

2006 BUDAPEST TO BUCHAREST

Thursday, September 28, 2006. In order to get to Budapest on an upgraded ticket I had to book through Amsterdam. There I am to connect with Malev into Budapest. Hurrah! No Charles de Gaulle airport today. Perhaps I shall make my connection and not lose my bag.

Friday, September 29, 2006. I think we must have landed in Brussels for the plane taxied and taxied. It must have taken 20 minutes before we finally reached out dock. They had a cart waiting and we had quite a tour of the Amsterdam airport before we got to my gate.

Great orange billboards show at every turn advertising ING investment services. I have a small amount of money with them myself. I knew they were a Dutch company but had no idea how big they were.

Malev Airlines had no record of my reservation! I knew there was going to be a problem when Delta converted my paper ticket to make it an electronic ticket for the Delta part. The Malev manager had to be called to straighten it out. Fortunately they had space on the plane!

It's about a two-hour flight from Amsterdam to Budapest. They served us hot ham and cheese sandwiches for lunch. There was also free wine but I settled for a coke. The sandwich tasted good but I had a little indigestion afterwards.

A nice man from England carried my bag off the plane and into immigration.

There was a Grand Circle representative waiting in the lobby but I hadn't purchased the transfer so I had to cope on my own. The best choice seemed to be a minibus. I bought my ticket and waited about a half hour until it came. The man drove like a kamikaze pilot and we had a grand tour of Budapest dropping off the other passengers before getting to the Corinthia Aquincum Hotel. It must be near the ruins of the old Roman city that I remembered from our trip last year. We are a long way up river from the Marriot where I stayed before. They may have put us here to keep us away from the demonstrations going on in Pest over the coming elections.

I have a lovely room overlooking the river. I did some unpacking and stopped to refill my daily pillboxes. Air regulations say medicine now has to be carried in its original prescription bottle.

I decided to try the in-room Internet access. I bought a card at the reception for 5 euros and tried to use it with no success. I called for help and a bored man came up to the room to show me how to use it. When he poked the buttons it worked. He left and I tried to access my mail. It wouldn't work for me. Perhaps it is the jet lag (I ran out of no jet lag pills last night) but it may be my lack of skill with the PC computer I have been given to use.

I took a short nap and pondered the problem. It came to me in a flash! This is a PC not a Macintosh. You have to use the mouse on the left side to make it work. I found the Internet connection is really high speed in the hotel.

Scotti and Mac arrived but their luggage was still in Frankfurt. It finally arrived about midnight.

At 6:30 PM there was a briefing. I arrived about 5 minutes late and learned that this group works on time! They had already stopped serving the promised welcome drink. There are a number of extra cost tours to be offered. We have to decide by tomorrow which ones we want at \$60 a pop.

Mac was ready to go out on the town but Scotti and I prevailed. I had a club sandwich and glass of wine in the hotel dining room and soon went up to bed.

<http://www.malev.hu/bp/eng/index.asp>

<http://www.gct.com/gcc/general/>

<http://www.save-on-budapesthotels.com/?hotel=corinthia-aquincum-hotel-budapest>

<http://www.iit.bme.hu/hungary/budapest/bptour/bpduna03.htm>

http://goeurope.about.com/cs/health/fr/no_jet_lag.htm

Saturday, September 28. I kept waking up during the night and had trouble going back to sleep. The jet lag has really gotten to me. I also woke up in the morning aching in every bone. After a buffet breakfast, I went down to the spa and signed up for a Thai massage.

I also got directions on how to find the Aquincum museum and ruins. I will do this tomorrow while the group does the "Big Bend Tour". Mary and I took that tour last year. It is the one with the jewelry store stop and I just can't afford another high priced piece of jewelry.

We are in the yellow group and left for the city tour promptly at 9:30. I'm glad I was here last year for this tour did not cover nearly as much. We started at the Palace where the guide merely turned us loose.

Scotti and I paid to go into the Coronation Church, which is very interesting. The original building dates from 1255. The Matthias Church has been called the Coronation Church ever since

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Emperor Franz Joseph 1 of Austria received his crown here in 1867. His consort Elisabeth was tapped on the shoulder with the crown. East meets west in the decoration of the church, for along with frescos of the saints the pillars are frescoed in geometric and floral designs to reflect the 150 years of Turkish occupation. I saw no point in paying again to go on the Fisherman's Bastion. You have a pretty good view from the street.

One of the things I don't like about Grand Circle is that they nickel and dime you. We have to pay our admissions and tip the local guides and bus drivers as well as buy optional excursions. I much prefer tours where everything is included. Grand Circle likes to make their tours look inexpensive, but when you add in all the extra costs they cost as much as any other tour.

The guide told us where to meet at 10:40. My back felt like it was broken so I sat for a while and watched the many tour groups go by. One had radios like our group in Libya. There was also a Tauck Tour. They had paid extra so they could park nearer the Church.

When I went to our rendezvous with the guide, there were two other ladies also waiting. I parked my stool in a shady corner and waited. Soon Scotti arrived. The guide had already loaded everyone and I was holding up the bus! This is an unforgivable sin on a tour and I am so embarrassed! I don't know how Scotti and Mac got past me without my seeing them.

We drove across the bridge to Pest and the guide pointed out the barricades around the Parliament. It seems the Prime Minister told lies about the economy in order to get reelected. There are many people unhappy with the socialist government. Inflation is rampant. There is an election tomorrow but I don't know for which offices. (We learned later that the socialists won in Budapest but the countryside voted for the right wing.)

We stopped at the beautiful cathedral but were told we could not go in because it was closed to tour groups. I'm glad I saw it last year. However, the guide said, "There is a shop nearby where we can buy souvenirs at a 5% discount". I decided to stay on the bus! It was nice and quiet and I even dozed off. I hope this doesn't become a "shopping" tour. I prefer to do my shopping on my own where I can bargain and know the guide isn't getting a rake-off.

More buildings were pointed out including the largest synagogue in Europe. This can't be an Orthodox synagogue for those synagogues are small. The members live within walking distance to attend services. Before World War 2 Budapest was 23% Jewish. The guide felt there must be almost that number in Budapest today.

The last stop was at Heroes Square with the wonderful statues of the Hungarian tribes. Scotti and Mac got off the bus at the shuttle stop. I rode back to the hotel for a nap!

At four I went down to the Spa for my massage. This was a Thai massage. The room held two tables, separated by a curtain. The tables were about 3 inches off the floor with a mat upon them. Presiding over the room was a Buddha. Oriental music played in the background. The therapist climbed onto the table with me and, straddling me, applied hard pressure to all the muscles of my back with all her weight. She used her elbows and knees. Then she poured warm oil on me and started the massage. It was an all over massage, but I didn't let her do my hair. I have trouble getting the oil out afterwards. I felt so much better.

