

**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Cruising the Danube River
Belgrade Serbia: The Fortress and Saint Sava**

Cruising the Danube River

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Cruising the Danube River Belgrade, Serbia. The Fortress and Saint Sava

October 2, 2013

Today, our Danube River tour ship was stopped at Belgrade, Serbia, located on the river as shown in Figure 1 (with the red circle). As with the previous days of this trip, rain and fog remained our companions. Some of our fellow travelers complained to themselves and anyone



nearby. Being from a moisture-deprived part of America, I was quite content. No rain check for me.

Today, I had second thoughts about choosing this specific trip on the Danube. I wanted to stay longer in each of the places I had briefly visited. But then, had I done so, I would not have had time nor opportunity to spread myself out to experience wider spreads. On third thoughts, Holly and I agreed the itinerary was fitting to our needs...as we made a list of places we vowed to revisit.

Figure 1. Belgrade, Serbia.

Not to Miss

Assuming you like history, a visit to the Belgrade Fortress is a not to miss item. We spent about three hours there. Because of its location, it was the focal point for much of the history of this part of the world.

Sidebar

How do you know what not to miss if you are missing almost everything in the first place?

One of my friends, and a pen pal for “Your on the Street Reporter” essays, has given me a hard time about my “Not to Miss” section. (Nothing new from him, he’s just taken on a different theme.)

- He said, “Uyless, you’re in a country for a few hours. How can you possibly tell your readers what they should not miss? You’ve seen almost nothing!”
- I responded, “I’ve seen some things that I am not placing in my ‘Not to Miss’ section.”
- “Such as?”
- “Every fifth church I enter. Every fourth statue I view. Every third fountain I see. Every second curio shop I pass by. And every single curmudgeon who comes my way, this person being you.”
- He made his point. I made mine. And here is what not to miss if your daily walk takes you through a city likely located thousands of miles from your daily walk.

The Belgrade Fortress

Belgrade is located where the Danube and Sava Rivers come together. The rivers have been major highways for scores of conquerors to pay calls on Belgrade: Attila the Hun, Theodoric the Great, Ostogoths, Gepids, Byzantines, Slavs, Avars, Crusaders, and Hapsburgs, to name a few. But during our brief stay, our guides concentrated on the Ottomans, the Nazis, the Soviets, and more recently, the breakup of Yugoslavia and resulting “visits” from former citizens of this defunct state.

Figure 2(a) shows a map of the fortress. Figure 2(b), is an aerial view of the fortress, with the Sava and Danube Rivers shown on the left side of the figure. Figure 2(c) is a photo I snapped while standing on high ground and looking at the confluence of the two rivers. The two red arrows are drawn to help acquaint you with the terrain.

