest is the capital and the biggest city of Romania, and depending on which census report you read, the overall metropolitan area of Bucharest has between 2.2 and 3 million people, making it the 10<sup>th</sup> largest in the European Union. Geographically, the city is situated on the banks of the Dambovitza River, which flows into the Arges River (a tributary of the Danube), on the south eastern corner of the Romanian Plain. Several lakes stretch across its northern sections, and in the center of Bucharest is Lake Cismigiu, a man-made lake, surrounded by the beautiful Cismigiu Gardens. Economically, the city is not only the wealthiest in the country, but one of the most important industrial centers and transportation hubs in all of Eastern Europe.

Before becoming the capital of Romania in 1862, Bucharest's history was marked by thousands of years of development and decline, starting with the settlements built in Antiquity and surviving numerous earthquakes, plagues, fires and occupying empires. The city was bombed heavily during WWII by both sides since it entered the war as a member of the Axis Powers and finished in the Allied camp. When the communists took over the country, Bucharest continued to grow; new urban districts were created, most dominated by residential tower blocks (high rise Soviet-style apartment buildings). Under Ceausescu's leadership, much of the historical areas of the city, like the Civic Center district, were demolished to make way for 'Socialist realist' development under his new *systematization* program. The city today is a curious mix of its old European self, combined with the drab socialist tower buildings and Ceausescu's own dubious architectural projects.

Our first stop was actually a photo-op of the enormous Parliament Palace (the Mother of all *systematization* projects). Our bus pulled into the cobbled-stone parking area known as Constitution Square and we spent several minutes photographing this legislative building from across the very wide *B-dul Libertatii* (Liberty Boulevard). The Parliament Palace is the second largest administrative structure in the world (only the Pentagon is bigger). And despite our distance from it, this sprawling off-white building is so long I was not able to photograph it from end to end (at least not with *my* camera). We would be taking a 45-minute walking tour of the building later, but right now we climbed back on the bus and drove to the Patriarchal Cathedral just southwest of *Piata Unirii* (Unification Square) to visit what is the official center of Romania's Orthodox faith.

The Patriarchal Cathedral complex was built on Mitropoliei, one of the city's few hills, during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. To gain access we walked through the bell tower entrance (built in 1698 and restored in 1958) and into a courtyard where the Patriarchal Palace and the Cathedral stand side by side. The palace (built in 1708) is the official residence of the elected Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church and is off-limits to tourists. The Cathedral has undergone several facelifts throughout the years, but the original structure dates back to the mid-1600s. It was constructed on a design similar to the cathedral in the Romanian town of Curtea de Arges (only much bigger), resembling a large and elaborate

Byzantine-style mausoleum, with a three-lobbed foundation, an ample pronaos (open vestibule) and four identical steeples. The outer decoration consists of two rows of upper and lower panels with a carved belt made of three twisting cords separating them. Along the top of the entrance are painted icons of Orthodox saints. The entire interior of the porch entrance is covered with frescoes. In the pronaos there is a silver coffin containing the relics of St. Demetrio the New (a Christian martyr) and the tombs of the first, second and fourth Romanian patriarchs. When we entered this beautiful church a ceremony was in progress – with dozens of people standing before the altar – so we discreetly took our photographs (without the flash) and moved on.

From here, we drove back to the Parliament Palace for our scheduled private tour of the legislative building. It was Saturday, and the Romanian parliament was not in session, but security, as you can imagine, was very tight. We had to surrender our passports with the front guards and have our bags X-rayed. This was followed by a metal detector scan. Once our group was cleared we were met by this adorable female tour guide named Gabriela who had an excellent command of the English language and an even better sense of humor. She led us on a very informative tour of the more important parts of the building, or, at least, the parts foreign tourists are allowed to see.

The Parliament Palace is massive, measuring approximately 885 ft by 787 ft, with 12 storeys and four underground levels (including a nuclear bunker). It has an eclectic neoclassical architectural style and was constructed using materials mostly from Romania. There are 1100 rooms in total, with a main marbled lobby that stretches more than 300 ft wide. This building is often referred to as the ‘white elephant’ of Bucharest, built at a staggering cost on the megalomaniacal whims of the late dictator Ceausescu during the 1980’s; in fact, he changed the interior decorative designs so many times it was never actually finished prior to his overthrow and execution. It was intended to house all the government ministries, the communist party offices and contain the apartments of high functionaries. The structure was originally called the Casa Republicii (the House of the Republic) and then by the more commonly accepted name of Casa Poporului (the House of the People). More cynical Romanians called this building the Casa Nebunului (the Madman’s House) since an entire historical district was razed to build it. Today, the place is simply known as the Parliament Palace. Following the overthrow of Ceausescu, the newly elected government of Romania anguished over what to do with this building, and there was even talk of tearing it down as a symbol of the disastrous excesses of communism. But then reality set in. The building was almost completed, and the costs had already been invested, so it was decided to just go ahead and finish the project. In 1994, it became the official seat of the Senate and Parliament.

