

**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Cruising the Danube River
Getting Started**

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Cruising the Danube River Getting Started

October 14, 2013

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter, with Reporterette (Holly) assisting me on this assignment. This report is the first of several I will send you about a trip to Europe, including a week-long river cruise on the Danube River. As always, I look forward to your views on these reports.

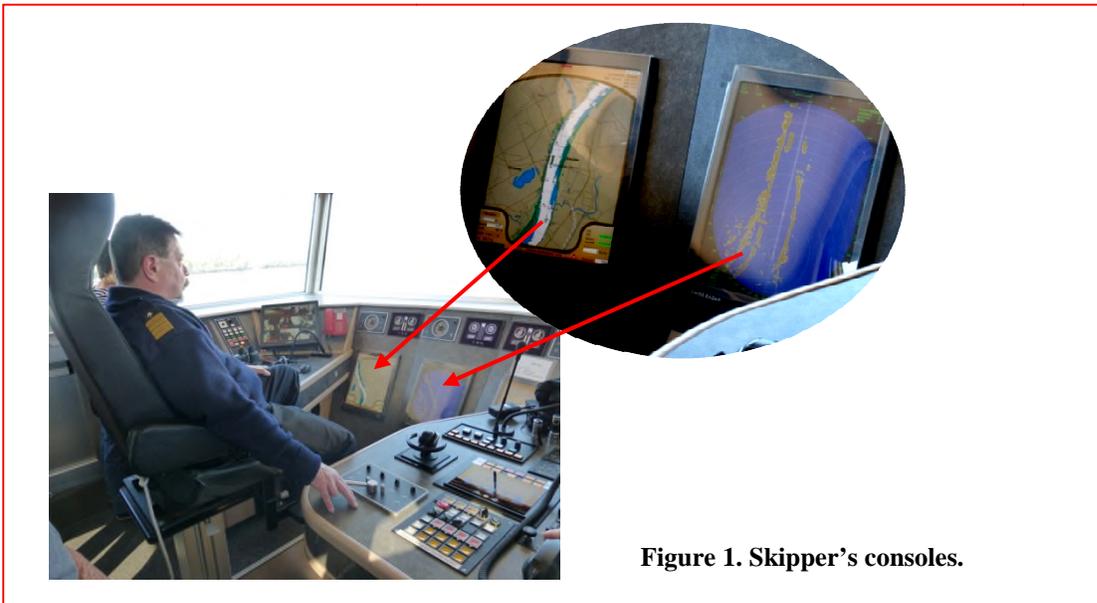
This first report is a general piece, not pertaining to a specific part of the trip. It offers some observations about Americans and our ventures into foreign lands.

During the cruise, the tour company (Viking River Cruises) offered interested passengers a short visit to the ship's wheel house. Being a former member of the U.S. Navy in the 1960s and eager to see a modern wheel house, I signed-up. The "dead-reckoning" days are over. Today's ships are equipped with GPS (Global Positioning System) and associated software that places a ship's human pilot into the hands of modern technology.

Figure 1 shows the ship's captain at his pilot's chair steering the ship through what was a narrow river passage. His task was made easier with the electronic maps furnished through previous surveys of the river, amplified with software tying this data to GPS.

As I took this in, I thought of my days in the U.S. Navy, times when navigating a river (and the shore lines of a sea) was one of constant calculations and checking hard copy depth charts and paper documentation about local obstructions. Well known passages were made with ease, but the ship still required an officer on deck to give steering directions to the helmsman.

It is easy to become less vigilant in the face of so much supporting technology. Yet, we sometimes read about outright sloth on the part of the captain of a ship. It is carelessness that damages our environment and costs each of us, however indirectly, money from our pocketbooks.



Take a look at Figure 2 (the left photo). On this day, the ship was navigating a narrow part of the Danube River. The weather conditions were windy and wet. Next, take a look at the empty wheel house, shown in the right figure. Other than the skipper's black chair, nothing else shows through the windows---including people! No one was in the wheel house. The ship was going through tight waters and guiding itself around bends and varying depths. At least that is my impression. I went forward to look for another piloting station. I saw none.



