

A Danube River Cruise through Eastern and Central Europe



June-July, 2016

This trip to Eastern and Central Europe gave us our first glimpse of four countries—Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia and Croatia—and also included third time visits to two of our favorite cities, Budapest and Prague.

The tour started in Bucharest, the capital of Romania, and was followed by an eight day river cruise on the Danube which included two stops in Bulgaria, a full day in Belgrade, Serbia and a day in eastern Serbia. An additional stop in Hungary (before arriving in Budapest) and some magnificent scenery along the river completed the very interesting itinerary.

Each of the six countries we visited had been part of the Soviet Bloc but each had a different story to tell and there were significant differences in the degree of allegiance to that union. Each country is now a democratic republic and most are members of the European Union with strong ties to the West. In addition, Serbia and Croatia are two of the countries formed after the breakup of Yugoslavia and are still emerging from the Balkan war of the late 20th Century.

The guides at each stop were excellent and we felt that we received a fair picture of life today and how it differs from the time under Soviet influence. Most appear to be satisfied with the way things have evolved but we were also told that not everyone (particularly in the older generation) feels better off since the fall of Communism.

It was a fascinating trip with lots of interesting history (much of it very recent) and the itinerary was well planned and executed. The food and accommodation on board were excellent.

Of course, the time we spent in Budapest and Prague was wonderful as it was on our previous trips and it is difficult to imagine two more beautiful cities to visit.

Eastern Europe, June-July 2016

Tuesday June 28/Wednesday June 29

We were picked up by Elizabeth at 8:15 and had breakfast at Bob Evans. Hayley and Colin were already there so it was nice to see most of the Shepard family before we left on our trip.

Hayley left before us as she had to go to work but Colin went to the airport with us – although he slept most of the drive. We arrived around 10:15, so had plenty of time before our 11:40 flight to Detroit. The very short flight (45 minutes) arrived early and we went straight to the Lounge where we had a snack and relaxed for almost two hours before boarding started for our onward overnight flight to Amsterdam.

The Transatlantic crossing was very short and we were in Amsterdam seven hours after leaving Detroit – 5:30 am local time! We didn't have much time to sleep on the plane but, as it was before midnight in Cincinnati, we felt reasonably fresh, much like after having had an afternoon nap at home. We wandered the quiet terminal and eventually found the KLM Lounge where we were able to get our boarding passes for the flight to Bucharest. We had almost three hours before that flight so we were able to relax and have a light breakfast before the final leg to Romania.

The flight left Amsterdam a little late but we made up most of the time during the 2 ½ hour flight. We had a good breakfast on board and were pleased to see that our bags made it on the same flight as us.

We found the machine to order a taxi (with a little help from a Viking representative), got some local currency and were soon leaving the airport for the downtown Marriott. We had gone through a small rain shower on the approach to Bucharest but that was nothing compared to the torrential downpour that started as soon as we left the airport. The streets were almost flooded in no time and the taxi had to drive quite slowly at times as the driver picked his way around the deeper waters. It was still raining heavily as we reached the hotel and checked in with Viking.



Part of the Parliament Building seen from our hotel

We were given two options for tours tomorrow before boarding the ship. One visited the enormous parliament buildings (which we can see from the hotel room) and another spent some time in Old Town. With the forecast being either more heavy rain or very high temperatures (it has been in the nineties here for the past couple of weeks) we opted for the tour that spent time in the parliament.

After settling in to our room, we made a dinner reservation at the Italian restaurant in the hotel (opting to stay dry and make it easy for us on our first night) and then relaxed until 8pm. We had arrived at the hotel about 2:30, almost exactly 23 hours after Elizabeth had picked us up at home yesterday.

All in all, it seemed like a very easy journey with three good flights and plenty of layover time, which avoided any stress en route.

Tonight's dinner was very good and a quite authentic Italian, especially as we were able to complete the meal with espresso and a glass of grappa. We were in bed and asleep quickly before 10 pm.

Thursday June 30

We were up at 6:30 after a good night's sleep and had a very pleasant breakfast in the hotel before starting our day-long tour of Bucharest at nine. We drove through much of the city center but made essentially only two stops, except for lunch at a local restaurant with the necessary traditional folkloric song and dance troupe.



