



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Cruising the Danube River
Bucharest, Romania**

Cruising the Danube River

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Cruising the Danube River Bucharest, Romania

September 27 and 28, 2013

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter and Reporterette (Holly). This report is the second of several about our visit to Europe, including a week-long river cruise on the Danube River.

Tour Company and Tour Plans

We chose Viking River Cruises (VRC) as our tour company. It is likely you have seen the company's advertisements on television. The ad shows one of the VRC ships passing by a beautiful landscape and an elegant castle. We did not see that castle on this tour, but we did take in some fine views. I have been asked about my impressions of VRC, and I will have more to say about this company in these reports.

We liked the week-long schedule. It placed us in a different country almost each day (six countries: Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, the Czech Republic), a challenge that would be tiring to meet by driving or renting a boat. Yet how much can one learn about a country with a one-day visit? Why not stay in one country for the full week or more and get to know it better? For the first question: Not much, but enough to gain a general understanding of the country. For the second question: I wanted to gain a feel for this part of Eastern Europe, perhaps to return for more emersion later. So, the VRC plan was ideal for us.

Plan for this Series. I will not write an extended history of this region. Ample documentation is available in libraries and online. To keep these pieces short (and to keep you reading), I will highlight one aspect (sometimes two) of a city/region that are evocative and recommend for a visitor experience. I will then provide a brief summary of other places that I think you will also enjoy. On occasion, I will offer some comments on the Viking River Cruises tour company.

Preponderant Themes. From Romania to the Czech Republic, the emphasis of the tour guides and several citizens with whom I conversed (and attempted to ask questions) was the occupation of the Nazis during World War II and the USSR during the Cold War. We saw a lot of museums and old churches, but most people focused on their recent history under Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. It was clear that the collective experience of the citizens in these countries under these two regimes will continue to leave unpleasant memories for some time to come.

In addition, visits to Serbia and Croatia brought forth many comments from guides and local citizens about the Bosnian War and associated conflicts.

This aspect of the tour was one of the main reasons I chose this itinerary, with Holly's gracious acceptance of the plan. Don't worry. I will not unleash a lot of grisly stories on you, but a few, along with some pleasant and unusual experiences we had.

Maps

Today, we are in Bucharest, Romania, preparing to board a Danube River ship in the nearby port town of Giurgeni (Giurgiu). We will travel west to northwest for one week to disembark at Budapest, Hungary. Our itinerary then places us on Budapest turf for two days, followed by a day-

long road trip to Prague. We will stay in Prague for three days, then head back to Idaho. Figure 1 shows the part of the Danube River we will be on (the bold purple line). The appendix at the back of this report shows the entire river flowing through Europe.



Figure 1. Danube River trip.



Figure 2. To Bucharest.

The trip from Spokane to Seattle, via Paris, to Bucharest was smooth and uneventful. We were in the air for a total of 14 hours. We traversed several thousand miles through different customs points, into places of different tongues, yet with less hassle than flying across America, with its stops at hubs. No pulling-off shoes, for example. America's gum shoes need to find out about Europe's gum shoes' progress on checking shoes. Anyway, off we went toward Bucharest, as seen in Figure 2.

Not to Miss

For certain, do not miss walking through the Palace of Parliament. It was built by the communist dictator and Stalin lackey, Nicolae Ceaușescu, as a tribute to communism and himself. It is magnificently surreal. I snapped the photo shown in Figure 3, as the tour bus approached the building. Here is a description (paraphrased, from Wikipedia) of some of the materials that went into creating what is now a huge drain on Romania's government budget:

Estimates of the materials used include one million cubic meters of marble from Transylvania; 3,500 tonnes of crystal — 480 chandeliers. Some 1,409 ceiling lights and mirrors were manufactured; 700,000 tonnes of steel and bronze for monumental doors and windows, chandeliers and capitals; 900,000 m (9,700,000 sq ft) of wood, over 95 percent of which is domestic, for parquet and wainscoting, including walnut, oak, sweet cherry, elm, sycamore maple. There are 200,000 m (2,200,000 sq ft) of woolen carpets of various dimensions, the larger of which were

woven on-site by machines moved into the building; velvet and brocade curtains adorned with embroideries and passementeries in silver and gold.