Our welcome dinner was at the Marvaymenyasszony Restaurant. Its long incomprehensible name means White Marble Bride Restaurant. It is a popular place for tour groups. We were in a private room with a band to entertain us with gypsy music. Unfortunately it also made it hard to hear. For a tourist meal it was reasonably good and there was plenty of wine to wash it down.

I sat next to Margaret Druse from Racine, WI. She is a retired schoolteacher and has been on enough Grand Circle trips to rate a gold name badge. I found we shared an appreciation of Gerald Durrell. His delightful books recount his adventures collecting endangered animals for his zoo on the Isle of Jersey. Margaret has been to Jersey and seen the zoo.

Across from me were Miguel and Irma de la Pena. They are from Cuba and live in Massachusetts.

<http://www.thaimassage.com/>

<http://www.bartleby.com/65/bu/Budapest.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Joseph_I_of_Austria

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heroes'_Square_\(Budapest\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heroes'_Square_(Budapest))

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerald_Durrell

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Sunday, October 1. I slept in until about 9:30 and missed breakfast, although I did have a banana courtesy of Scotti. Had been told the station was under the nearby bridge and so I walked. Near the station I found the Vasarely Museum and when I heard it was free decided to check it out. Victor Vasarely's (1908-1997) paintings from the 1940s and 1950s are known for their geometrical designs. There were also some other drawings but all from the modern school. I have never understood modern art so I'm glad I didn't waste any money touring the museum.

Then I went to the train station but my Hungarian was inadequate to buy a ticket to the Aquincum Museum. Returning to the hotel, I took a cab.

Aquincum was a Roman Garrison. At the beginning of the second century it was the capitol of Pannonia. At its height its population was about 60,000 people. Excavations began at the end of the nineteenth century with the museum opening in 1894. The surrounding archaeological park only includes about 1/3 of the original town. It has descriptive signs in English as well as Hungarian so I was able to know what I was looking at. There was a theater and a public bath as in all Roman towns. They also had on display a private bath. The restoration is not the greatest I have ever seen. However it was good enough that I could almost visualize the soldiers in their togas and hear the chariots.

The small museum has some interesting artifacts including a helmet from the 2nd century. There were some figurines and one or two statues, but I felt the main pieces were probably in some National museum elsewhere. I did not tour the outdoor lapidary section of old tombstones for it was hot and I was getting tired.

I decided to return to the hotel and the adventure began. Of course there were no taxis to be had. I went to the train station but there was no ticket window. Finally I went to the bus stop and luckily found a young man who spoke English. He was raised in New York City and came to Hungary with his mother after his parents divorced. He told me I didn't need a ticket! No one would ask for one. He didn't plan to use one himself. So when the bus arrived he ushered me into it and made sure I got off at the right stop that was at the hotel driveway. I never did pay.

I had a tuna salad in the Health Club and came up to the room for a nap. I hope I get over the sleeping sickness soon. I was so pleased I slept until almost five this morning and then I died.

Scotti and Mac reported to me about the Big Bend Tour. It was an abridged version of the trip Mary and I made last year. They did not get to see the wonderful cathedral at Esztergom with its neo classical interior.

A friend had recommended the Rezkakas Restaurant and so we went there for a truly elegant and memorable meal. There was all sorts of wild game in the menu. I had a steak with a wild mushroom sauce. Scotti and Mac had wild rabbit. It was all delicious.

http://www.place-des-arts.com/en/liste_art.asp?n=VASARELY&p=Victor&script=Listeabc.asp

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pannonia>

<http://www.iit.bme.hu/hungary/budapest/bptour/bpduna03.htm>

<http://www.rezkakasrestaurant.com/>

Monday, October 2. We took the optional tour to Holloko for an in-home lunch with the locals. It took about an hour and a half to drive up into the mountainous region. En route we saw the fertile farming lands, which supply Hungary with all kinds of fruits and vegetables, as well as the meat that is a large part of their diet.

Holloko was a coal mining community and when the mines closed they had to come up with another source of income. It is tourism. Two or three times a week the town opens its doors to bus tours.

It is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. There are 58 houses in the old section that are in the old rural folk style. The village sits in a picturesque valley. High above the village is the ruin of an old castle.

The ladies gave a demonstration of their dancing. One even popped corn for us in an open pan over a fire. Their costumes were interesting. The married ladies wore three skirts each, which made them look well fed. The unmarried one wore five to make her look "fertile" enough to attract a husband. The married ladies wore a scarf decorated with beadwork while the unmarried one had a bare head. They all wore white stockings.

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After the dance we had a walking tour down the main street where there were several occasions to buy the local handicrafts. Everyone wants to live on the main street so the town is basically one street wide. The houses were originally thatched or covered with wood tiles.

A lovely 19th century church is in the middle of town to make it accessible for everyone. It is the only building left with a wood tile roof. It has stone foundations, adobe walls and a wooden spire. The cobblestones were hard to walk on and I did not go all the way down to the end. I was breathless climbing back to the bus.

Then we were divided into small groups and taken to a private house for a home cooked lunch. Our hostess was the unmarried woman from the dance. Her grandmother did the cooking.

We entered the house through a lovely grape arbor with the tempting grapes looking ready to harvest. This family makes their own wine and also grows most of the food they use in their back yard. There was a vegetable soup followed by a chicken paprika and desert. We were told it was rude to not eat so we stuffed ourselves. You should never go hungry in Hungary! We had also been told to be smiling when we left or the watchful neighbors would think our hostess had not done a good job. It was easy to comply

We drove back to Budapest and disembarked at the pier where the River Aria was moored. It was directly across from the Parliament. Captain Josef Buchelhofer was at the door to greet us (as he was at subsequent stops).

I have a huge cabin with lots of storage space. After unpacking I took a nap, only to be awakened by the call that we were sailing. Up on the sundeck we had a commentary on the various buildings as we glided past them.

We adjourned to the main salon and there were free drinks while the Captain introduced us to the crew. A safety lecture was given. We were told what to do if we had to abandon the ship. The Captain commented that he could probably get the ship to shore before we would have to use lifeboats.

For supper we sat with Tom Mould, a psychiatrist, who lives in Gaithersburg, MD. He told us about his three years on an aircraft carrier during the Korean War.

<http://www.gct.com/gcc/general/default.aspx?oid=105210>

<http://www.travel-images.com/hungary14.html>

Tuesday, October 3. At breakfast I met Bea and Richard who have been on the ship since Prague. I do not know their last names since they are not on the passenger list of 91 names that we had been given. The green group, which started in Prague, is a complete mystery to me. There must be 130 or so passengers in all.

We went ashore at Vukovar, Croatia. This was the site of the worst shelling in the Croatian-Serbian War. Even though we had been briefed it was still a shock to see this town. It was 90% destroyed in the war eight years ago. Although some rebuilding has occurred, many of the buildings are still rubble. The main industries were all destroyed so there is a high unemployment rate.