Parliament Complex and the Independence Statue

The first and major stop (the reason we took this city tour) was at the Parliament Palace. This is the second largest building in the world after the US Pentagon and was built under the final years of the Ceausescu dictatorship. He was president of the satellite Soviet country of Romania and had taken on several personae as the whims and fancies of the USSR took shape and eventually failed.

Obviously he was initially in favor of the Union and enjoyed the privileges of being an elite member of the Communist Party and the leader of one of its major satellite countries (it was never a part of the Union per se). However, he differed from Moscow when they took over Czechoslovakia and increasingly became a powerful leader in his own right, aligned with, but not wholly responsible to Moscow.

This "independence" clearly went to his head and he became a ruthless dictator (albeit with continuing support from Russia and – at least after he was gone – with a somewhat belated reverence from his own people) which eventually (1989) led to his demise and ultimate execution for crimes against his country and people. Prior to his ultimate downfall, however, he began his legacy in stone and marble which was to be the Presidential Palace which we visited today. It was begun in 1984 and not "completed" (it is still classified as incomplete) for ten years, by which time he had been exiled and executed, together with his wife (and second-in-command).

The palace was never intended as a residence (although with the many major changes he made in his lifetime, who knows what might have been) but rather as a ceremonial and office building. Today, some 40,000 people are supposedly employed here but they occupy the top few floors in somewhat more modest surroundings than the rooms we saw today



Nicolae Ceaușescu (26 January 1918 – 25 December 1989) was a Romanian Communist politician. He was General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party from 1965 to 1989, and as such was the country's second and last Communist leader. He was also the country's head of state from 1967 to 1989.

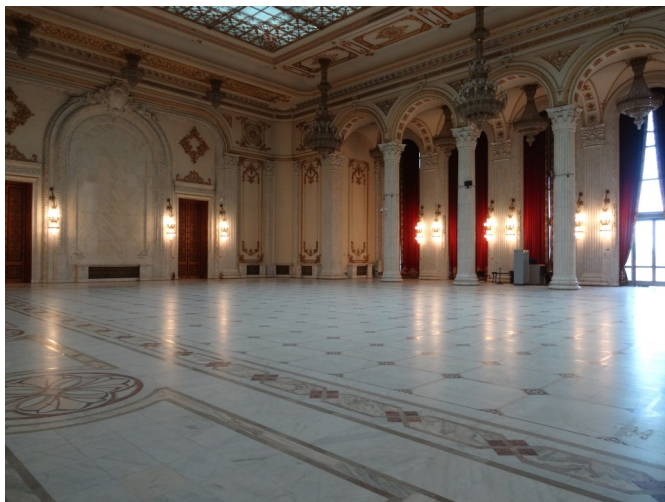
A member of the Romanian Communist youth movement, Ceaușescu rose up through the ranks of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's Socialist government and, upon the death of Gheorghiu-Dej in 1965, he succeeded to the leadership of Romania's Communist Party as General Secretary.

After a brief period of relatively moderate rule, Ceaușescu's regime became increasingly brutal and repressive. By some accounts, his rule was the most rigidly Stalinist in the Soviet bloc. He maintained controls over speech and the media that were very strict even by Soviet-bloc standards, and internal dissent was not tolerated. His secret police, the Securitate, was one of the most ubiquitous and brutal secret police forces in the world. In 1982, with the goal of paying off Romania's large foreign debt, Ceaușescu ordered the export of much of the country's agricultural and industrial production. The resulting extreme shortages of food, fuel, energy, medicines, and other basic necessities drastically lowered living standards and intensified unrest. Ceaușescu's regime was also marked by an extensive and ubiquitous cult of personality, nationalism, a continuing deterioration in foreign relations even with the Soviet Union, and nepotism.

Ceaușescu's regime collapsed after he ordered his security forces to fire on anti-government demonstrators in the city of Timișoara on 17 December 1989. The demonstrations spread to Bucharest and became known as the Romanian Revolution, which was the only violent removal of a Communist government in the course of the revolutions of 1989. Ceaușescu and his wife, Elena, fled the capital in a helicopter but were captured by the armed forces. On 25 December the couple were hastily tried and convicted by a special military tribunal on charges of genocide and sabotage of the Romanian economy in an approximately one-hour long court session. Ceaușescu and his wife were then shot by a firing squad.