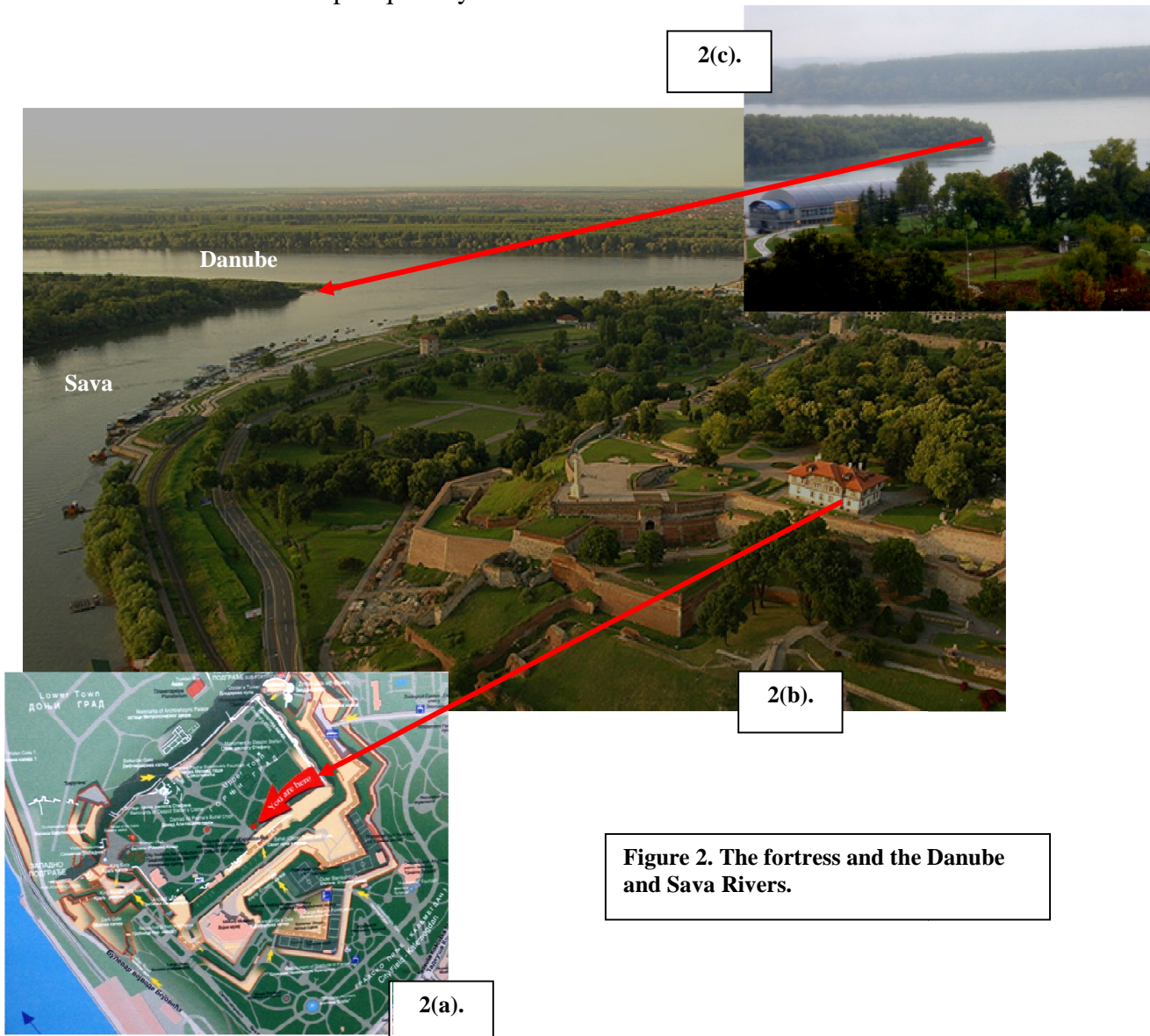


Figure 2. The fortress and the Danube and Sava Rivers.

The older parts of the city line the sides of both rivers. While the city itself goes back to pre-Roman Empire times, the area around Belgrade was farming land as early as 5,000 BC. For many centuries, the location of the city placed it as a crossroads between the Orient and the West.

The fortress was built at the confluence of the rivers to control the navigation on their waters and to offer protection to the local citizens and especially their rulers. It is huge, a city within itself. Like many castles and fortresses, it has inner and outer walls, as seen in Figure 3. Unlike most of these kinds of buildings, it has tennis and basketball courts, shown in figures 4 and 5. These sports are very popular in Serbia and the country produces world-winners, both in teams and individuals.

I follow the career of Novak Djokovic, the male tennis player. I have seen him play in two tournaments. When he is on, he plays the game with almost no unforced errors. I watch him with awe. If he continues to improve (and he is only 26 years old), he will challenge Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal for number one in the world. He has that kind of potential.

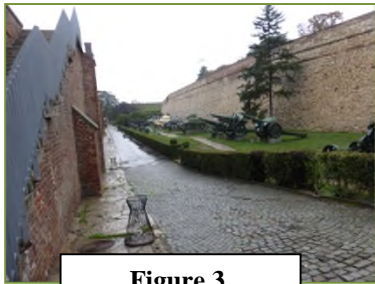


Figure 3.
Double walls.



Figure 4.
Tennis is big.



Figure 5.
Basketball is, too.