The 45-minute tour of the Parliament Palace takes you through ten of the most ‘representative rooms’ (in other words, the most dazzling and spacious) of the building. Photography was strictly prohibited unless you paid an additional 32 lei, which seemed rather expensive, so I decided to pull a ‘James Bond’ and keep my camera on (without the flash), cupping it in my right hand as clandestinely as I could without drawing attention. There were security cameras everywhere, but I would secretly depress the photo-shoot button while keeping the camera leveled at my side and nobody noticed. At

least I don't think they did. Ahhhh, maybe the head of security was watching me the whole time, saying: "*Look, another cheap American trying to save 32 lei!*" I was able to capture a few nice shots of the interior, although most came out blurry.

Gabriela took us through several large conference rooms with enormous chandeliers. We visited the Chamber of Deputies where the legislative body meets, two different theaters, the round executive conference room, massive halls filled with Romanian paintings and artifacts, the enormous glass-ceilinged Sala Unirii (Unification Hall) and the Alexandru Cuza room (named after a famous Moldavian prince) which is the tallest chamber in the palace and the second largest overall, and designed as a protocol room. The long balcony outside the Cuza room offers a wonderful panoramic view of the Constitution Square and the Union Boulevard beyond it. We were permitted to take photos from the balcony. Although the Parliament Palace may have been an initial embarrassment for the newly-democratic republic back in the early 1990s, today it is an important monument, showcasing the natural resources – stone, marble and wood – from Romania's mountains and forests, and representing the historical and political achievements of its people. If you visit Bucharest, this is definitely a must-see. Before we left, most of us tipped Gabriela generously.

From the Parliament Palace we drove north through the city to visit the Village Museum, the largest outdoor museum in Europe, founded by royal decree in 1936. Nestling the shores of Lake Herastrau inside the beautiful Herastrau Park, this unique collection of 50 buildings represents the history and design of rural Romanian architecture. Spread out over 30 acres are authentic homes and farmhouses from all the regions of Romania, carefully taken apart and shipped to the museum where they were reassembled in order to re-create a village setting. We spent an hour here, wandering through the park grounds, viewing an assortment of peasant structures: log cabins, steep-roofed homes, thatched barns, watermills and several rural wooden churches. Many of these historic dwellings had employees milling about dressed in the traditional wardrobe of the regions they represented; the homes were decorated with authentic furnishings. Throughout the museum's walkways vendors displayed Romanian arts and crafts: gypsies sold copper pots, artists sold paintings, painted bowls, and jewelry. This was a fun stop, giving us a glimpse into the history of rural Romania.

We continued touring the streets of Bucharest, seeing many of the famous sites and structures the city has to offer. Near the Village Museum we passed the Arch of Triumph (*Arcul de Triumf*) dedicated to the Romanian soldiers who fought in WWI. The Arc is 85 feet high and resembles a smaller version of the one in Paris. It was completed in 1936 out of Deva granite; the sculptures decorating the Arc were created by notable Romanian artists. We drove down Victory Avenue (*Calea Victoriei*), Bucharest's oldest and most charming street, and passed the Cantacuzino Palace, which now houses the George Enescu Museum (dedicated to the great Romanian composer and violinist). The palace was built along a French Baroque style with Art Nouveau elements; the façade famous for its sculptural decorations.

A few blocks further south along Victory Avenue we stopped at the Revolution Square (*Piata Revolutiei*) – not far from Cismigiu Park – and got off the bus to view the historical buildings surrounding it. On the far side of the square sits the Royal Palace (completely rebuilt in 1939 after a massive fire destroyed the previous one) and now home to the National Art Museum. The stunning neoclassical Athenaeum (opened in 1888) is across the wide avenue from the palace; this ornate, domed and circular structure is a landmark in Bucharest, and serves as the city’s main concert hall, home to the George Enescu Philharmonic. Next to this is the equally impressive Central University Library which first opened in 1895 (and has been expanded many times since) as part of the University of Bucharest. The original structure was named after King Carol I who donated the land for the building. All of the additions have all been paid for by donations, state grants and a percentage of the students’ tuition, making this library system one of the world’s largest. A massive statue of King Carol I atop his horse stands in front of the building.