Our guide Sonja talked about her experiences during this time. It is hard to imagine what it must have been like. We passed mile after mile of un-ploughed fields. Warning signs told of the land mines still there. There are automated ways to get rid of them but it takes time and money. The mines in the swamps and woods must be eliminated by hand. It is dangerous to prod the land, inch by inch, with a stick. Without access to their fields, the people must live on what they can grow in their back yards.

We drove for about an hour to a grade school in Laslova. The community is ethnic Hungarian although they are all Croatian. Grand Circle helps support this school and the school children entertained us with songs. Some were dressed in their traditional costumes. The originals had been destroyed in the war but the grandmother's are working to make new ones. The school was brand new. They only have 100 students, about 20 to a classroom. The reason for such a small ratio is because of a lack of children.

The school had a modern lab for science and a computer training room. Many of the children are learning English and were able to talk with us. Children go to school for only 3-4 hours and everyone goes home to lunch. In the cities sometimes there is a second shift of children who go in the afternoon, but still everyone is home for lunch. A teaching job is well paid by the Croatian government.

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We next drove to Osijek, our guide's hometown. This town was also shelled but never fell to the Serbs. Situated on the Drava River it is about 15 miles from where the Drava drains into the Danube. The Romans first started the town. It was destroyed by the Huns and then rebuilt during the Middle Ages. The Turks again destroyed it in the 18th century.

Now it is being restored once again although it is a long way from being the World Heritage City, which it aspires to be. We walked to the esplanade along the river and viewed what remains of the Middle Ages walls. Pockmarks in the buildings attested to the shelling this town felt.

There is a beautiful church devoted to St Anthony with much gold baroque design. Over the altar is a 500-year-old statue of the Virgin Mary, which we were told has never left the church. Since the church was turned into a mosque during the Turkish occupation I found this somewhat surprising but perhaps the painting was hidden in the church.

Next to the Church is a Franciscan Monastery. There were public restrooms and a gift shop. There was also a cross made of shrapnel, a reminder of the war.

We drove from there to Aljmas a small village on the Danube where we were invited into another home for a meal. The house had four rooms all in a row. Some had dual purposes. The room in which we ate also doubled as a bedroom.

First we were offered Slivovitz the local plum brandy which is like Schnapps. Again a vegetable soup was offered, made from all homegrown vegetables. The main course was a meat patty made of beef and pork with special seasonings and several side dishes.

Our young hostess spoke English very well and told us about her family. During the War, Serbs occupied their house. When they left they took everything, even the windows and doors. Only some broken furniture remained along with the family photograph albums. She proudly showed us pictures of her grandparents and parent's wedding.

Had dinner tonight with Tom again and the McCarthys. The other couple at our table was Patti and Bruce Brink. He is a surgeon at the Marshfield, WI clinic so the talk was of medicine and Patti's interest in photography.

A local band entertained us after dinner and played some Croatian music before making it a sing-along of tunes like Oh Susanna. It was so nice to get through the evening without falling asleep. Perhaps my time clock is now on European time!

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vukovar>

<http://www.sf.hr/osijek/osijek.html>

<http://www.maplandia.com/croatia/osijek-baranja/aljmas/>

http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/hr_indx.html

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slivovitz>

Wednesday, October 4. I was sound asleep when the abandon ship alarm noisily intruded my room. It was only a test but my appearance was still required on the sun deck. For some reason I had overslept and it was 9:30 AM. I threw on some clothes, grabbed my life vest and hurried up the three flights. It was not an auspicious beginning to a day!

Back in the cabin, I showered, washed my hair and brushed my teeth. I arrived late in the lounge where the Captain was having a question and answer session. I learned that it is now possible to go all the way from the North Sea to the Black Sea due to a canal connecting the Rhine and Danube. Also, that the reason there has been almost no other shipping on the river is due to the poor economy. Another reason is that the river is very low. Our draft of 5 feet allows us to travel in the 12-foot deep river.

This was followed by a funny lesson in basic Cyrillic. We all learned to write our names phonetically. Later we were teased by the schedule being written in Cyrillic!

The Federation of Serbia and Montenegro is all that remains of the old Yugoslavia. Under Slobodan Milosevic they tried to expand their territory into Bosnia and Croatia but were not successful.

We docked at Novi Sad, Serbia. Across the river we could see the huge fortress, the second largest in Europe. It comes complete with a clock where the hour hand is the longer one in order to confuse an enemy.

There is an interesting holocaust monument depicting a naked family, which commemorates where thousands of Jews were killed and thrown into the river.

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The town was a market town of shops. There was an interesting Bishop's house next to the Catholic Church and some other buildings with interesting exteriors.

I bought some funny cat earrings and an ice cream cone. The one thing I wanted was an Internet Cafe but this was not to be seen. I walked home through a park with much shade, welcome in the 80-degree heat. My wardrobe had been packed with cooler weather in mind!

Back on board I used the one public computer on the ship to send some e-mails. How spoiled I have become on other ships with direct satellite connections. These emails will not go out until the middle of the night when the traffic on the satellite is less. I don't care for the fact that the email can be read by anyone using the computer.

There was a folklore show before dinner. The group demonstrated old Serbian dances and songs.

The River Cloud tied up alongside and many of us went over to see her lounge. The same company owns the legendary Sea Cloud, which was originally the ship of Marjorie Meriwether Post Hutton. From the brochure we could see the River Cloud is very elegant with original artwork in her 39 cabins and 6 Junior Suites.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyrillic_alphabet

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slobodan_Milosevic

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holocaust>

http://www.gradnovisad.org.yu/cnt/index.php?id_node=2

http://www.crownluxurytravel.com/Template_gallery.asp?ID=80&sub=2&Wt.srch=1&wt.mc_id=GooglePPC&qclid=CN2S24GRhYgCFRVSAodfnwF3w

Thursday, October 5. Rain and noticeably colder. We slogged ashore for our city tour of Belgrade. The guide pointed out the numerous embassies and told us the names of all the streets. The Indonesian Embassy has a golden Garuda on it. The US has bought a bombed out building and plans a new embassy. The wealthy neighborhood has homes costing millions but most live in much smaller quarters.

The focus of the trip was Tito's tomb. Tito came by his office by killing his enemies and for years ruled as a benevolent dictator over his communist country. He kept peace between the various ethnic and religious groups and was revered by all the world's leaders. Yugoslavia had one the highest standards of living in Europe. When he died he was buried near his home in a tomb covered with a simple marble slab. In the same building were batons that had been given him by various governments.

There is also a small museum displaying his other favorite gifts. Due to an electric failure we could only see half of his collection of potteries and costumes that had come from all over the world. Apparently there are also gold and other valuable gifts awaiting a new and larger museum for exhibit.