Figure 2. Narrow passages with no helmsman.

Americans Encourage Terrorism in Europe?

I intended to ask the wheel house tour guide about the situation, but I was deterred and lost this train of nautical thought. While we were being briefed about the navigation technology, one of our tour guide members continued to ask questions about the security measures taken by the ship's crew to protect us from being attacked by Somalia-like pirates from the nearby shoreline. The guide patiently explained that potential pirates would have no escape route, that the river shores were therefore not populated with pirates.

She kept the podium: Why did the ship not have armed guards manning the gangway while we were docked at a city? The guide good-naturedly explained that only Budapest required any unusual security measures: one unarmed person keeping an eye out for pickpockets, not al Qaeda killers. I was about to ask about the pilotless house, but the woman refused to stop. She then asked the guide about extra security measures needed to protect crew members and passengers from terrorists who knew Americans were aboard.

This last question to the tour guide had several other tour members turn their (empathetic) heads toward Holly and me. From previous encounters, they knew we were Americans. I think they were a bit embarrassed on our account.

I was neither surprised nor embarrassed. The concern of this person, however remote, reflects the views of many non-Americans about America. This subject is for another time. For now, as several of us walked away from the wheel house tour, I made a joke to a Canadian couple, "How did this woman know Americans were aboard? After all, we look a lot like you Canadians." The female in our northerly neighbors' couple responded, "Maybe it's the baseball cap."

Hm. Some Europeans wear baseball caps, but not many. They are thought to be American apparel. I do not wear them very often. As general practice, I don't wear hats or caps. During winter up here in north Idaho, I wear my old U. S. Navy blue knit watch cap. Still, I understood the Canadian's meaning. We Americans have our ways that make us more easily identified as Americans, and according to the wheel house woman, easier targets for anti-American terrorists and therefore a danger to non-American passengers.

Terrorism in Europe

The attacks of 9/11 still resonate. During this trip, I asked the tour guides about the wars in this part of Europe (especially the recent conflicts in Bosnia and Serbia). After their responses to my questions, they often asked us about 9/11. My response was along these lines: America is a primary target because of our power and presence in the world. But the 9/11-type terrorists are not going to single out just America. Western countries' secular societies are anathema to radicalized religious zealots. Europe had best prepare itself, as the Americans have been doing since 9/11. You've already had some attacks like the bus bombings in London, and your borders are so open, they are invitations for terrorists to come in. The guides were not surprised by my comments. Time will tell if Europe is fortifying itself enough.

Stereotypes

Sizable parts of the world's population do not like America's foreign policies. On the other hand, if we are taken in small doses, I have found they generally like us as individuals. We are seen as ignorant about other countries and arrogant about ours. Let's use the baseball cap to make some points about this subject.



Figure 3. A cap purchased in England.

During my work in Europe, I began wearing head gear on cold days. The watch cap was too hot, so I bought a couple of caps, one seen in the photo on the left. Returning to the states, I placed these hats somewhere and forgot about them until last year. Going through some boxes of old stuff, I came across them, took them out, and began wearing them back and forth to the gym.

Does this cap resemble a baseball cap? Is it American? Is it Communist-like? Perhaps Socialist-like? The first time I wore it, one of my gym buddies joked, "Hey, U where'd ya get the socialist hat? Been to Europe lately?" Another mentioned my hat, then said, "You look like Elmer Fudd!" Had I worn a conventional baseball cap, I would have passed un-noticed.

I was taken aback by these two jokesters. They were my friends, and we often exchanged friendly banter. I admit I am a bit naïve about the culture in the panhandle of North Idaho, where I now live. It is the original home of the White Aryan Nations. It is deeply conservative. But a cap gathering this attention? Yes, it was that much of a standout.

I had no defense about the Elmer Fudd joke, but I had a come-back about the socialist-style hat. I suggested to my friend that he go back a few years and look at a photo of the original baseball players in America. He would find they wore, as I put it, "socialists' hats."

The picture in Figure 4 (thanks to Google) is an image of an American baseball player of the early 1900s. Sweet Statue of Liberty, the man is wearing a socialist baseball cap, just like the ones I have been wearing in north Idaho.

