



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Cruising the Danube River
Belgrade, Serbia: Touring the City**

Cruising the Danube River

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Cruising the Danube River Belgrade, Serbia. Touring the City

October 2, 2013

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. This report continues the Danube River tour stop at Belgrade, Serbia, located on the Danube River as shown in Figure 1 (with the red circle).



Figure 1. Belgrade.

I had intended each report in this series to focus on one day of the tour. But I have made an exception with Belgrade. It is covered here and in the next report. I was taken by how the citizens (those with whom I could converse) and our guides dwelled on the wars that came from the breakup of Yugoslavia. Perhaps it is because the memories are still fresh. Thus, this “extra” report.

While our tour bus traversed parts of the city, our guide (yet another learned scholar, making his way through university with this part-time job) spoke about some of the landmarks and buildings we encountered, one is shown in figure 2. Partially bombed buildings can be found throughout the city.



Figure 2. War damage.

He stopped talking about the old places. It was as if he put on another hat. He told us about the 78 days of NATO bombing in 1999. Without prompting, he said it came about because of Serbia’s contesting a rebellion in Kosovo, a region considered part of Serbia by the Serbians. What is known and generally accepted is that the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) attacked Serbian law enforcement detachments in Kosovo. In response, Serb forces began fighting and eliminating KLA supporters, including Albanians.

Our guide offered, “...and the (our) leaders over reacted.” Thus, leading to the NATO bombing. He said the NATO campaign resulted in the deaths of 3,500 people, 2,500 of whom were civilians. Of course, these claims can be checked, by referring to other sources, but I prefer to report in this series on what the locals say.

Why not pull down the damaged buildings? Were they there to stand as a symbol? He wavered. He said the buildings were state monuments and state monuments could not be pulled down. He added there was not enough money to take them down anyway. Our scholar/guide was not clear

in his explanations about this subject. He seemingly escaped this subject by offering a knock, knock joke:

- “In 1999, the joke went as, ‘Knock, knock.’ “
- “Who’s there?”
- “Tom.”
- “Tom who?”
- “Tomahawk.”

He was referring to the Tomahawk missiles launched by the NATO forces.

As best I could tell, and this day had me speak to only five Serbians (other than the guide), the Serbs believe they were deceived by NATO and America. They were targeted by the KLA. They responded. They were unfairly punished. Again, the story is much more complex. But it is sufficient to note that, true to human nature, blame is a one-way, outbound street.

The next report returns to this subject, as seen from the perspective of the Croatians.

Be Sure to Not to Miss...the Bus

I will say briefly: In this part of Europe, do not expect the local citizenry to know the English language. The Iron Curtain resulted in over four decades of isolation of Eastern Europe from Western Europe and America, and resulting in the lack of English language assimilation. In Western Europe, English is a second language in most countries. The only country I recall having difficulty finding my way around in the larger cities using English was in Portugal.

Some of us left the tour group to do a bit of solo exploring. We wonderers were to meet at the statue of Prince Michael (liberator of Serbia from the Turks) some 45 minutes from our departure. There, we would find the bus that would take us back to the ship. Figure 3 shows a photo of this landmark.



Figure 3. St. Michael Statue.

I have little discipline in putting a time limit on walking through exotic places. I am much better at it than when I was a younger man. My wife is impressed that I actually ask her the time to check if we are on schedule, as I do not wear a watch or anything else attached to my peripherals.

During my first Navy liberty in Hong Kong (1964), the ship’s crew was ordered not to enter into certain areas of the city, as their stores were stocked with illegal (communist) wares. The boundaries were ill-defined, and how was I to read Chinese street signs? In ignorant innocence, I wandered into forbidden areas, became lost in a labyrinth of winding small streets, purchased a small, beautiful “communist” bowl, and eventually found my way out into the capitalist part of the city.

Anyway, for Belgrade, I thought I was looking backward as I walked forward, in order to reconstruct my path to the Prince. Holly and I wanted to sample the local wines. Viking River

Cruises provides as much wine at the meals as one wishes to drink. But we wanted a taste of native wines. So, off I went, looking for a Serbian wine shop. As I entered a wine and liquor store, I was certain I could trace my steps back to the statue.

- I walked to a section that appeared to sell native wines (no French labels). “Hello...eh, wine...Serbian?”
- She called over a colleague and spoke with him. He motioned me to the other side of the small store. There, he took off a cap from an opened bottle, poured an ounce or so of the liquid into a glass and handed it to me. I took a sip.
- It is said that liquor is form of slow poison. I felt I had just been poisoned, but not slowly. I gasped, as the man and woman laughed. Just think of drinking the original Listerine. This was much worse.
- The man looked at me as I had been the butt of a joke, or a foreign wimp, maybe both. I headed back to the other side of the store.
- There I bought two bottles of white and a red from parts unknown, and with an inflamed throat and puzzled mind, headed back to the statue.

I got lost. I could find no one who spoke English. I said to anyone who would look at me, “Saint Michael?” Finally, after repeated attempts, a young woman responded, “Oh, horse!” and pointed me in the opposite direction I was headed.

And that pretty much sums up my mingling with the Serbs. I asked our Serbian guide about the stuff I tasted at the shop. He laughed and told me I had probably sampled the store owner’s own concoction.



By the way, Holly and I found the two wines to be fine. The white was exceptional. They are shown to the left. If you know their origins, drop me a line.



PS, here is a photo of the illegal communist bowl I bought many years ago in Hong Kong. Its jade tray sits on a small wooded pedestal. A lovely memento, I show it openly. The statute of limitations has expired.