Initially, Ceaușescu became a popular figure in Romania and also in the West, because of his independent foreign policy, challenging the authority of the Soviet Union. In the 1960s, he eased press censorship and ended Romania's active participation in the Warsaw Pact (though Romania formally remained a member). He not only refused to take part in the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, but actively and openly condemned that action in his 21 August 1968 speech. He even traveled to Prague a week before the invasion to offer moral support to his Czechoslovak counterpart, Alexander Dubček. Although the Soviet Union largely tolerated Ceaușescu's recalcitrance, his seeming independence from Moscow earned Romania a maverick status within the Eastern Bloc. Ceaușescu's main aim as leader was to make Romania a world power, and all of his economic, foreign and demographic policies were meant to achieve Ceaușescu's ultimate goal of turning Romania into one of the world's great powers. For the Conducător (the "Leader"), as Ceaușescu liked to call himself, "demography was destiny" and countries with rising populations were rising powers. During the following years Ceaușescu pursued an open policy towards the United States and Western Europe. Romania was the first Warsaw Pact country to recognize West Germany, the first to join the International Monetary Fund, and the first to receive a US President, Richard Nixon. A series of official visits to Western countries (including the US, France, the United Kingdom, and Spain) helped Ceaușescu to present himself as a reforming Communist, pursuing an independent foreign policy within the Soviet Bloc. Romania was the only country in the world to maintain normal diplomatic relations with both Israel and the PLO. In 1984 Romania was one of the few Communist countries to participate in the 1984 Summer Olympics when most of the East bloc's nations boycotted this event

The four floors that we visited consisted of a number of very large official meeting and greeting places and were opulent in their fittings but generally very sparse in decoration. There were very few paintings, almost no furniture, but the rooms were completed in Romanian marble and all the finishing work was done by Romanian workers. As such (as our excellent guide pointed out) the building deserves maintenance and reverence as a tribute to Romanian craftsmanship, if for no other reason). The only exception to the “All Romanian” rule was the mahogany doors in several rooms which were presented by a somewhat doubtful African leader.



Views from the Palace Balcony

Significance – for reasons that are not always in the best interests of the country or its people.

It was interesting to see this magnificent (if somewhat “bare”) tribute to a dictator of not that many years ago and was a stark reminder of how power can not only corrupt – but, in some cases, create monuments of great

Having said that, our guide was quick to point out that her parents (she was 30) had enjoyed a somewhat more stable and comfortable life under Communism than the one created after the fall of the USSR and the onset of Capitalism. Life had been simpler (in all facets) but predictable, with virtually everyone enjoying a living that was covered but perhaps somewhat more Spartan than what was to follow.

Next we visited a very pleasant village comprising buildings transported here from all parts of Romania (including Transylvania – “the land beyond the woods”). The park was nice to walk through on a beautiful warm day and it was interesting to see the different types of structure – with lots of wooden buildings, a number of thatched roofs and interesting pieces as much as two hundred years old.



The "Dimitrie Gusti" Village Museum in Bucharest is an open air museum located in Herastrau Park, a beautiful green oasis near the north part of town. Visitors can have a truly authentic experience here, as they will walk through the museum and feel like strolling through a traditional Romanian village. The museum manages to capture the originality, unity and diversity of an authentic Romanian village. 40 traditional homes, 3 churches and 165 household annexes can be found in the open air museum.

The museum visit was followed by an enormous lunch (five courses) and some local dancing, after which it was time to leave Bucharest to join our ship 50 miles away on the Danube River. But first we were taken on a tour of the city of Bucharest, which provided an interesting combination of stately buildings and monuments (in the grand European style) together with a few modern structures—and we saw surprisingly few Communist Era monstrosities.

Bucharest is the capital and largest city of Romania, as well as its cultural, industrial, and financial center. It is located in the southeast of the country, on the banks of the Dâmbovița River, less than 40 miles north of the Danube River and the Bulgarian border.