Our guide was giving us the impression that Tito was wonderful, Milosevic was bad, but it was big business that ruined the economy. Inflation was so rampant that they even issued a 500 billion denomination note.

From the tomb we went to the fortress and it was pointed out that the promontory was the end of the Balkan Peninsula. Across the river was central Europe. Through the centuries millions have lost their lives in battles over this strategic spot.

The guide felt that NATO should not have bombed the city in 1999 during the Kosovo and Bosnia time. I didn't realize that we had bombed Belgrade to the extent we did!

We returned to the ship for lunch. At 2:00 they pulled Tito's special train into the station near the ship. Grand Circle arranged for the train to be brought out of mothballs for our entertainment. The train was patterned after the famous Blue Train from Johannesburg to Cape Town but is not quite as elegant.

The train had originally been designed for the Serbian royal family. Tito loved traveling by this train and had special cars designed. We started in the conference car with refreshments. It had a long table seating about 20 people. Tito's own car was beautiful with inlaid wood paneling. I even got to sit in his chair in the office where he received dignitaries. (They sat in a lower chair and had to look up to him). His bedroom and his third wife's bedrooms were also on display.

There was another car, which was designed for Charles de Gaulle, although de Gaulle never came to Yugoslavia to use it. It was used, however, for Queen Elizabeth. It was very stark

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compared to the lavish appointments of the dictator's car. Queen Elizabeth gave him a present: a Rolls Royce Silver Shadow. The car is still extant, having been mothballed with the train.

When Tito traveled there were always 5 trains that set out. No one knew which one he was on. His body was brought back to Belgrade for burial on the train and thousands lined the route.

The short ride was through the Railway yards and we ended up at the station, which had been reserved for the royalty. Folklore dancers were there to entertain us as we sipped our champagne.

Before returning to the ship we checked out the handicraft shop at the dock. There was an Internet cafe there and many of us got caught up with our affairs. The Internet on the ship is only good to send and receive e-mails.

For entertainment, they brought aboard four attractive college students and we were invited to quiz them about their life. Apparently there is no way you can go part time to the University. There are no part time jobs to be had, and there is a dearth of jobs to be found after their graduation. However, the girls were optimistic that they would have the opportunity to travel abroad and find jobs somewhere.

They were asked about Milosevic. It was explained that the older generation had been very prosperous under Tito and supported Milosevic in the hope he would continue their good life. This did not happen and many of the older people in Serbia are finding it hard to accept things as they are today. The students did not support Milosevic's ways and felt that Serbia was now off on the right track to build a good society for the future. They also commented that no one wanted Serbia. One by one the other Balkan States have split off on their own. This makes their life very difficult, as the Serbian passport is not accepted universally.

At dinner we sat with Barbara and Jim Wilson who are from San Diego. He recalled when the Thistle Class held their national Regatta there. I remember the sailing conditions were just about perfect there.

<http://www.beograd.org.yu/cms/view.php?id=220>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garuda>

<http://www.titoville.com/>

<http://razgledanje.tripod.com/tvrjava/english.htm>

<http://www.beograd.org.yu/cms/view.php?id=201271>

<http://www.yurail.co.yu/eng/prezentacije/plavi%20voz/index.htm>

<http://sailing.about.com/od/thistle/p/thistle.htm>

Friday, October 6, 2006. There are no shore stops today but we had a full day of activities while we enjoyed the Danube. The Danube is Europe's second longest river rising in the Black Forest and running 1776 miles until it flows into the Black Sea.

As I went into breakfast we entered the scenic Kazan Gorge on the river. The cliffs fall almost 2000 feet into the Danube. A huge face was carved into one limestone cliff much like Mount Rushmore. There is another carving, which I missed. They are known as the Cazankle Mari (600-1000) feet wide and the Stirbatu Mic, which is at the narrowest part of the gorge.

There is evidence the area was settled back in early Neolithic times. The Romans built a road through the gorge by drilling holes into the cliff face and installing beams. That and a 19th century Hungarian road have been lost due to the damming of the river.

As we traveled down the river we were told about how the River had a reputation for whirlpools, currents and rocks just below the surface. Until the 1970s passage through this narrow section was limited to just 200 days a year when the water level was high. The first widening and deepening of the gorge took place in 1890 but the river did not become really navigable until the 1970 dam known as the Iron Gates was constructed by a joint venture between the Romanian and the Serbian government.

Ada Kaleh, an island, was supposedly where the Argonauts discovered the olive tree. Well into the 20th century it held a Moslem community with mosques and fortresses. The island has been lost to the rising waters.

The Iron Gates are also a power-generating dam. The lock is in two parts the first drop was the deepest. We did this behind a Viking ship so we could not see the moment when the gates opened. It was rainy and cold on the sundeck so I spent most of the morning in the lounge.

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Three of our tour leaders gave a commentary of how life was under communism. Valentin Gheorghe, Madalina Merisou and Yener Ismail are all Romanian.

Madalina told about how there were no goods available unless you stole them and that this became a way of life. I recalled my visit to Romania during that era when I sent some laundry out and it was not returned. After I made a scene and refused to leave the hotel, it was eventually found. My wash and wear travel wardrobe must have been hard to resist. After all under communism, everyone owns everything.

Yener talked about how he was made to work on the canal project as a teenager. He worked long hours and was paid far less than the professionals.

At lunch we found a pleasant table at the stern of the ship so we could watch where we had been. I took a nap after lunch.

At 3:40 we were offered a galley tour. I was surprised at the size of the galley. I have seen much smaller ones on some of the larger ships. The regular chef is on vacation but the substitute gave a good description of how the meals are assembled. He is actually the regular chef's superior and goes from one Grand Circle Ship to another.

He pointed out that this cruise is eating much more fish than meat. He tries to accommodate everyone and will even provide a hamburger if requested. (I tried one but have had better),

The evening entertainment was the crew show. The whole crew participated in these humorous skits. Funniest of all was one of the waiters doing a ballet dance.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danube>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_Gate_\(Danube\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_Gate_(Danube))

<http://www.vikingrivercruises.com/>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Argonauts>

Saturday, October 7, 2006. We docked at Rousse, Bulgaria. It is the largest Bulgarian port on the river. It is an industrial city. At Rousse is the Friendship Bridge, the only bridge connecting Bulgaria and Romania.

Bulgaria is the oldest surviving state in Europe to have kept its original name. Since 681 AD it has been known as Bulgaria. The first empire lasted until the Byzantines conquered it in 1018. The second Bulgarian kingdom was the result of a revolt against Constantinople and lasted from 1185-1280. The Serbs overran Bulgaria and finally in 1350 the Ottoman Turks arrived and absorbed the whole country into the Ottoman Empire. 500 years later, in 1878, Bulgaria again became independent. The Communists took over at the end of World War 2. In 1989 under intense domestic and international pressure the first multi-Party elections were held. The communists under the name of the Socialist Party won. This was followed by six years of economic crises and massive inflation. Five different governments tried to straighten out the mess. Now the government is turning to a market economy and seeking admission into the European Union.