Meanwhile, during the construction of this building, Ceaușescu's subjects experienced one of the lowest standards of living of any of the European countries. The country is still trying to recover.



Figure 3. A tribute to excess.

The Intent. The place is so opulent it is difficult to put into words. Images will help. Figure 4 shows this writer standing on one of two identical staircases in the main entranceway. They are opposite of each other in a huge reception foyer. Ceausescu dictated this design as a way for visitors (dignitaries and others) to stand at the entranceway as he and his wife descended down each staircase to join each other as they turned to greet their guests.

Figure 5 shows a view from the main balcony toward Bulevardul Unirii (Unification Boulevard).¹ On the ground below this balcony is a large area set aside for Ceausescu's subjects to stand, watch, and listen to their despot's speeches. The boulevard center section contains forty elaborate water fountains (more on these fountains shortly).

Figure 6 shows an example on one of many rooms in the building. We saw ten or so of them. The tour guide said we had only touched the surface. These rooms are rented-out if the state does not need them for government business. Nadia Comăneci, the famous gymnast, was given free accommodations for her marriage in 1996. Michael Jackson performed for a select group in one of these rooms.

The Reality. The building was intended to be the presidential home of Ceausescu and to serve as lodging for legislative bodies and courts. It is now used for additional functions, but much of the space remains empty. During the time it was built, communism was the state practice, and Romania, true to communist creeds, was in the midst of creating a classless, moneyless, and stateless social order. The problem with such an idea is that most of the people became moneyless. The state---run by the communist party---and the leaders who ran the party became an autocratic class with most of the money.

¹ I did not take this photo. Thanks to Wikipedia.



Figure 4. Dictator's staircase to his guests. (one of two).



Figure 5. Dictator's boulevard.

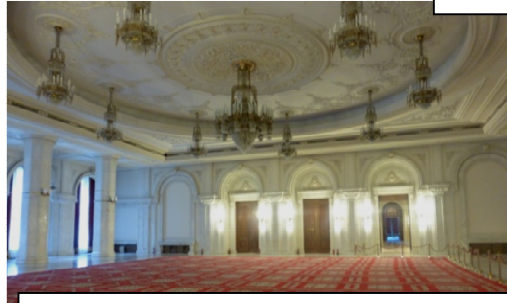


Figure 6. Dictator's den (one of many).

This practice is still widespread. Many countries in Africa are so-governed. The most pervasive example is China. Its leaders' principal goal is the perpetuation of the communist party. Anyone who is even remotely perceived as a threat to the party is ploughed under. The Chinese communist party lives in perpetual fear of China going the way of the former USSR.

Thus, the Ceausescu sham held for the other communist countries. What a cruel joke it was on the common person. But ironically, after the Romanian revolution of 1989 (and a bloody one it was), some three generations of communist welfare recipients were ill-equipped to thrive in a competitive world. They had been acculturated to dependence on the largesse of the communist regime. I heard more than one time while on this trip that many older people who live in the former Soviet bloc often reminisce about those times when the "stateless" state ran their lives and somewhat took care of them.

While walking around this place, I looked for an example that would symbolize the gratuitous waste of the communist philosophy. I found it in the men's toilet. Take a look at Figures 4, 5, and 6 again. Then take a look at my predicament, seen in Figure 7. A toilet---with walls of exquisite, subtle stone tiles but *sans* toilet paper---is surrounded by a palace costing millions of dollars. Not exactly what one has in mind for the idea of a paperless society.



Figure 7. No words needed.



Figure 8. One of Forty empty fountains.

The boulevard shown in the middle-top part of Figure 5, with its 40 huge marble fountains, was part of the backdrop for communist displays of unification and stateless efficiency. Now the boulevard displays 40 empty fountains, one shown in Figure 8. Waterless and lifeless, just like moneyless and classless communism. As stated, nowadays, the Romanians cannot afford to keep the communists' tributes to themselves in working order.

Reversal of Fortune

Ceausescu's regime was overthrown in the 1989 revolution. He and his wife, Elena, were executed by a firing squad. We did not have time to visit their first resting place (the execution



Figure 9. "On the whole, I rather be at the Palace."

firing wall) or their final resting place: their graves. But we gained a sense that their deaths were not mourned by most Romanians. I had been following his rule for over 20 years. I was glad to see him go. He was one of the Soviet's Warsaw Pact most vicious leaders. The excess of his palace was only exceeded by the cruelty he inflicted on those he was supposed to protect. Figure 9 (courtesy of YouTube) shows Ceausescu's body lying where he was shot. ...Just retribution.

