



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Cruising the Danube River
Vukovar and Osijek, Croatia**

Cruising the Danube River

Contents

Report One: Getting Started

Report Two: Bucharest, Romania

Report Three: Bulgaria

Report Four: Iron Gate

Report Five: Belgrade, Serbia. Touring the City

Report Six: Belgrade, Serbia. The Fortress and Saint Sava Cathedral

Report Seven: Vukovar and Osijek, Croatia

Report Eight: Landscape of Hungary and the Puszta

Report Nine: Budapest, Hungary

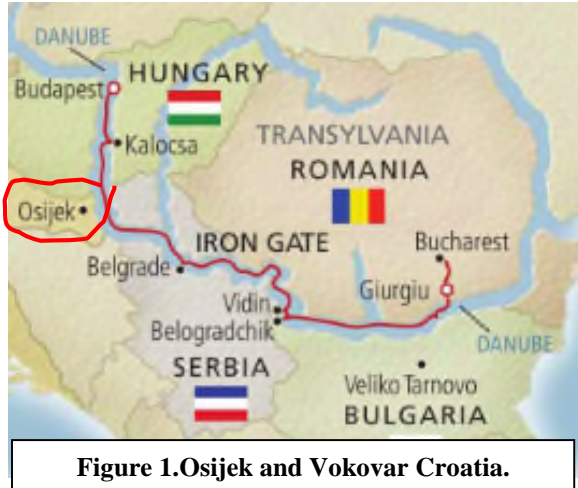
Report Ten: Prague, Czech Republic

Report Eleven: Wrap-up

Cruising the Danube River Vukovar and Osijek, Croatia

October 3, 2013

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. This report continues the Danube River tour with a stop in the vicinity of Osijek, Croatia, and the port of Vukovar, located on the river as shown in Figure 1(with the red circle).



Because of the breakup of Yugoslavia beginning in 1991, this part of Eastern Europe is divided into several countries. Unless you are student of these events (which I am not), the map can look jumbled. For the readers who wish more details than the map in Figure 1, I came across a fine map while visiting Osijek, which I have placed in Attachment One.

Reporterette and I were nearing a part of Europe where we had once visited. In 1989, I was invited by a private firm operating out of Ljubljana (soon to be part of Slovenia) to give a series of lectures

on Internet protocols. The occasion took place at a resort on the North Adriatic Sea. Later, we were driven to Zagreb (soon to be part of Croatia) to catch a plane to return home. Parts of this trip were accentuated with demonstrations on the streets of these future countries. The demonstrators were pushing for their regions to become independent nations. We were never in danger, but my Slovenia sponsor later called me and expressed concern for his future.

Slovenia's citizens were fortunate. This area is sparsely populated with Croats or Serbs (fewer than 4 percent of the population). The culture is more oriented toward Italy, Austria, and Hungary than Croatia and Serbia. Consequently, Slovenia was largely immune to the ethnic vendettas that plagued its neighbors to the south. I found the country and its citizens to be Swiss-like. They were gracious to Holly and me, and if not for the unsettled times of the late 1980s and early 1990s, I might have formed a partnership with the Zagreb group, a story for another time.

I chose this cruise as a way to introduce myself to a part of the world I had never seen, some of which is in the Balkans. I make this distinction, because Hungarian, Slovenes, even Romanians do not associate themselves with the Balkans. Anyway, because of my interest in current foreign affairs, I was hoping to be exposed to its more recent history. I was not disappointed, and as you have read in the earlier reports, my emphasis has been on events taking place in Southeastern Europe since World War II to the present time.

I did not realize the tour would take us through Vukovar and Osijek, an area made infamous by a 1991 87-day siege by the Yugoslav People's Army and Serbian forces.¹ As soon as we departed the VRC ship, we came across memorials to this siege. In addition, as we walked into the town, a damaged water tower---kept as it is as a memorial--- was visible, as seen in Figure 2.



Figure 2. A memorial.

As I've mentioned, National Geographic and the Internet provided ample information on this part of the world as well as the battles that took place. For now, perhaps my sharing with you the personal views of the citizens of Vukovar and other Croatians (whom I know in Idaho at my gym and from Holly) will be the best way to use this time.

As also mentioned, I found the VRC tour guides to be some of the best I have come across. They were more than tourist guides, they were historians, and proud of their knowledge and the research they had done about their subjects. Many of them were university students earning their way through school.

Our guide for Vukovar explained that the citizens of pre-siege days were a prosperous community of Croats, Serbs, and a few other ethnic groups. During this part of the talk, he spoke of Serbs coming across the Danube River to attack the town. (Serbia and Croatia share this river as part of the boundaries from each other. See the appendix to this report for a more detailed map, which was also furnished in Report One.

His tone, twenty-two years after the battle, was one of incredulity. I asked what the mix in the area of Serbs to Croats was in 1991. He said "About 90 percent were Croatian. Fewer than 5 percent were Serbs." He continued that the minority Serbs started a rebellion within Croatia and that's when the non-Croatian Serbs entered the picture.