After a brief city tour on our way out of Rousse, we drove for an hour and a half through Bulgarian farmlands into the foothills of the mountains. It rained for much of the way.

Veliko Tarnova is situated on three steep hills, the Tsarevets, Trapesitsa and the Sveta Gora. The Yanta River wraps itself around this city of 75,000. Houses cling to the sides of the hills like barnacles making the whole site very picturesque. The history of the town dates back to the fourth century BC. In 1185 it became the center of Bulgarian uprising against the Byzantine domination.

We stopped to view the 12th century Tsarevets citadel, built when Veliko Tarnova was the capital of the second kingdom of Bulgaria. I would have loved to explore it, but it was determined that we were too old and might fall and hurt ourselves.

Instead we were driven to a shopping street and given an hour to shop! Grand Circle's emphasis on shopping is done at the expense of showing us something interesting. Scotti and Mac are coming back here after the trip is over. I am so envious.

However, I must say I did enjoy the shopping. I wandered into the small shop of Ventsislav Starkov. He is an icon painter of some note. He is religious and crosses himself each time he picks up his brush. The Eastern Orthodox cross themselves with three fingers signifying the trinity. They cross themselves from right to left and often do it three times. I watched him paint from a pattern and he showed me pictures of one client in Nashville, TN who bought 60 of his

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icons for every member of his family. Needless to say, I bought an icon. It is a triptych with the Virgin and child in the center panel. One side shows Peter, Nicolas and Antonias as well as St George slaying a dragon. The other panel shows Paul, John and St Demetrius. Then I bought some examples of the lovely Bulgarian lace.

We went from there to the village of Arbanasi and had a delightful lunch at the Galleria Restaurant. We were greeted at the door with fresh baked bread and invited to dip it in the dish of salt and pepper. This is a traditional Bulgarian welcome. I liked the bread better than the salt and pepper. Shopska Salad was the first dish. It came in a huge bowl filled with cucumbers, tomatoes and cheese and is delicious.

This was followed by a wonderful veal stew. Desert was a sponge cake. We were given the recipes so we can make it on our own after we return home.

After lunch we took a walk through the town that is a favorite place to get married. One place had a sort of petting zoo. I petted a donkey and he tried to eat my coat! There was no food of any kind in his pen!

The town is known for the fortified houses built by merchants during the 16th century. Stone foundations have wood beam inserts to cushion the impact of earthquakes. The actual wooden house sat on top of this. The houses are in compounds where they could keep their animals and wares. The one we toured had an interesting wooden cannon that had been used in a battle against the Turks.

Highlight of the tour was a stop at the old Rozhdestvo Church. Inside every inch was painted with icons. Some of the icons depicted stories from the Bible. Some were portraits of the men who had donated to have the church built. The guide described the service, which is done standing. The men used to be in the nave but the women were in the antechamber, Today this no longer occurs. After explaining the service she introduced three male singers who gave a performance of religious music. Their voices were lovely and the sound bounced off the rounded dome in such a way I felt shivers up my back.

We had a "technical" stop at an interesting building that had once been owned by the Communist boss. It had a lovely view over the valley and is now a hotel. A small chapel nearby holds the remains of the man who built it.

Then it was two hours to drive back to the ship. I was very stiff and sore, not only from the sitting but also climbing on and off the buses with the high steps.

There was a passenger talent show in the evening but I was too tired to go see it.

http://www.travel-bulgaria.com/index_shtml

http://www.travel-bulgaria.com/content/veliko_turnovo.shtml

www.artistswithoutfrontiers.com

<http://www.picturesofbulgaria.com/article/arbanasi.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shopska_salad

Sunday, October 8, 2006. I was up early enough to see us leave the Danube and enter the canal the communists built to connect the river with Constanta on the Black Sea. We were lifted through the first lock for the Danube is much lower than usual. At the other end we were lowered into the Black Sea.

Stalin first proposed construction of the Canal. Work began in July 1949 using manual slave labor of political prisoners and common criminals. Three years later the canal was only 4% complete. 30 to 60 thousand people had died in the forced labor camps. The canal was called the Canal of Death. Stalin died and the project was stopped.

In 1976 Ceausescu proposed to restart the project. Young men were taken out of high school to be "voluntary" workers. Teachers and construction workers were also used in the project. About 50,000 people working 24 hours a day finally brought the canal to completion in 1984.

The Romanian treasury was sorely taxed by the project and it has only been since the cruise ships started using it in 2002 that the canal has finally been showing a profit. The canal is forty miles long and 360-420 feet wide. It is twenty-two feet deep. It costs 1 Euro per ton to navigate the canal. It will take 250 years to pay for it!

We came out of the canal into the harbor of Constanta, Romania. This is one of the major ports on the Black Sea. A seven-kilometer breakwater extends into the Sea. It was created with the debris from the canal. A huge container port and also the Romanian navy is based here. We tied

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up near the Naval Yard. One of the navy ships is a tall ship. The rest of the Romanian navy includes several old ships that had been bought from the Russians, ships so old they are virtually useless!

We had a lovely city tour of Constanta. This is an old Greek colony with roots back to the 6th century BC. Its ancient name was Tomis. The Romans conquered the area (hence the name Romania). Roman soldiers were given land grants here and married into the local Dacian population. Thus the Romanian alphabet is Latin and not Cyrillic like its neighbors.

The bus first stopped in front of a statue of Ovid. He was exiled here because of his poetry. I remember reading Ovid in school and loving his poetry because it was a great improvement over the military annals of Caesar and the dissertations of Cicero. It was the only year in which I got a good grade in Latin!

Our tour started with the old Roman ruins. A huge mosaic floor has been uncovered where the ancient market stood. There was also an aqueduct that brought water to the ancient town. It was interesting to see the old anchors that had been made from the local iron. They were so similar to anchors that we use today. One old amphora had been broken and inside you could see the nails it had been carrying.

The old town hall is now the archaeological museum. We only saw two rooms but they were very interesting. The first was full of ancient glass bottles and glasses. In the second room there were some statuary, one of a magnificent snake. Some cases were full of Dacian gold jewelry. The country was called Dacia before the Romans came.

We drove to the shore and were invited to put our toes into the Black Sea. Then we walked past the old casino, new being restored, and walked along the esplanade admiring the statuary.

We were taken to a mosque. Only a small proportion of the city is still Moslem. A highly decorated Mihrab showing the direction of Mecca greeted us as we went in the door. On the floor was a huge rug, so big that part of it couldn't be unrolled. This has been brought here when the Ada Kaleh was flooded with the construction of the Iron Gates.

We drove past apartment houses and the guide explained that during the communist rule, people were brought to the city to man the new industrial projects. The traditional houses with their gardens were demolished to build apartment buildings. The owners were relocated into the apartments.