It became the capital of Romania in 1862 and is the center of Romanian media, culture, and art. Its architecture is a mix of historical, communist-era and modern. In the period between the two World Wars, the city's elegant architecture and the sophistication of its elite earned Bucharest the nickname of "Little Paris." Although buildings and districts in the historic city center were heavily damaged or destroyed by war, earthquakes, and above all Nicolae Ceaușescu's program of systematization, many survived. In recent years, the city has been experiencing an economic and cultural boom.

According to the 2011 census, 1,883,425 inhabitants live within the city limit, a decrease from the 2002 census. The urban area extends beyond the limits of Bucharest proper and has a population of about 1.9 million people and the larger metropolitan area of Bucharest would have a population of 2.27 million people. According to Eurostat, Bucharest has a larger urban zone of 2,183,091 residents. Bucharest is the sixth-largest city in the European Union by population within city limits, after London, Berlin, Madrid, Rome, and Paris.

Economically, Bucharest is the most prosperous city in Romania and is one of the main industrial centers and transportation hubs of Eastern Europe.



*The City of
Bucharest*

The city even has its own Arc de Triomphe, although it was surrounded by construction walls during our visit. A Wikipedia version is included to show it in all its splendor.



On leaving Bucharest, the drive to the River Danube – through flat farmland – took about 1 ½ hours and we arrived at the Viking Lif in the port of Giurgi soon after 5pm. This gave us just enough time to clean up and change before the 6:15 briefing about the Danube cruise and the welcome drink before dinner at 7. This was a very good meal and we retired about 9:30 after a very full and interesting day.

Our guide in Bucharest – a 30 year-old lady – was excellent and she gave us not only an overview of life in Romania today (a developing country now in the EU) but also compared it with the Communist regime that ended in 1990. Her perspective (and vicariously that of her parents) was interesting in that, while she seemed to embrace the new Capitalism, she was quick to point out that her parents were not so enamored with the change. Communism had provide them with a comfortable – albeit somewhat Spartan – livelihood, whereas Capitalism had brought a lot of unemployment and an equal amount of uncertainty. A modest “cradle to grave” life – or a potential (but not guaranteed) better life. The jury was still out! We had heard similar questions and concerns in Russia just four years ago and recent events there seem to underscore the continued need for evaluation and assessment.

Romania is a republic in Southeast Europe which borders the Black Sea, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Serbia and Moldova. It has an area of 92,043 sq miles and a temperate-continental climate. With 19.94 million inhabitants, the country is the seventh most populous member state of the European Union.

The River Danube, Europe's second longest river, rises in Germany and flows southeastwards for a distance of 2,857 km, coursing through ten countries before emptying in Romania's Danube Delta. The Carpathian Mountains, with their tallest peak Moldoveanu at 8,346 ft, cross Romania from the north to the southwest.

Modern Romania emerged within the territories of the ancient Roman province of Dacia, and was formed in 1859 through a personal union of the Danubian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia. The new state, officially named Romania since 1866, gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1877. At the end of World War I, Transylvania, Bukovina and Bessarabia united with the sovereign Kingdom of Romania. During World War II, Romania was an ally of Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union, fighting side by side with the Wehrmacht until 1944, when it then joined the Allied powers and faced occupation by the Red Army forces. Romania lost several territories, of which Northern Transylvania was regained after the war. Following the war, Romania became a socialist republic and member of the Warsaw Pact. After the 1989 Revolution, Romania began a transition back towards democracy and a capitalist market economy.

Following rapid economic growth in the early 2000s, Romania has an economy predominantly based on services, and is a producer and net exporter of machines and electric energy. It has been a member of NATO since 2004, and part of the European Union since 2007. A strong majority of the population identify themselves as Eastern Orthodox Christians and are native speakers of Romanian, a Romance language. With a rich cultural history, Romania has been the home of influential artists, musicians, inventors and sportspeople, and features a variety of tourist attractions.