Another Must See

Another place you do not want to miss is the Village Museum. I have never seen anything like it. It is a museum of houses, located at Herăstrău Park in Bucharest. It contains 272 authentic peasant houses and farms that were moved to Bucharest from all over Romania. The tour guide informed us this 1936 project was financed by the King (not the government). It is a remarkable real-life depiction of part of the Romanian past. As we walked around the village, we shared paths with chickens, dogs, and cats. Goats were kept in a pen, as they would tend to chew at our cameras and almost anything else we had on our possession. Figure 10 provides some examples of the dwellings in this open-air museum.



**Figure 10 (a).
Layout of Village
Museum.**



(b)

Figure 10 (b) shows one site in which workmen are disassembling a dwelling for later transport to the Village museum. During World War II, with housing in short supply, people lived in these dwellings. I cannot help but compare these structures, built by the common folk, with the House of Parliament, built by a megalomaniac.



(c)

Figure 10 (c) shows one result of this operation. On the left is a house with a hard roof. In the middle is a house with a roof made of straw.



(d)

Figure 9(d) shows the details of one of the houses. Imagine the planning and attention to detail that went into this project.

Also imagine the devotion and passion of those who dreamed-up and executed it. I think about the notion that passions allow us to dream and imagine what does not exist. We can only salute these people and their passion for what they did and the gift they gave to the world.

If You Have Time

In this part of the world, visits to old churches and government buildings can provide a lot of interesting historical information. The best way to see them is on foot. Early this morning, we took a walk around the neighborhood of our hotel. We came across an old church undergoing remodeling (Figure 11(a)).

I like visiting churches in other countries. Their history tells much about the history of the region in which they are located. The interiors often have preserved beautiful art and such, as seen in the insert to this Figure 11 (a). We spoke (somewhat) with a woman at the church, but our Romanian and her English were limited. In lieu of conversation, we smiled at one another and nodded our heads.

Just across the street from the church was a nightclub, which had mannequin musicians standing on a balcony overlooking the place of worship. (Figure 11(b)). It was as if the musical group of dummies are either celebrating or mocking their religious neighbor. The cymbal banger was set up to stare at the church steeple. Maybe the nightclub owner was Roman (and not Orthodox) Catholic.



Figure 11 (a). Renovation.

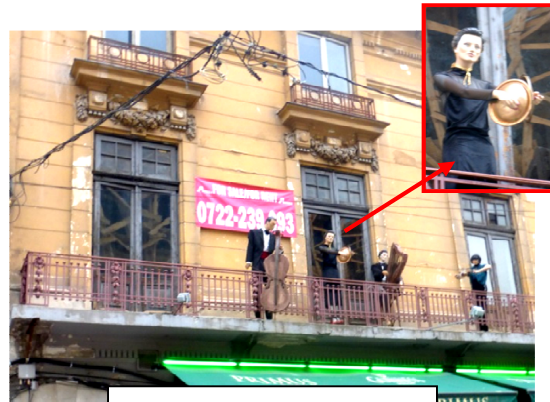


Figure 11 (b). Jubilation.

The Arch of Triumph



Figure 12. Arch of Triumph.

On the way to the hotel from the airport, we passed by the Arch of Triumph (Arcul de Triumf), as shown in Figure 12. It is modeled on the Paris monument (which was built in the 1830s). Initially, the Budapest monument was made of wood, and was erected for the victorious Romanian troops to pass under after Romania gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878. It was replaced in 1935 and is now part of a vehicle turn-around. Military parades are held beneath the arch on December 1, Romania's national holiday.

Salute to the 1989 Revolution



Figure 13. Salute to the revolution.

One of the more striking monuments is shown in Figure 13. It commemorates the overthrow of communism. I asked the tour guide details about the black part of the statue. He offered that the statue represented a dagger or spear into the heart or brain of communism. I searched the Web for a more complete description but decided to leave it at that. After all, if art has to be explained, and not left to the imagination of the viewer, its interest is diminished. So, I choose to believe it represents the killing of communism, and the red flow emphasizes that the revolution was violent and bloody.