One sad result of this is that they could not keep their dogs in the new apartments and so these pets were turned loose. Now stray dogs are a huge problem in Romania. We were told some were so street-smart they even wait for the green light to cross the street. Euthanasia was suggested but the animal rights people rose up in protest. There are too many of them to neuter them so the dog population continues to grow. I must admit they did not look too emaciated. People do feed them.

We were taken to a shopping center and given an hour to shop! Fortunately we were also given the option of returning to the ship. I chose the latter and started the packing process.

The Captain gave a farewell cocktail party and an elegant dinner followed.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danube-Black_Sea_Canal

<http://www2.mfa.gr/www.mfa.gr/en-US/Policy/Geographic+Regions/South-Eastern+Europe/Balkans/Bilateral+Relations/Romania/info.htm>

<http://www.romania.org/romania/cities/constantia.html>

Monday, October 9. Bags had to be out at 6:30 so we rose for an early breakfast. Then we were bused to the train that would take us to Bucharest. This was once Ceausescu's train.

Our route ran along the canal for some time, then crossed the Danube and continued into Bucharest. As trains go, it wasn't too bad. The one bad part was the bathroom door that tended to lock you inside. I pondered for some time how I was to get out of that pickle! Finally after fiddling with the lock for the umpteenth time it finally opened.

The country was okay but as we got into the more settled areas we saw terrible poverty with people living in makeshift shacks along the tracks. The ship had packed us box lunches. I had a delicious pear but the sandwiches were not the greatest. A Mars Bar was the surprising desert.

It takes 4 hours to get from Constanta to Bucharest. There we were transferred into buses for the two-hour 80-mile drive to Sanaia. I slept much of the way. Since some of our "yellow group" did not buy this post cruise extension we are down to only 27 and could spread out more on the bus.

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By the time we got to the foothills of the mountains we had a "technical stop" and I got to stretch my legs by walking back and forth in the parking lot of the filling station. Scotti treated to some ice cream!

The Carpathian Mountains are lovely. Sinaia is called the Pearl of the Carpathians. Prince Michael Cantacuzino founded a monastery here in 1695. He named it Sinaia because it reminded him of Mount Sinai.

In 1866 the people of Moldova and Walachia decided to unite. Count Phillippe of Flandra refused the throne and Carol of Hohensollern-Sigmaringen was invited to be the new ruler of Romania. He built a mountain retreat in Sinaia in the 1890s and it became fashionable for Romanians to have a mountain home here. There are many picturesque Victorian buildings from this era.

We checked into the New Montana Hotel. I found an Internet Cafe across the street and caught up with things. Then Scotti treated Mac and I to a dinner at the Irish Restaurant. About the only thing Irish about it was the music and the Guinness on tap. I had a tripe soup followed by a sort of mixed grill with the best polenta I have ever had. They were both Romanian dishes and very good

I came back to the hotel and had a massage. It really helped my aching joints. The massage therapist would periodically rub her hands together until they were warm and then she would place them on the tightest muscles.

http://www.montania.ro/en_Sinaia_info.htm

<http://www.cs.kent.edu/~amarcus/Mihai/english/carol1en.html>

Tuesday, October 10. It was cold when we left early to drive to Transylvania. The Carpathian Mountains remind me of the Swiss Alps. Even the houses look like chalets. The hills rise so steeply behind the houses you wonder how they ever climb up to feed their animals. Also how do you put up a fence that goes straight up at a 45-degree angle!

During the drive we were told about the legendary Dracula. Vlad Dracul 1 was a military governor of Transylvania. He belonged to the Order of the Dracul (in English "Dragon"), a secret fraternal organization whose object was to protect the interests of Catholicism and to crusade against the Turks. His son Vlad Dracul 11 (1431-1476) is the man who is thought of as Dracula. Known as Vlad the Impaler he was a ruthless king who impaled his enemies but he was not a vampire. The Irish writer Bram Stoker wrote a gothic novel depicting Vlad as the vampire Dracula. (Son of dragon). Driving to his castle, the guide made many jokes about this legendary king. Vlad Dracul didn't live in Bran Castle although he may have visited there. It was part of his line of defense.

It was a beautiful drive with the fall color starting to show in the trees. A mountain stream lay below the road. However the stream had been trashed. There were bottles and cans and other debris to mar the scenery.

After about an hour we came to Bran Castle. The gothic castle was built between 1377 and 1382 on a 197-foot high rock. It looks as if it has escaped from a fairy story. Perched high on a hill it is all turrets, spiral stairs, secret staircases and ports from which to fire cannons!

There were crowds of people there and they made us go through in groups. We clambered all over it. Up and down stairs, we admired some handsome furniture and other exhibits. I am amazed I could do it for it was about as strenuous a sightseeing visit as I have ever made.

Queen Maria of Romania was a niece of the Russian Czar and also a granddaughter of Queen Victoria. She married Ferdinand, King of Romania. She loved this castle and modernized it covering the original brick interior walls with plaster. She even installed an elevator but we tourists were not allowed to use it. On her death she left it to her daughter, Ileana. She ended up a nun and died in the United States. Since communism has ended in Romania, property is reverting to its original owner. The castle has presently been returned to a grandson of the Queen. He must keep it a museum for three years but then he can sell it or move into it or what have you.

After the castle tour we investigated the historic village that had been assembled near its entrance. There was also a large souvenir shopping center but it did not interest me. There have been far too many shopping stops.

We returned to Sinaia and after a short rest went to hear a concert in the Enescu museum. The Romanian composer and violinist George Enescu (1881-1955) left Romania during the political upheavals of 1946. His villa, Luminis, which he left to Romania, is now open to the public and

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has been a national museum since 1995. He was a child prodigy and has been compared to Mozart. His magnum opus was the opera Oedipus. A combo of violin, piano and cello played some of his works. It was a lively and enjoyable selection of music.

Then we toured the villa. Many musicians including Yehudi Menuhin came here to study under him. The villa was lovely. Enescu fell in love with a Romanian princess and after many years married her. However, it must have been a strange marriage, for we are told she entertained men in her opulent bedroom with the pink velvet covered bed.

Then Mary and Bob Kreisher, Barbara and Jim Wilson, Tom Mould and another couple whose name I do not have, went out to dinner at a restaurant near the hotel. Scotti and Mac had announced they wanted an evening off. I had a very good beef stroganoff and tried the beer since I am not impressed with Romanian house wines.

<http://members.aol.com/johnfranc/drac05.htm>

<http://www.dreamsmith-graphics.com/wizglass/vlad.html>

<http://www.draculascastle.com/>

<http://www.tkinter.smig.net/QueenMarie/index.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georges_Enescu

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yehudi_Menuhin

Wednesday, October 11. We drove to Brasov. At the beginning of the 13th century, merchant and trader Saxons came here from the Rhine and Mosel regions of Germany. To protect themselves from the Turkish armies just across the Danube, they built row houses around the town forming a protective wall to make a fortress. There were a number of these Saxon fortress towns but only seven survive today.