Speaking of Mr. Djokovic, he made some comments for an interview a few months ago. He spoke briefly about the reputation he perceives Serbia has in the world community...in light of the conflicts with Croatia and the so-called Vukovar massacre (also known as the Vukovar hospital massacre or Ovčara massacre). He was not defensive about Serbia's role, but seemed regretful that it happened and the resulting cloud that hangs over his country. A segment in this series addresses this subject.

The breakup of Yugoslavia, with the wars that followed, was on the minds and tongues of both Serbians and Croatians. I will defer this subject for now, but because it was one reason I made this journey, I ask you to share it with me. We can read papers. We can surf the Web. We can watch TV. But there is no substitute for being there, of looking at the places and hearing the voices of those who live there.

The Cathedral of Saint Sava

The Cathedral of Saint Sava is another place you should try not to miss. During my travels these past few decades, I have seen so many grand churches and cathedrals that, as unique as some of them may be, they are almost impossible to keep as separate edifices in my mind. There are exceptions, and this cathedral is one of them.

I read a bit about this part of the world before embarking on this trip. I came across the name *Saint Sava* often. He lived (1174-1236) as a prince and Orthodox monk. He was a learned and influential man, the founder of much of early Serbian law. He was the first Archbishop of the Serbs and authored the oldest Serbian constitution, which is regarded by historians as a cornerstone of Serbian's independent philosophy and a foundation for some of their laws. He was also a scholar of literature. It is easy to understand why he has a river as well as a cathedral name after him.

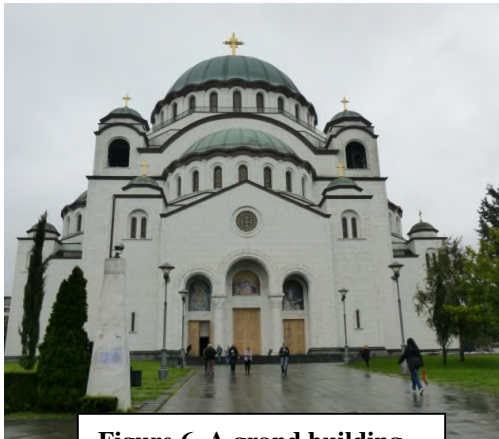


Figure 6. A grand building.

Figure 6 shows the front of the cathedral. It is the largest Eastern Christian church building in the world. The cathedral was built on the site where the Ottoman Turks supposedly burnt Saint Sava's remains (in the 16th century). It was one of many acts that did not endear the Serbs (and many other subjects of the former Ottoman Empire) to the Turks. History, perhaps legend, has it that the Turks were angered because the Serbs used depictions of Sava icons on Serb flags following their uprising against the Ottoman rulers. History also recounts countless battles and baths of blood. This part of the world is no exception. The Turks and the Serbs are famous for both.



The inside of the cathedral was undergoing renovations and some additions. To the left are some pictures I made during this visit, with a few notes from our guide (see Figure 7).



The architecture is a pleasure to behold. The exterior is what struck me. It is made of white marble and granite. The inner parts of the church are decorated with many mosaics, one of my favorite modes of art. We learned this place is revered by many Serbs, as is Saint Sava. In the past, Serbian cathedrals and churches have also offered physical sanctuary to believers and nonbelievers alike. They sometimes have shielded their inhabitants from the wars taking place outside their walls. Not always. But sometimes is better than no times.



Figure 7. Inside the cathedral.

I am nearing my self-imposed limit of a few pages for each of these reports. For now, I implied above that the preponderance of old churches in Europe can dull the senses of ordinary tourists, and by-passing them is one of my practices. I also expressed my reservations about visiting the places on the Danube River so quickly.

For both thoughts, it comes down to a compromise, one that perhaps you and I share: We experience fewer details of the wonderful images we come across in these kinds of adventures, and therefore, we have fewer recollections about the specifics of their representations. But then, by seeing more churches and such, we have more recollections of a wider variety of images, but in a more general way.

For myself, brief visits to the Fortress and the Cathedral of Saint Sava was fitting to how I wanted to spend my time. Maybe for you, too. We are tourists, not cultural anthropologists. Anyway, with this admission and my visit to Saint Sava, my tourist soul has been cleansed.