What happened? How did the original baseball cap become what it is today? I suspect it came about because players needed a larger bill to shade their eyes from the sun. Slowly, America's sportswear evolved away from the short-billed socialistic cap of old. Anyway, I usually get a stare or two when I wear these hats up here in Aryan Nation land.



Figure 4. An American Socialist baseball player.

On the other hand, with my “European socialistic” hat on my head, I can walk the streets of European cities with nary a fear of being downed by drive-by shooters who are looking to even the score against us big bad Americans. My simple disguise is so effective that in the six European countries I visited recently, I was greeted in stores and on the streets with the native tongue of the area. I remained an incognito American, until I answered with “Howdy!”



Figure 5. Socialist looking people.

During this cruise, I had struck up a friendship with a Brit. As seen in Figure 5, Rob is wearing a socialist hat, too. With my hat on my head, until I opened my mouth with my southwestern drawl, he thought me to be European. After a while, I talked with him about the episodes just described. One day, when our tour group had time to do our own exploring, Rob and I ran into each other at a marketplace in Budapest. As he passed-by, he mentioned, “Some of those hats are for sale down where you are heading...the booth on the right. Don’t make yourself too obvious.”



Figure 6. Traveling incognito, until I opened my mouth.

Eager to bait my buddies back home, I purchased the leather cap shown in the figure above. And while I was in Europe, I was armed with several socialist hats to pass-off as a non-American and avoid any kidnappings by terrorists. I went about my shopping that day with the secure feeling that I was as safe as any other person on the street. As seen in Figure 6, I even had my own plastic bags.

Before I retired from working with computer networks, for twenty years I spent three to four months each year in countries other than my home in America. I came to assimilate some of the customs and characteristics of the people in these foreign lands.

Mind you, not many. My veins still flow with All-American blood. So, do not get on my case for expressing some modest criticisms of the stars and stripes. If I were talking with my cowboy friends in my childhood home in New Mexico, I would offer, “Hold your horses for a minute.”

My changes in behavior (and sometimes, dress) were enough to get by in these foreign lands without creating a fuss or attracting too much attention. For example, I stopped saying “How’s it going, pardner?” I substituted a subdued, “Hello.” My modest demeanor led to the local merchants not jacking up their prices for an American interloper.

I lowered the amount of my tips, a sure sign that I was not from across the pond. Furthermore, when I went to the toilet, I made sure I had sufficient pocket change to present to an attendant. For this fee, I was given access to the accommodations.

As of this writing, while prices vary from country to country in Europe, the going rate to use a public toilet for either a number 1 or number 2 runs about 75 cents. These toilets are located in restaurants, museums, and department stores. Some businesses do not charge for the use of their toilets, but my experience over the past few years is that more charge than not. It is a source of income and a way to ensure clean facilities will be available to the public.

As stated above, the same rate applies for either 1 or 2. No discounts for depositing lesser loads into a nation’s sewer infrastructure. Nonetheless, the Europeans, being practical people, have designed their toilets to give the user two options: A full flush or a partial flush. The idea is to save water for flushing-out the non-solubles our body does not want to keep (a full flush). Or the soluble stuff (liquids) our body also wishes to rid itself of (a partial flush).

Figure 7 is a photo I took of the toilet control console in our Prague hotel room. The Czechs (and other Europeans) assume people using toilets in hotels---being foreign citizens of lands with ample water---might not be attuned to the nuances of European Union (EU) waste disposal protocols.

Thus, as you can see from the red arrow, they provide a user’s guide for a full flush. It directs the flusher to press the upper part of the control console. Whoosh! Out it goes. But for



Figure 7. Socialistic flushings.

number 1, the EU assumes the user is adept enough to see that the console has a second control mechanism. I’ll draw a blue arrow to show this part of the system. By pressing this control console, you can cut down the volume of water that is used to clear the toilet.

Why has this practical invention not found favor in America, especially in some areas that are dangerously short of water?¹ I’ve been making light, but this simple concept would, so to speak, lighten the load on the taxed water supplies in many parts of America. Lake Meade in Nevada is running low on water, and Americans continue with a full flush.