During a group tour of the city, the guide devoted much time to discussing the impact of the forty-two-year reign of the communist party had on Romania and Bucharest. One positive aspect was that almost all citizens were treated equally. The other side of this coin: The equal treatment, coupled with communism's inherent inefficiencies, led to drastically lower living standards to which I made reference earlier. In addition, the head of state (1967 – 1989) Nicolae Ceaușescu imposed an increasingly rigid, Stalin-like regime: brutal and repressive. As he evolved to become a self-serving, egoistic despot, his citizens grew to hate him.

In 1982, with the goal of paying off Romania's large foreign debt, Ceaușescu ordered the export of much of the country's agricultural and industrial production. The resulting extreme shortages of food, fuel, energy, medicines, and other basic necessities drastically lowered living standards and intensified unrest.

Small wonder he met a bad end.

Postscript

The area surrounding our hotel is considered up-scale. Designer shops such as Ralph Lauren and Rolex are scattered here and there. Yet this neighborhood does not compare in glitz to, say Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills or 5th Avenue in New York. Elegance and wealth are mixed-in with shabbiness and raggedness.



Figure 13. Fancy and not-so-fancy digs.

Figure 14 shows the fancy shops on the ground floor of some of the high-rises. As examples (see red circles), the apartments above these fancy shops have exterior air conditioning units, balcony extensions, and other less-than-elegant extensions that would not be permitted on Sunset Boulevard and

other enclaves of an anal America suburbia. The Romanians do not let fastidiousness get in the way of practical comfort. Holly and I once owned a place in Santa Fe, New Mexico in which vehicles had to be placed in garages at night. The streets were devoid of vehicles. It was very tidy yet somewhat sterile.

Of course, these differences are also affected by the variations in overall wealth. “As stated by the Mercer international surveys for quality of life in cities around the world, Bucharest occupied the 94th place in 2001 and slipped lower, to the 108th place in 2009 and the 107th place in 2010.” This index does not measure just wealth, but factors such as health care, transportation, crime, education, political stability, etc. But the index does reflect the economic ability and willingness of a city to provide for its citizens. By the way, the highest ranking American city is Honolulu (28th).



Figure 15 (a).

A blue bar to cure the blues.

Figure 15 (b).

A view from above.

We stayed one night here before getting on the ship for the Danube River Cruise. Our hotel was the Raddison Blue Hotel, which I highly recommend. I especially liked the lobby bar, where I am seen sitting in Figure 15(a). Not seen in the photo, but at my feet is a

small stream of water that flows around the floor of the bar. The hotel has at its center a shaft that runs from the ground floor to the top. The view of the bar from our floor is seen in Figure 15(b).

For those who had an extra set of lingerie to toss on a stage, Tom Jones was in town! As seen in Figure 16, he looks a bit somber, not like the Tom Jones of the 1960s who was tantalizing the ladies of the day. As some of the older readers may recall, his act often ended with members of the audience tossing up their bikinis, thongs, etc. to Tom.



Figure 16. Tom Jones.

We can wonder what those ladies would do today? My bet is they would do the same, perhaps not with bikinis and thongs but with something. After all, it's not the material itself that counts, it's the thoughts behind the material.

Who could not want to join in, even if Tom is 72 years old. I loved the man's music and his friendly, spontaneous nature. Let's close this report---forgetting about Romania's difficult recent past---on the upbeat. It is likely Tom sang the song below to a Bucharest crowd, and it is likely the ladies took off what Romanian ladies wear under their dresses and tossed them to Tom. Who could not get into fine spirits by watching and listening to Mr. Jones sing this one.

Well she's all you'd ever want,
She's the kind they'd like to flaunt and take to dinner.
Well, she always knows her place.
She's got style, she's got grace, She's a winner.
She's a Lady. Whoa whoa whoa, She's a Lady.



Figure 17. True grit.

In closing, we like Bucharest a lot. It has spirit. It's both shabby and well-dressed. One last picture summarizes this idea. Figure 17 is a photo of several buildings that are located a block or so from the fancy parliament building. Imagine this setup on Pennsylvania Avenue near the White House or the Capitol building. While I prefer America's approach to a capital's tidiness, I admit that the Romanians have grit.

Appendix: The Danube River.