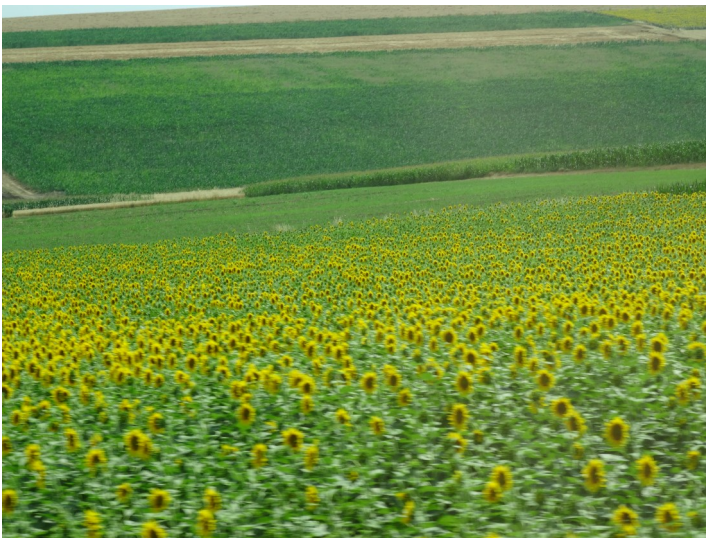
So, our very brief stay in Romania ended as we reached the Danube port of Rousse but we found Bucharest (the only city we visited) to be a very pleasant and interesting city of contrasts: the wide boulevards, huge elegant homes and tree-lined streets being reminiscent of Paris or Vienna, standing side-by-side (and in stark contrast) with the decaying concrete structures of the 45 post-war years of Communism. Absolutely fascinating and once again underscoring for us the joy of – indeed, need for – travel to other countries and cultures.

Friday July 1

We were up at 6:30 once again to get breakfast and be ready for the start of another day-long tour at 8:30. Late last evening we had left Giurgi in Romania and sailed a little upstream and docked on the other side at Rousse – now we were in Bulgaria. Obviously there wasn't much difference in the local landscape – still flat and very much farming land, although both towns on either side of the river had some port industrial activity. The weather hadn't changed either and we were in for another very hot and humid day with temperatures once again in the nineties.

From Rousse we headed through the town and went in a southerly direction towards the capital city of Sofia. This city, however, was probably still 200 Km away and on the other side of the Balkan mountain range so we were not going anywhere near that southeastern part of Bulgaria. Instead we were headed to the foothills of the Balkans to visit two small towns that were very close to one another. One was Veliko Tarnovo, the capital of the country for several hundred years both before and during the period of the Ottoman Empire occupation. The other was a hillside town called Arbanassi, famous for its Church of the Nativity.

The drive south was through rolling countryside with hills that became more pronounced as we approached the mountains but which still were almost exclusively farming communities with very few inhabitants housed in several small towns and villages. Apparently during the Communist regime, a number of factories were built and some larger towns were populated by former farmers but the end of the Soviet era brought an end to their existence as the products had been almost totally for Russia. Now the ugly Communist apartment blocks were dilapidated and in some cases abandoned as the population shifted once more. This time, the shift was largely out of the country and we were told that the overall population of the country has dropped significantly since 1990 and seems to be accelerating since Bulgaria joined the European Union in the past decade.



Crops in the farms alongside the road were wheat, corn and sunflower. The latter were planted in huge fields with row upon row of bright yellow heads facing the sun making a very pretty picture. The oil is widely used here and is a major export and we had never seen such large concentrations of this crop anywhere we have traveled. The 1 ½ hour drive was very pleasant and, as we said, became more attractive as the flatlands gave way to the mountain foothills near our destination.

Sunflower fields—a feature of Bulgaria (and the entire region, it seems) —and stork nests on the tops of telephone poles.

These, too, were seen a lot on our journey.



Before visiting the two major attractions we stopped at the very attractive town of **Veliko Tarnovo** where we were treated to a coffee and pastry break, followed shortly afterwards by a drink of Raki, a 40 proof liquor very similar to the Italian grappa.



Between the two drink stops was a visit to a 300 year old house built during the Turkish occupation and built in the style of a rich Ottoman nobleman. The main rooms were on the first floor with storage and probably animal shelter on the ground level. In its day it had been the height of luxury and even now it was easy to see how opulent it probably was.