In one corner of the Revolution Square, seemingly out of place next to these other larger historical structures, is the Kretzulescu Church. Built in 1722, this very small temple sticks out due to its simplistic Broncovenesc style, its once painted exterior now displays a brick façade (as a result of restoration work done during the 1930s). The porch frescoes date back to the original structure, but the interior frescoes were painted by the famous artist Gheorghe Tattarescu from 1859-60. As was the case whenever we entered *any* church in the Balkans, a service of some kind was going on and we had to take our flashless photos (enduring the annoyed glances of the parishioners in the process) and quickly moved on.

Across from the Kretzulescu Church is the former Communist Party Headquarters, a large structure now used as an administrative building. It was from the front balcony of this building that former dictator Ceausescu gave his last speech before fleeing from the angry mobs below. Near the center of the square there is a controversial memorial called the Rebirth (resembling, as some art critics have described it, “a potato skewered on a stake”) dedicated to the people who lost their lives during the brief revolution that toppled the communist regime, and not far from it is the bizarre-looking statue of Luliu Maniu (a popular prime minister who served from 1928 to 1933) sitting in a chair with unusually long limbs and fingers, and behind him is the equally intriguing Broken Man sculpture, which resembles a splintered tree.

We continued down Victory Avenue for several more blocks and came upon the neoclassical structure of the National Military Club (*Cercul Militar National*) built in 1912 to serve the social, cultural and educational needs of the Romanian army. Banquets and social functions are still held in the ballrooms, and upstairs are the army’s library and numerous offices and classrooms for training officers. While most of the building is off-limits to civilians, the building’s restaurant and spacious summer terrace is open to the public. Just east along Regina Elizabeta Boulevard, passing the University of Bucharest, is the University Square (*Piata Universitatii*), a popular gathering spot in the city, showcasing four remarkable buildings: the University of Bucharest’s School of Architecture, the Bucharest National Theater, the neoclassical Coltea Hospital and its

church (built between 1702 and 1794) and the neo-gothic Sutu Palace, now home to the Bucharest History Museum. This square is famous for its four statues: *Ion Heliade Radulescu* (erected in 1879 to honor the Romantic and Classical poet, writer and politician), *Michael the Brave* (erected in 1874 to honor the first prince who briefly ruled over Transylvania, Wallachia and Moldova and is considered one of Romania's greatest national heroes), *Gheorghe Lazar* (erected in 1889 to honor the secular teacher who founded the first Romanian language school) and *Spiru Haret* (erected in 1932 to honor the mathematician, astronomer and politician who reformed the Romanian educational system).

We drove west on Regina Elizabeta Boulevard, passing Cismigiu Park on our right. Just beyond the University of Bucharest's Rectory and Faculty of Law we came upon the beautiful Bucharest National Opera building, and from there crossed the Dambovita River via the Eroiler (Heroes) Bridge driving southwest until we reached Eroiler Square (*Piata Eroiler*) where we passed the famous Heroes Monument. Our last stop on the city tour was the Romanian Military Academy not far from the square on Sos Panduri Street. This large building was originally constructed in 1889 and is known as the Carol I National Defense University. Both military and civilian experts receive security and national defense training here, and the school undertakes relevant scientific studies when asked to do so by the state. It is a member of IAMP (the International Association for Military Pedagogy) a group of military institutions dedicated to advanced learning. There is a tall statue of three Romanian soldiers on the front steps of the building. Unlike the other sites we had visited, I found the grounds a little unkempt. This building actually saw fighting during WWII as German military advisors took up residence here, making this place one of the last bastions of Nazism in Romania. There is a plaque in the courtyard commemorating the soldiers who died liberating the building.

It was now after 1:00 pm (on a Saturday afternoon) and the rest of the day was free. Many of us wanted to do a little souvenir shopping since there had been very few opportunities to pick up items along the tour. Unfortunately, many locals close their businesses on Saturday. I'm not sure if this is for religious reasons or just a cultural thing, but we found it odd that on the day nobody works, stores also close down. *No wonder the Romanian economy is lagging!* The government needs to give its country's entrepreneurs a refresher course on Consumerism 101: when people are free to shop, open the damn stores!

To compensate, Silviu had Marius drop us off at the Unirea Shopping Center on Unification Square (*Piata Unirii*) along the wide Unification Boulevard with its small park and numerous sprouting fountains. This is one of the largest squares in central Bucharest, a major transportation hub with taxis, trams, buses and the metro rail heading out in all directions. The streets here were packed with locals. On one corner sits the historic *Hanul lui Manuc*, or Manuc's Inn, originally built in 1808, it is the oldest continuously operated inn in Bucharest. The Unirea shopping mall was once the largest department store in communist Romania, but was expanded and later converted into a shopping center during the 1990s. It resembles a typical multi-level mall in the United States, although with a lot less pizzazz, I thought.