We were led into the huge central square, and then to the Black Church. Here we had to pay our own admission! The church was very interesting. Originally known as St Mary's Church, the building was built in 1380. A great fire in 1689 almost destroyed it but a new roof was installed and the interior refurbished. It is the best example of Gothic architecture in Romania. Originally Catholic, it is now a Lutheran Church with German the official language.

The floors are rough and wooden because when they wanted to install central heat this false floor was the only way to conceal the pipes. The floor does not add to the beauty of the church, but everything else did. The merchant guilds had built pews for themselves with painted decorations. There was also one fresco over the side door that miraculously survived the fire. It depicts the Virgin Mary, patron saint of the church.

We then walked to a side street, under reconstruction, where the long row of houses provided a wall right up to one of the old city gates. A small street, really a one-man alley way, provided access to the outside in another place. Obviously as the enemy entered one at a time they could be easily picked off.

We also paused to see the old synagogue. It has a remarkably decorated facade for a synagogue.

Back in the square we sought a technical stop. The local Kentucky Fried Chicken had been suggested. This turned into a real adventure for they were having a power failure. We stumbled down a dark stairway where attendants were waiting with penlights to show us the way to the pitch black WC.

Scotti and I poked our noses into the Eastern Orthodox Church next to the KFC. It was interesting in that it had a place to light a candle outside in a courtyard. This was probably to protect the icons. It was a lovely church but nothing compared to the wonderful one in Heliko Karnova!

Then we were walked around the corner to the Sirul Vamil Restaurant for an unmemorable chicken cordon bleu meal. More memorable was the pianist. He had been part of the concert last night. He played a lot of modern American music. Mac finally got him to switch to jazz.

We then returned to Sinaia and went to Peles Palace. Prince Carol of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, who had become King of Romania in 1866, came to Sinaia and ordered the palace built. Construction started in 1893 and finally concluded in 1914. The palace has more than 160 rooms. In front of palace was a lovely boxwood garden with appropriate statuary.

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The palace developed a fungus problem and so it was closed for many years. As a result it was not used during the communist years Ceausescu used the smaller neighboring palace that belonged to Queen Maria to entertain his guests

We entered the palace and were directed to put on shoe covers to protect the floors and rugs. We climbed a stair to the magnificent reception hall. Alabaster bas-reliefs and tapestries decorate the walls. Walnut paneling led up to a stained glass skylight that can be opened. We are told this palace was very advanced for its time. It was built with central heating, electricity and plumbing. The heating is concealed behind the fireplaces and stoves in the building

The other rooms on display go in a circle around this hall. First we toured the armory. There are over 4000 pieces in the collection, which includes armor from all over the world. The most amazing piece is a 16th century full armor for both a knight and his horse. There are some beautiful ceremonial swords and guns in the small armory next door. One piece is both a sword and a pistol.

The king's office was also grand, with a small sitting alcove for private conversations. There was a portrait of his wife, Carmen Sylva, on the wall. She wrote children's books. They only had one child who died young, so after King Carol's death the throne passed to his nephew.

Beyond was the library, which now only holds about 700 books. There were many more in King Carol's time, written in many different languages. We were shown the secret door that led to the private apartments.

The Florentine room was used for receptions. It had some beautiful Murano glass chandeliers and parquet floors. Next there was a Hall of Mirrors. It was not as grand as the famous one at Versailles but huge mirrors gave an illusion of size. There was a concert hall for meetings. Fourteen different kinds of wood were used in the paneling. There was a dining room where the King could have intimate dinner parties at a table that sat thirty-six.

The Moorish room was modeled after the Alhambra in Spain. Here the King's body lay in state after his death. The Turkish room was for smoking and it was furnished with divans. Koranic verses decorated the walls. A sixty-seat theater completed the tour. We came away feeling the palace was done in the utmost taste.

In the evening we had a tour of the Rhein-Azuga winery where they make a sparkling wine that cannot be called champagne in deference to the French! The winery was established in 1892 when a German named Rhein used the cellar for a storage place for wine. He soon started to produce his own wine and supplied sparkling and other wines to the King. During the communist occupation the cellars were used to store wood and coal, but now they are producing wine again.

We were shown through the cellar and shown each step of the process before being given a taste of both the white and the red champagne (oops sparkling) wine. The red wine was made using grapes of three varieties, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot noir. I was not particularly impressed although we had been told it would be like velvet on our tongues. It may be I am not that fond of sparkling wines. Then we were seated at a long table and served a meal. The most memorable dish was the eggplant and onion spread, pureed with mayonnaise and oil. They also had wonderful tomatoes and cheese. The cold meatballs and chicken bits were not as good. Small cheesecakes were served for desert. We were served some of the wineries other wines at dinner including a sweet wine with our desert. We were given the chance to buy some but I did not.

<http://www.brasovtravelguide.ro/en/index.php>

<http://www.brasov.ro/history.php3>

http://archives.obsus.com/obs/romanian/tour97/pics/b_neagra.html

<http://www.kfc.com/>

http://www.ici.ro/romania/en/turism/c_sinaia.html

<http://www.tkinter.smiq.net/CarmenSylva/index.htm>

<http://www.boglewood.com/murano/history.html>

<http://www.parisdigest.com/monument/galeriedesglaces.htm>

http://www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/The_Alhambra.html

<http://www.afterbusiness.ro/RomaniaToursAndTrips/WineTastingTour>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wine>

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Thursday, October 12. Bags had to be out at 7:00, perhaps because the hotel only has two small elevators to transport both luggage and people. We were on the bus by 8:45. Because of construction we took a more scenic route back to Bucharest. We drove over the mountains, which are kept as a nature preserve. There are supposed to be brown bear, wolves and deer in the preserve but we didn't see any. We did see some ravens and were told they can live to be 200 years old! Once over the crest we started following a rocky river.

We came upon a gypsy town where the gypsies make their living selling rocks they collect from the river. There was a lot of traffic from their picturesque donkey and horse carts. Nikita told us how the gypsies know how to take advantage of every opportunity. For instance 12 places are reserved in school for gypsy children and they are given a stipend for attending. The clever gypsies stay in school just long enough to collect the money and then leave. As a result most are illiterate. They steal from people outside their tribe. However stealing within the band is grounds for expulsion. For a time Germany tried to relocate their gypsies back to Romania but the gypsies took the money, flew back to Romania and in two weeks found their way back to Germany.

I was interested that the gypsies did not begin in Romania since the term Romany Gypsy is known to me. Their language shows they have roots in western India and many of their words are from Iran and other Middle East countries.

We drove through plum groves from which the local brandy is made. There was a cement factory belching pollution, which made us gasp for breath.