Our first major attraction, however, was in the village of Arbanassi where we saw the **Church of the Nativity**, which had been built over 300 years ago during the Ottoman occupation. Obviously Christianity (Orthodox here) was not condoned by the Moslem rulers so the church is very plain on the outside and is very low so as not to



compete with the domed mosques. It looks much like a long barn. The inside, however, is very ornate and we were told that all the paintings (which cover every wall and ceiling) were original and, in most cases, over 300 years old. Although much smaller than many we had seen in Russia, the church decoration and the story it told (emphasizing the Nativity in this case) was much the same, including the very ornate iconostasis hiding the altar.



The local guide did an excellent job of pointing out the beautiful paintings and explaining the message presented in each and we left feeling that one could easily spend an hour or more simply admiring the works and the “Bible in Pictures”. We were not allowed to take pictures inside the church but below is a website photograph of the beautiful iconostasis.



Now it was time for lunch, which was just a short walk from the beautiful church. As yesterday, this was a multi-course meal accompanied for a time by a small but energetic local dance troupe.



After lunch we were driven just a short way back to the town of Veliko Tarnovo, where our stop was at an overlook that gave us good views of both the river valley and the mountain in front of us.



On top of this mountain were two points of interest; the first was the home of the last Communist leader of the country which boasted grand views over the valley and towards the Balkan mountains – as well as his personal heliport. As our guide said – “under Communism all were equal, but some were more equal than others”.

The other landmark was a small church perched high on the hilltop overlooking the town and which had been destroyed by the Ottomans but rebuilt in the late 20th century. This occurred during the Communist regime (who were not alto-



gether sympathetic to Christianity) and so, although the exterior was faithful replica of the original, the interior decoration celebrated more of the Bulgarian way of life than that of Christ.



A beautiful church in a beautiful setting with some unusual decoration inside



Our guide did almost everything except physically stop those who wanted to see the church by citing the steep climb, the many steps and – on this day in particular – the high heat and humidity. Nevertheless, five from our bus and a smattering of others decided to ignore her advice and made the climb.

It was indeed HOT and a somewhat difficult 25 minute climb but was worth the effort – if not so much for what we saw as for what we had accomplished!

The walk down was not a lot easier (but had some spectacular views) as the steps were high and the grade steep; but several of us made it and even found the short, but steep, walk back uphill into town to catch the bus, almost as challenging as our climb. Once back on the bus, however, we could relax (and beg forgiveness from those who had not been fully aware of our absence) and even sleep some of the 90 minute journey back to the ship.

The ship by now had moved a little further upstream to a port called Svistov (still in Bulgaria) and we sailed upstream shortly after our embarkation.

Tonight we had the obligatory lifeboat drill, after which Molly and I had a pre-dinner drink in the lounge before a very interesting dinner at a table with two young-ish gentlemen traveling together from England – although one was originally from Northern Ireland. It was a fascinating discussion covering many topics from world travel (of which they had done a lot) to the recent British vote to leave the EU. We closed the restaurant shortly before 10pm!



Saturday July 2

Today's excursion began at nine so we had a little extra time in bed before breakfast and departure. We drove a little over an hour south from Svistov, again in the direction of Sofia. Our destination was Belogradchik, a hill town at an elevation of about 2000 feet in the lower part of the Balkan Range (which reach an elevation of about 6000 feet further south).



A beautiful drive south in Bulgaria, with our destination in the distant foothills

Belogradchik is the site of a Medieval fortress, built on the remains of earlier forts including those built by the Romans and later the Ottomans, and takes advantage of some striking natural rock formations. These rocks – a little like a smaller version of many in Utah – are thought to have been sediment left by a retreating sea and later “carved” by wind and rain erosion. Most of the formations can (with a little imagination) be seen as figures of



Belogradchik

animals and people and all seem to have been given a name best describing the features.



“The Lady with the Backpack”!!

The sediment contains a large amount of iron oxide so the rocks now appear almost red in color in the right light. Today the sun was very bright again so it was difficult to see much coloration and mostly the formations appeared as very dark shadows against the bright sky.