As we walked through the town, and drove through the countryside, we came across structures that were still damaged. The town was defended by a small contingent of about 1,800 members of the Croatian National Guard and a few hundred civilian volunteers. They had little chance against a force of 36,000. The guide stopped his walk, paused for moment and said, "Tanks and cannon fired thousands of rounds each day into the places we are now walking," as he pointed out some of the effects of the shellings. (See Figure 3.)

¹ Central Intelligence Agency Office of Russian and European Analysis 2000; *Vukovar – Final Cut*. This film won the Human Rights Award at the 2006 Sarajevo Film Festival. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tL3oQ4SCaY>. In addition, as we walked through Vukovar, a Croatian tour guide gave an impressive lecture about this event. I have also used some statistics from Wikipedia for this report.

Ethnic cleansing followed the victory of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Serb paramilitaries.



Figure 3. Lingerin damages.

When Vukovar's paltry forces were defeated (November 1991), hundreds of soldiers and citizens were massacred. Our guide said over 30,000 civilians were deported from the area, and the town was taken over by the Serbs. Ethnic cleansing in action, the town was not returned to its rightful owners for several years. Our guide said that when the Croats came back to their houses, all their possessions were either gone or purposely destroyed. Later, several Serb officials were indicted and charged with war crimes. Slobodan Milošević, a Serbian leader, was one of these men. He was never found legally guilty, and died in his cell in The Hague (2006).



Figure 4. Lingerin wounds.

Perhaps it is time to move on. But one more thought. As I watched the film (see footnote 1), I copied a screen shot. It is shown in Figure 4. The message from this part of the film: One's life depended on the ability to sing a correct song. How many times have you and I read or experienced this sort of blind prejudice? I witnessed it almost daily while stationed in the Far East. The Sunnis and Shias have beheaded their Muslim "brothers" for mispronouncing a word (and thereby

giving away their religious identity.) Al Qaeda troops (Sunnis) forced captured men, women, and children (Shia) into 18-wheeler vans. They shut the doors and left them to bake alive in a giant oven.

For some good news, the town has undergone a notable recovery. While it has not attained the affluence it had before the siege, it has made remarkable strides. Figure 5 shows two buildings that have been repaired. The building on the left is the Grand Hotel. As we passed by this building the guide said, "The Grand Hotel will once again be grand." This landmark, going back to 1895, was severely damaged during the war. I have placed it on my list of places to visit before I kick the bucket. And with that positive note, we move on to more cheerful parts of this report.

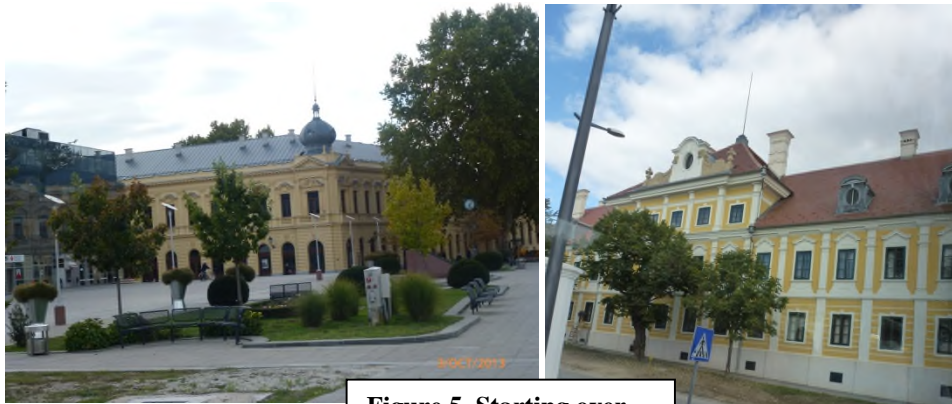


Figure 5. Starting over.

If You Have Time

If you are roaming around Croatia, and have some time on your hands, take in Osijek. It is located 36 miles northeast of Vukovar. Our tour group rode a bus from Vukovar to Osijek. Thus, we had a chance to see some of the countryside in Croatia.



Figure 6. To Osijek.

Osijek is the fourth largest city in Croatia, but our tour skirted most of Osijek itself, and paid a call on Tvrda (Citidel), which is located in the old part of the city and next to the Drava River, as seen in Figure 7. Like other river fortresses, it was built in the eighteenth-century to control shipping and passage on the river. It is well-preserved, and provides wonderful examples of the architecture of its times. Wars mongers somehow missed their chances of completely leveling its buildings, although it suffered extensive damage during the Croatian War of Independence during the 1990s.

We walked the streets of Tvrda for a while. I harbored wishes of being in a backward-moving time machine and tried to visualize the fort and its citizens at a time before America had become America. I gave it a go, but was only marginally successful. My time machine is moving, with fast forward turned on, all too quickly into the future.