I tagged along with Ron, Anke and Dana Marie and we immediately headed into the shopping center's McDonald's restaurant for lunch. The lines were long but the Big Mac and fries were worth it. After lunch we split up to do some shopping, agreeing to meet back at the restaurant in about an hour or so. I was disappointed to discover that the Unirea hardly sells any traditional Romanian goods; most of the items were imported and could have been purchased in similar malls anywhere in the world. After taking the escalator to the top floors, and checking out the shops and boutiques up there, I headed back down to the ground floor where I ran into Dana Marie. She helped me select a uniquely-designed silver cross for my (now ex) girlfriend. *I've decided it's cheaper to break up with your girlfriend prior to traveling!*

By 4:00pm we rendezvoused at the McDonald's and decided to walk back to the Marriot instead of taking a cab. Silviu said it was a 15 minute walk. Apparently, his notion of distance must be based on his own nervously rapid gait. It took us just over an hour, but the scenery along Unification Boulevard made the walk very pleasant. We had to cross the wide square, watching out for traffic and the tramline cars, but soon found ourselves strolling down a nicely paved tree-lined sidewalk dotted with park benches. It was a beautiful day. We slowly made our way towards the Parliament Palace, turning left on Liberation Boulevard and continuing up the street adjacent to the palace grounds until we reached *Calea 13 Septembrie* (September 13<sup>th</sup> Street) where the Marriot is located.

Back in my hotel room, I made a cup of coffee then pampered myself with a long hot bubble bath, finishing up with an invigorating cold shower. At 7:30 pm the gang was to meet downstairs in the lobby to go have our Farewell Dinner. Earlier on the bus, Silviu handed out Kompas survey questionnaires requesting that we turn them in at dinnertime. His attitude took a turn for the worse when some of the tour members mentioned they didn't feel comfortable handing him their survey and preferred to send them to Kompas directly. This irritated Silviu and he actually *insisted* that we comply. Tempers were still flaring when we boarded the bus that evening. Jim and his wife Linda, and the two California women (Kim and Linda) opted to skip the Farewell Dinner and eat inside the Marriot's Italian restaurant instead. When Silviu walked down the aisles of the bus collecting the questionnaires, Dana Marie told him she hadn't filled it out and he got very upset with her. When he got to me, I told him straight out I wasn't going to give it to him. A group of us briefly considered getting off the bus at that point. Let me tell you, Silviu had a real mutiny on his hands.

But the mood lightened once we reached the Restaurant Pescarus, a very festive establishment (founded in 1936). It had two large dining halls on multi-levels and live entertainment, surrounded by the natural scenery of the Herastrau Lake and Park. The restaurant is very famous, and caters to Bucharest's high society. We sat at these long tables while the staff placed drinks and appetizers in front of us. Once again, we had pre-ordered our meals, and I had opted to try the traditional polenta with rolled cabbage stuffed with mincemeat. I had never had this dish before, so I was excited to be trying something new. *I will simply state that I did not like it.* The smell of the cooked cabbage ruined the meal for me. The others had fish, which, from my vantage point, suddenly

seemed very tasty. *Drats*, again. I loaded up on bread...and a neglected plate of appetizers near the middle of the table. Eventually, Magda took pity on me and gave me some of her fish in exchange for the cabbage rolls. Prior to the main meal being served, several young people clad in peasant clothing danced through the aisles and onto the main floor where they performed traditional Romanian folk dances.

During my trips, I'm usually skeptical about restaurants that offer cultural shows. Mostly, they cater to tourists and tend to be a little on the hokey side. But when I looked around, the Pescarus dining hall was filled to capacity with Romanian customers. I knew this restaurant had to be very popular. It wasn't until the orchestra started belting out Lionel Ritchie tunes that I started to get suspicious. Sure enough, I looked up at the dance floor and saw a beautiful young woman in a bridal gown. *Holy Matrimony, we were sitting smack in the middle of a wedding reception!* And not only that, some of our tour members had joined the wedding party on the dance floor; Paul, the short Vietnamese man from Canada, was *holding hands* with the bride and circling the dance floor in some kind of Romanian folk dance. Actually, it was pretty cool (and quite funny, too). Afterwards, Kathy went up to the bride and groom (Andrea and Lorensu) and took their picture and thanked them for allowing us to be part of their wedding. They were very friendly and gracious, according to Kathy. The Farewell Dinner turned out to be a very fun outing. Silviu began inviting all the females in the group to dance. And, truth be told, he was a pretty snazzy dancer. Even Marius, a tad liquored up, seemed more human. Where the heck were *these* guys throughout the trip?