Then we came to Targoviste where Vlad Dracul made his capital when he was ruler of Walachia. The castle is in ruins but the 16th century church and the Shindei Tower are still there. When the king was in residence a fire was burned on top of the tower to warn his enemies away. We were allowed out of the bus to view all this through the fence.

There was one more gypsy village. This was interesting because the gypsies have houses but they prefer to sleep in the tents in their yards.

We drove into Bucharest and the first thing we saw was an Arc de Triumph erected by King Carlo 2 in 1835. Nikita, our guide, went on at length about the many beautiful buildings. He also pointed out and identified the many sculptures of prominent Romanians. We could see why Bucharest has been compared to Paris.

He talked at length about Ceausescu. Apprenticed to a shoemaker as a child he soon quit and went to work passing out communist literature. He was arrested and thrown into jail. As luck would have it, his cellmate went on to become the first president of the new communist state. He appointed Ceausescu the Minister of Agriculture. He quickly rose to become Minister of Defense and finally the dictator. His reign lasted 24 years.

Ceausescu was popular with Western leaders during the Cold War since he ignored the communist edict against Israel. He was able to get loans to develop the new industries. For a time Romania was prosperous and the people loved their communist leader. But then the notes came due and his economy was ruined. The Romanian people starved during this period.

He engineered laws prohibiting abortion and mandated that families have four and later five children to supply workers for his industries. As a result abortion mills flourished and thousands of Romanian women died.

We stopped to view the spot where Nicholas Ceausescu tried to give his last speech while protesters demonstrated in the square. He escaped when a helicopter came and picked him off the roof of the building. He was arrested after the revolution and we were shown the barracks where he had his trial and was executed along with his wife.

Another Kodak moment was a stop to photograph the Parliament. It is the second largest building in the world after the Pentagon.

We had had a long drive and Nikita talked non-stopped about people we neither knew nor cared about, and about buildings until we could no longer concentrate. As a result I didn't even get out of the bus at the last stop. Scotti reported it was the best. It was the oldest section of Bucharest and there was a caravansary there where she and Mac hope to stay after I leave.

At long last we came to the Italian Restaurant where they served an excellent mushroom soup, indifferent pasta and tiramisu for desert. I was so happy when we finally got to the Sofitel Hotel.

I was assigned a lovely room, almost a junior suite with a king bed. I traded with Mac and Scotti and took their twin bedded room. I have never understood why Americans on tour are given twin bedded rooms.

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I bought a wireless card and spent a lovely afternoon catching up on my investments and other affairs. I was too tired to go down for dinner.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roma_people

<http://www.ceausescu.org/>

http://www.sofitel.com/sofitel/fichehotel/gb/sof/1714/fiche_hotel.shtml

Friday, October 13. The last day. Our tour to the Caldarusani Monastery left at 10:00. The traffic was very bad, as it always seems to be in Bucharest. Someone said that 50,000 cars have to be retired before they can enter the European Union next year. Many of the Romanian cars are old Russian models that do not meet the emissions standards.

Our first view of the monastery was across Lake Caldarusani from which the monastery took its name. Caldarusani means bucket. There was an older monastery on the site that dated back 600 years, but the present Monastery was built by ruler Matei Basarab in 1635. The whole thing was built in 100 days. It is made with brick and river stones.

The Romanian Orthodox Church is second in size to the Russian Orthodox Church. It is autonomous although there is a loose affiliation of all the orthodox churches in Istanbul. Eighty-seven percent of the Romanians belong to the church.

The church of the monastery is inside a large cloister decorated with scenes from the Bible. Inside every surface was covered with paintings and icons.

Father Calinic showed us around. He is a handsome young man with a full curly beard. He spoke of the history of the Monastery. At one time there was a painting school here and Nicolai Grigorescu, a famous Romanian painter studied here.

In 1825 the monastery installed a printing press so they could print the religious books. They were one of the first monasteries to do so.

They also had a school at one time to teach the singing of the traditional verses. Also in the last century there was a school for priests.

The monastery has farm land and along with their orchard try to be self-sufficient. There are 35-40 monks in residence and each is assigned chores. Father Calinic is in charge of giving tours.

The monks go through a novice period before taking their final vows. Some only need a few days; some never do and remain novices their whole lives.

He discussed the services. Only men are allowed in the closed end where the altar is. People generally stand for the two to three hour service but there were some kneeling pads for those who wished them. There were also the semi-sitting seats as at the wonderful church we saw in Bulgaria.

The most sacred icon, prominently displayed in the nave, was of the Virgin and child. It is lavishly decorated in silver and jewels and is supposed to make miracles. On the backside of this freestanding icon were St George and the dragon. During the Communist days, it was hidden in a stove. The communists never caught on as the monks prayed in the direction of a stove!

Father Calinic made a small joke when he talked about how the Nazis came looking for treasure and were taken to the wine cellar. There, after a few nips, they forgot what they came for and left empty handed.

It was interesting to light a candle here. One tray was for the living and the other for the dead. A monk stood near to give you his blessing.

We then toured the treasury where old icons and religious pieces were displayed. There were also some beautiful embroideries.

The monks served us lunch. It seemed more lavish than what I remember from so long ago at the Sisters of Zion Convent in Israel. The drinking glasses had gold rims.

We returned to the hotel to pack and rest before the farewell dinner. The dinner was at the McMoni restaurant just a block from the hotel. The hotel had been built on the site of an old racetrack and the restaurant was in what had been the stables. I walked back from dinner to try and get as much rest in before my 3:45 wake-up call. All international flights from Bucharest leave early and my Air France flight leaves at seven for the connection to Atlanta through Charles de Gaulle!

<http://www.rotravel.com/romania/history/app3.php>

http://www.polymernotes.org/biographies/ROU_bio_grigorescu.htm

<http://www.hellers.ws/travel/05-07-europe/>

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Saturday, October 14. No traffic! We got to the airport in record time for my 7:00 am flight. It is about 2 hours and a half to Paris. Learning from past experience, I decided not to use a wheelchair to make my connection. It really was pretty easy until I got to Terminal 2E. Then the troubles began. First they took my water bottle away, and then I was body searched. They also inspected my carry on luggage and my purse.

I thought I was finished but when I go to Delta, I was interrogated at length about where I had been and what was in my luggage. I guess they are looking for some little old lady terrorist. It was with a lot of relief that I finally got to the Air France Salon.

As I write this I realize it is only 4:15 AM in Atlanta but it is 10:14 AM in Paris and I have been up for hours! One nice thing about Air France's business salon is that they have free Internet access.

It was the usual long fight back to Atlanta. I hope I don't get the bug that was making my seatmate so sick!

I was bringing home a bag for Scotti but it didn't get to Atlanta. Delta thinks it just missed the flight in Paris. It turned up four days later having been routed home from Munich!

<http://www.airfrance.com/>