¹ There are instances of America adopting water conservation measures with toilets. Smaller flushes are designed into new toilets. But I have yet to see the 1,2 flush console at the local hardware store.

Maybe this full flush mentality deals with our country not being able to accept the idea of paying for what is a required bodily function. With the practical, effective idea coming from Europe, the Tea Party residents up here in the panhandle of North Idaho likely think it's a socialistic trick to lull Americans into paying for other things that are free in the Land of the Free, such as toilet flushing and plastic grocery bags.

About those bags: I would wager that California, New York, and Oregon will eventually outlaw plastic bags in grocery stores. But Texas, Idaho, and Kansas will not.

Paranoia about Socialism

In my travels around America, I have discovered many Americans have little understanding of socialism. Some people even equate socialism to communism. Rush Limbaugh lumps them together. Amazing, and to think the man actually has a following.

The fact is that most countries in Europe do not practice socialism unto itself. They practice a blend of socialism and capitalism. Unfortunately, we stereotype the European countries as "socialistic," and therefore anti-capitalistic. From this view, we close ourselves off from examining some practices in Europe that we need to study. First and foremost is universal health care. I've used the medical systems of England, France, Sweden, and Norway (as well as Canada and Singapore). They are equal to the care I have received in America. Yet, America is drifting to a financial abyss with its current approach. We can only hope the nation comes to its senses and implements a single-payer system, similar to some European countries. But we are too ideologically rigid to "lower ourselves" to acknowledge that our system is not working.

I am a free-market advocate, but pure capitalism is immoral and untenable in the long run. By the way, for the dyed-in-the-wool capitalist who is reading this piece, keep in mind that Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, unemployment benefits, and other American programs are socialistic, as they are owned by the community; that is, the citizenry, which is the definition of socialism.

Money Talks...sometimes

I bought some snacks and drinks in grocery store located in Prague, Czech Republic. After paying with a credit card, I expected the clerk to place my purchases in a bag of some sort. He looked at me with a silent directive to remove my stuff from his work area. I made motions that I could not hold all this food and drink in my arms. Meanwhile, the Czechs behind me in the queue were starting to frown.



A brief Sidebar: Even though some countries in Eastern Europe are recent members of the EU, some of them have yet to adopt the Euro as their currency. (Its symbol is shown in the figure on the left.) In some stores, only local currency is accepted. I was in one such store.

The clerk caught-on to my request and handed me a small plastic bag. As I was about to take it, he pulled back my newly-discovered treasure and said in Czech something to the effect, *No way Yankee! These bags cost money.* The money in my possession was in twenty dollar and twenty Euro notes. I handed him a U.S. twenty. He nodded no. So, I handed-back my credit card.

Clerks have feelings, too. Plastic money for a transaction likely less than the cost of processing it? He frowned an insult and nodded his head no to the Visa. As my only alternative, I

pulled out a 20 Euro bill and handed it to him. The clerk gave me one more frown and an exasperated nod of NO!

What could I do? I had tried to give this store fair compensation for the plastic bag. For all I knew, the bag might have cost 20 Euro (about \$28). He could have given me back little or nothing, and I would have been powerless to protest. Thus thwarted, but lacking any other alternative, I pushed my purchases back to his work area and handed him my signed Visa receipt. The overhead of a reverse transaction took him aback. He understood “refund” and waved me away...thus giving me a plastic bag free.

This interaction is a micro-example of the complexities of international trade agreements. Euro-wise, it's a jungle out there in Eastern Europe (not only the Czech Republic). By asking to be admitted into the European Union (EU) yet keeping their own currency, the Czechs are trying to play it both ways. They tell me they are not quite ready for the Euro. I ask them why they were ready for the EU, but not the Euro?

They are feeling their way. They recognize the benefits of being in the EU. They also recognize the membership will slowly erode away many of their centuries-old customs. Nonetheless, the EU's cumbersome rules and huge bureaucracy are disliked by a substantial population in Europe.

By the way, a couple days later, I returned to the store to make other purchases, and brought along my plastic bag with local money in my pockets. My Czech koruna and I were taken-in and accepted. I could not speak a word of Czech, but the money was bilingual. It did my talking for me.