

**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Cruising the Danube River
Landscape of Hungary and the Puszta**

Cruising the Danube River

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Cruising the Danube River Landscape of Hungary and the Puszta

October 4, 2013

This report continues the Danube River tour with a stop in the vicinity of Kalocsa, as seen in Figure 1. We also take a motor tour to a small part of the *puszta*, a Hungarian word for a traditional landscape in the country.

Introduction



Figure 1. Next tour stop.

I was introduced to this part of the world during a two-semester course titled “The History of Western Civilization,” which was a history of Europe. This class, taken my last year in college, opened my mind to the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg Empire, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Since that time, I have been a history buff.

During one of the sessions, the professor passed some photographs around of Hungary. One showed the terrain of a vast plains, one similar to the area where I was reared in New Mexico. I

have used the Web to obtain Figure 2(a), the Hungarian plains (the *puszta*), and Figure 2(b), the Southwest plains.¹ I was not interested in these plains. I had seen enough of them during my childhood. Depending on the season (and rain), each day I beheld featureless, seemingly, never-ending vistas of brown or gray grass...and no lakes or rivers.²



(a). Hungarian *puszta*.

(b). American prairie.

Figure 2. Plains.

¹ Thanks to Wikipedia’s open sources.

² And giving credit to what I have come to learn is a fanciful, diverse world. After a rain, one takes in a stunning profusion of wild flowers and high green grass, mesquite that pleasantly shocks one’s smells; pristine air; majestic silence, broken only by a never-ending wind whistling through the grass.

The word *puszta* is associated with a Hungarian flat landscape. The area shown in Figure 2(a) was once on the floor of the Pannonian Sea, “which existed for about 9 million years. Then, about 600,000 years ago, its water broke through the Iron Gate on the Danube River [see Report 4] and flowed through the gorge, leaving the vast plains one sees today.”³

Not to Miss

The motor tour through this part of Hungary took us into and around the town of Kalocsa and yet another church. I will devote the “Not to Miss” to a visit the tour group paid to, granted, a tourist trap outside of this town. But then we were tourists trapped on a tour bus. What else could we expect? The place was built as a large arena, one that reminded me of a rodeo arena back in New Mexico.

Those arenas of my youth---for the big events---played country and western music as part of the entertainment. It was brassy and loud, perhaps to get the crowd fired-up. This arena also played music, but it was of a single flute, played by a man standing inside the left part of the arena (Figure 3). Unlike America’s arenas, this one was inundated with subdued, almost plaintive music. No drums, no fiddles, no guitars; one lone flute. While walking into the grandstands, several horses stood at the rail, patiently letting us pat them if we wished (Figure 4).

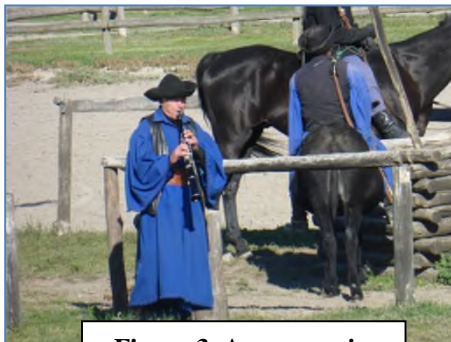


Figure 3. Arena music.

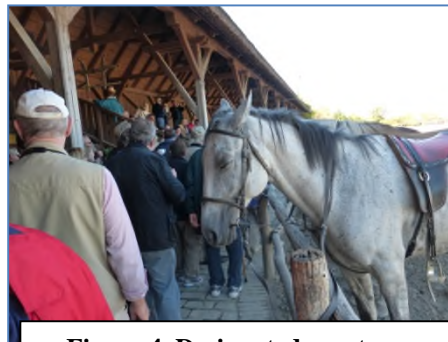


Figure 4. Designated greeters.

Figure 5 shows a view of the arena from the grandstands. The seven horse riders provided part of the entertainment for the day. They were dressed in clothes of the past and carried with them what I call bull whips, braided leather whips about twenty feet long held by a short handle of about eight to twelve inches. I used the whips while living on a ranch in New Mexico.⁴ I was not adept at “cracking” them as they were too unwieldy for a child’s mainframe. But I tried. One of our hired-hands gave me a small bull whip to help hone my skills.

The precision and grace these men displayed with their horses and whips thrilled their audience. Their performance, to the rhythm of Hungarian folk music, had them circling around the arena, alternately weaving between one another, lying down on top their horses. All the while cracking

³ *Viking Daily*, published by Viking River Cruises, October 4, 2014, 2.

⁴ I saw them used to control cattle and sheep, and to my everlasting dismay, on more than one occasion, to “discipline” horses. Of course, the whippings had the opposite effect. The horse was forever alienated from its tormenter. I succored those animals when no one was around, stealing food from our cook’s upcoming supper which I gave to more-deserving animals.

their whips in unison with one another and in harmony with the music. Figure 6 shows the part of their show in which they dismounted, placed the horses on the ground, and sat with them for a short while.

Notice the wagon and cattle in the background. Later, the driver brought the wagon and cattle into the arena for a closer look. Another smaller wagon was also driven around for us to see, as depicted in Figure 7. What memories this image brought to me. As a child in the late 1940s, the ranch where I spent my summers (my dad and step-mom lived there) had remnants of the wooden wagons rotting away in a pasture next to the ranch's central site (barns, house, and corrals). Some had rusted hubs housing gray and decaying wheels, similar to the wheels on the wagon shown in Figure 7. They still had their curved iron bands, once used to hold the covers across the bed of the wagons. Their precarious states of disrepair did not diminish my fantasies of riding and driving them across the staked plains of New Mexico.



Figure 5. Horses and horsemen.



Figure 6. Taking a break.



**Figure 7.
A Three-horsepower vehicle.**

In some of my writings, I have told of my fear of horses as a lad. I have told of some close calls with, if not my life, certainly with my health because of the actions of horses. I have made light of my dislike for them. The truth is I revere horses. I was around them often. With few exceptions (very few), they treated this small animal with deference...mostly ignoring me. But not all of them were aloof. Those for whom I snuck-out food became fond of me. (No surprise there.) More seriously, I learned that a horse could be as loyal to a person as a dog.

It takes longer to gain the trust of a horse than that of a dog. After all, part of the DNA of a dog is that of a predator. The DNA of a horse contains alleles associated with being a prey. Nonetheless, once a horse accepts you as a trusted human, unless you abuse the animal, you have a loving friend for the rest of the horse's life.



**Figure 8. Getting
reacquainted
with past times.**

While at this whimsical place, the Viking River Cruises photographer caught me at a truthful moment, as seen in Figure 8.

Later, I tried my hand at a bull whip. What little I knew long ago, I knew no longer. But my failure was more than compensated by the music of a man who popped up all over this place. Each time, he played a different instrument, one shown earlier and two more shown in Figure 9. During an interlude, I approached him and bid him hello with a nod and a smile. He returned my greeting. I pointed to his stringed instrument and asked if I could touch it. He seemed to understand, smiled, and stepped slightly away.



Figure 9. An accomplished musician.

I was taken by its complexity, at least to this non-musician. It had well over fifteen strings. The man was accomplished and gracious, as were all the people at this place. I left reluctantly, but only after trying unsuccessfully once again to crack one of those bull whips.

Back at the ship, the talk among our dinner mates was what a unique experience today had been. I was familiar with most of the goings-on at the arena and the plains over which we traveled, but I would guess I considered it an even more unique day than the others. I had something with which to compare it.