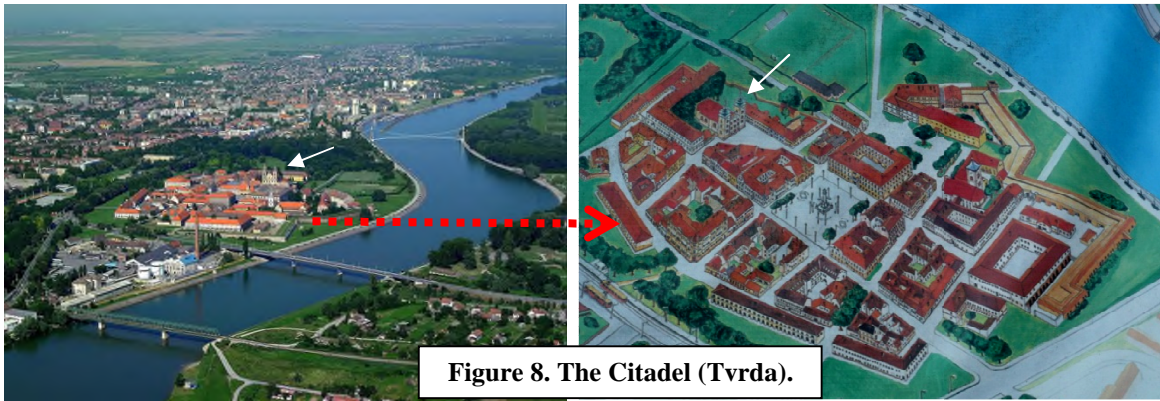


Figure 8. The Citadel (Tvrda).



Figure 9. St. Michaels.

For the present, we visited yet another church, St. Michaels, positioned in the citadel in Figure 8, shown with the white arrows and seen in Figure 9(a). (This photo of the church is courtesy of Wikipedia, as my snapshots of the building were, charitably speaking, below average.) Figures 9 (b) and (c) provide examples of the interior of the church. In the 1700s, it was likely a religious Disneyland to poor peasants who lived in hovels. Traveling backwards in time, I can imagine what a treat it must have been for a serf to escape from a dreary hut and sit in such a grand place...even if the serf had to listen to scary organ music.

During the short motor trip, we stopped at another place, which had monuments to the war made of used gun cartridges and shell casings (Figure 10(a)), and another curio shop (Figure 10(b)). It is likely that Viking River Cruises has arrangements with these stores to share in the sales to VRC tourists. I bought the map that is shown in Attachment One. But my fancy was caught by a poster, seen in Figure 10(c). Uncle Sam is almost everywhere on the globe. This fact, while distasteful to many Americans, does not obviate the gratitude many people in this part of the world have toward Uncle Sam (and NATO) for intervening into a nation's affairs and stopping genocidal wars.



Figure 10. Monuments and Mementos.

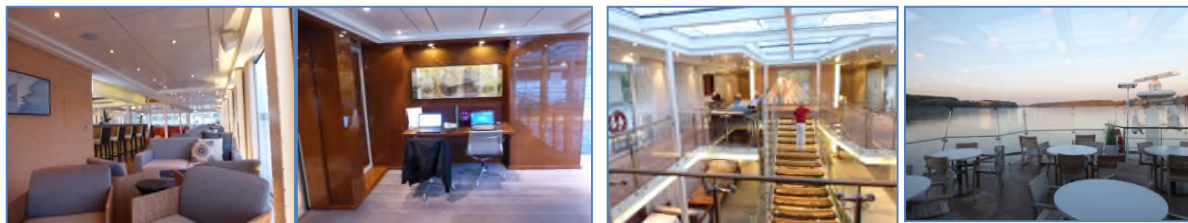
Post Script



I have mentioned the VRC tour guides a couple times in these reports. I do so again. With one exception on this cruise, I found them to be exceptional speakers and knowledgeable in their subjects. I have been writing Your on the Street Reporter essays for eight years, many about tours such as the one in this essay. Some of the guides I encountered were a bit flakey and not well-versed in the matter at hand. But not many. I bring this subject up because over these eight years I have occasionally received correspondence that is condescending toward these people. Invariably, the correspondent compares them to a professor at a university. Granted, they do not command a scholarly pulpit, and some are self taught. But that is no reason to assume they have not done their homework. We all start with an intellectual tabula rasa. How we go about filling in our mental slate is not all that important. What is important is if we are committed to filling it in. Just ask the 16th President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln.

Viking River Cruises

To close this report, a few more words about the ship we were on. As mentioned before, our cabin was comfortable and efficient. The common areas were inviting and pleasant to be in, as seen below.



Overall, I found this tour company one I would use to take another cruise. I mentioned the dinners were a disappointment. Some of our travel companions did not like the bus-loads of people on each tour. Others did not like other things. Holly and I were happy campers...and happy VRC did not treat us as such.

Attachment One: The Danube River.