By 10:00pm our group began piling back onto the bus. Some of us had very early departure flights the following morning. Thirty minutes later we reached the Marriott and the official 'good byes' and hugging in the lobby began, with everyone exchanging phone numbers and promising to keep in touch. By 11:00pm I was back in my room, crawling into bed for a few hours shuteye.

## Day Eleven

My wake-up call was for 2:00am. I dragged myself out of bed and made several cups of coffee in my room. I showered, dressed and did some repacking, and an hour later was downstairs in the lobby with my luggage. It was too early for the breakfast buffet, so the staff prepared a boxed breakfast consisting of a croissant, a yogurt, a sandwich, banana, juice and bottled water. At 3:15am our transport driver showed up and we (Kim, Linda, and – I believe – Anne and Paul) boarded the van for the twenty minute ride to the airport. There was a bit of confusion when we arrived since it was too early for check-in and we weren't sure where to go, but soon the ticket counter opened and we were squared away. The plane was a very comfortable A320 Airbus. I slept most of the way to Frankfurt.



At Frankfurt International Airport we had to get off the plane on the tarmac and take a bus and then a shuttle train to Terminal 2 where all the U.S. bound flights depart from. Everyone had to go through security again. The hefty female officer who rifled through my backpack – after it came out of the X-ray machine – nearly crushed the decorative eggs I purchased back in Sighisoara (and had painstakingly wrapped in tissue paper). ‘Helga’ held one of them up between her stubby thumb and forefinger and asked, “*Vat ees dees?*” I explained they were Romanian decorative eggs and were *very* fragile. She grunted, ripping apart the tissue paper like a spoiled child unwrapping a Christmas gift. She then picked up another one and began shaking them violently, causing my gonads to quiver uncontrollably. Satisfied, I guess, that there were no tiny grenades hidden inside the eggs, she dropped them into my open backpack with all the finesse of a wrecking ball, and signaled me to move on. Miraculously, my *huevos* survived the ordeal...*and the decorative eggs were unbroken, too.* (Yuk-yuk-yuk).

Once I was inside the terminal gate area I said good-bye to Kim and Linda (Anne and Paul were in a different terminal building, I think) and proceeded to the nearest Lufthansa counter to see if I could get a free upgrade to business class (on account of the cancelled flight the previous week). *Ha!* The representative gave me a look that had ‘nice try’ written all over it, and then flatly denied my request. My flight left on schedule at 9:25 am. It was a pleasant flight, nobody sat in the middle seat so I had more room to stretch out. But three of the passengers in front and in back of me had terrible colds (or the flu) and would begin sneezing and coughing in fits and spurts. Half way through the flight their bodily functions had synchronized, and when one started sneezing, the other two would start coughing and hacking or vice-versa. It was a real symphony, too; a light sneezing, followed by a guttural coughing, followed by a gentle wheezing, followed by more pronounced sneezing and then a final deep phlegmy clearing of the throat. The only thing missing was Leonard Bernstein waving a conductor’s wand. I took *two* Ambien and gratefully fell asleep for the remainder of the flight.

After touching down in Miami I collected my luggage, breezed through customs and made it home in less than an hour. I actually live minutes from the airport. I had taken the rest of the week off from work and spent the time going through the almost 2,000 photographs of my trip, deleting and tagging as I went along. I was in touch with Kathy and Anke and Dana Marie, as well. And I began the arduous process of collecting my notes and ‘memorabilia’ from the tour and starting my journal. To me, the journey isn’t finished until this thing is written.

The Balkans trip presented me with a lot of problems: the airline strike, the lost luggage, the tour director from Hell and the thug who drove us around. But as a result, this tour will always be special. I enjoyed the sites immensely (Belgrade was my favorite city and *all* of the German Saxon towns we visited in Romania were awesome). Ultimately, though, what makes any journey worthwhile are the people you meet along the way. I would like to thank Kathy and Alan (who also ventured with me to Turkey earlier in the year) and the rest of the Balkans tour gang for making this trip – regardless of the inconveniences – a wonderful experience. I have to give a special ‘thank you’ to Ron and Anke who were also stranded with me in Frankfurt; their company made that

entire ordeal bearable. *Thank you both.* I always send a copy of my journal to my fellow travelers as a parting gift for their companionship. Although the words are mine, I hope that when you read this it will instantly take you back to our time in the Balkans together. Until next time, may you all venture where your hearts wish to go...

Richard C. Rodriguez

(My trip to the Balkans occurred on August 30 – September 9, 2012)