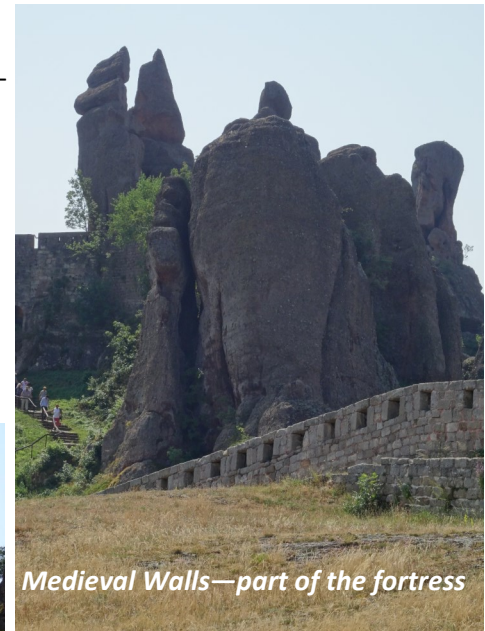
Bulgaria, officially the Republic of Bulgaria, is a country in southeastern Europe. It is bordered by Romania to the north, Serbia and Macedonia to the west, Greece and Turkey to the south, and the Black Sea to the east. With a territory of 42,855 sq miles, Bulgaria is Europe's 16th-largest country. Organised prehistoric cultures began developing on current Bulgarian lands during the Neolithic period. Its ancient history saw the presence of the Thracians, Greeks and Romans. The emergence of a unified Bulgarian state dates back to the establishment of the First Bulgarian Empire in 681 AD, which dominated most of the Balkans and functioned as a cultural hub for Slavs during the Middle Ages. With the downfall of the Second Bulgarian Empire in 1396, its territories came under Ottoman rule for nearly five centuries. The Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78 led to the formation of the Third Bulgarian State. The following years saw several conflicts with its neighbors, which prompted Bulgaria to align with Germany in both world wars. In 1946 it became a one-party socialist state as part of the Soviet-led Eastern Bloc. In December 1989 the ruling Communist Party allowed multi-party elections, which subsequently led to Bulgaria's transition into a democracy and a market-based economy. Bulgaria's population of 7.4 million people is predominantly urbanized and mainly concentrated in the administrative centers of its 28 provinces. Most commercial and cultural activities are centered on the capital and largest city, Sofia. The strongest sectors of the economy are heavy industry, power engineering, and agriculture, all of which rely on local natural resources. The country's current political structure dates to the adoption of a democratic constitution in 1991. Bulgaria is a unitary parliamentary republic with a high degree of political, administrative, and economic centralization. It is a member of the European Union, NATO, and the Council of Europe; a founding state of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE); and has taken a seat at the UN Security Council three times.

There are still quite extensive stretches of the Medieval wall built between the natural rocks and it is easy to see how the area has been a well-defended place for so many centuries. Even without the natural and man-made fortifications, the “castle” sits on a small but steep hillside rising from the modern-day town.



Inside the first area

We were escorted through two entrance gates of the fortress as far as the second courtyard on a relatively flat and easy path to walk.



Medieval Walls—part of the fortress



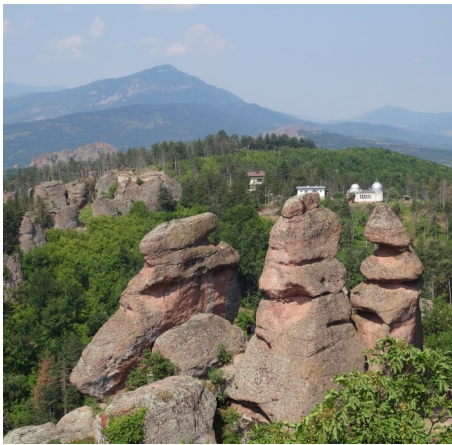
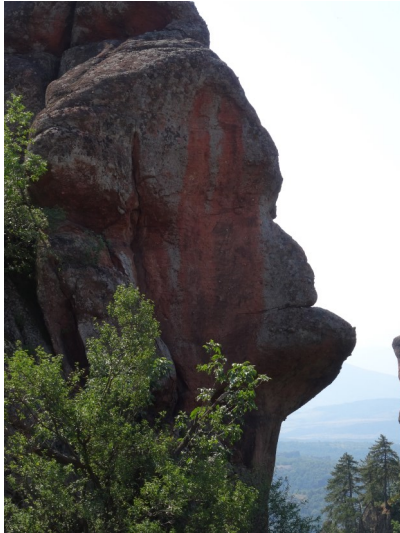
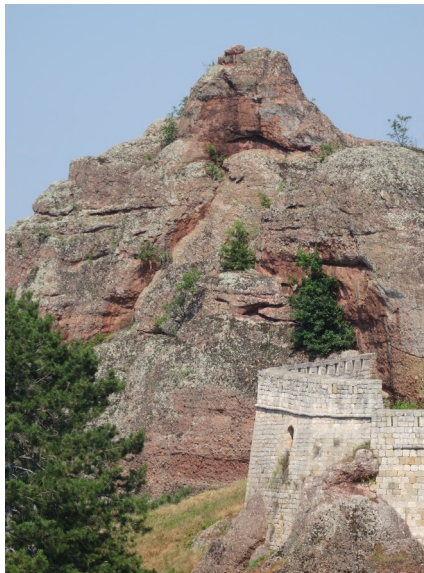
However, we were then told that we could, if we chose, take the very steep and much more difficult stepped pathway to the highest point of the fort from where there were magnificent 360 degree views of this very attractive and heavily forested countryside. A surprisingly



large percentage of the Viking tour group actually made the hike and indeed the view from the top was well worth the effort. This area on the edge of the Balkan mountains – the range that divides the country in two – is quite a contrast to the Danube plain which we had seen for the last two days. We were now less than 200 Km from Sofia and only 25 Km from the border with Serbia.



Panoramic View of the Fortress



The Belogradchik Fortress is an ancient fortress located on the north slopes of the Balkan Mountains, close to the northwestern Bulgarian town of Belogradchik and is the town's primary cultural and historical tourist attraction. It is one of the best-preserved strongholds in Bulgaria and a cultural monument of national importance. The fortress's walls are over 2 meters thick in the foundation and reaching up to 12 m in height. Three separate fortified yards exist that are connected with each other through gates. The fortress has a total area of 10,210 square meters. The Belogradchik Fortress was reconstructed to later become a proclaimed cultural monument.





We spent a little over an hour in the fortress before driving back to the ship in time for a late lunch, after which our afternoon was free. I went for a two mile walk into the town of Vidin, despite having seen most of it from the bus as we returned from our excursion. It was extremely hot and the town was almost deserted so my main purpose was to get a little exercise before returning to the ship – for a nap!



Vidin



Around 5pm the skies darkened considerably and we were treated to a very heavy rain with lots of thunder and lightning. Molly had spent a little time sitting on the small covered deck outside our room but eventually was forced inside by the torrential rain. However, by now it was approaching cocktail hour and then dinner to end another day of interesting sightseeing. Tomorrow we leave Bulgaria and enter Serbia, so we will end this three day visit with a few thoughts on the two countries. (Inset, opposite page).

Sunday July 3

Today was to be a day of cruising on the river with no shore excursions so we started a little later than usual with breakfast around 8am. It was a beautiful sunny day and the temperature and humidity seemed to have moderated some after the thunderstorm late in the day yesterday.

During breakfast we were parked at the lower end of a two rise lock (we had been through a similar lock during

the night) and we started the 72 meter rise right after we had finished our meal. Consequently, most of the guests were on the sun deck to watch the operation of the lock gates and experience the magic of being lifted 200 feet upstream.



Romania seems to have come out of the depression caused by the end of the Communist regime a little more rapidly than Bulgaria, although both countries must still be described as "Developing" despite many centuries of proud history and culture. Both had earlier spent hundreds of years under Ottoman rule but both had periods of independence and glory. Indeed, Romania (with present day Moldova and parts of other neighboring countries) had been perhaps the largest country in Eastern Europe for a very long time and Bulgaria claims to be the oldest country in the region and has had the same name since Roman times.

Both peoples it seems have mixed emotions about the collapse of the Communist regime and the ties to the old Soviet Union. Neither was part of the USSR but each was a satellite very much dependent on the larger entity. Indeed, Russian supported industry was established and caused a major shift from an agricultural and very rural society to one with much larger towns and workers to support the factories built here. However, when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989, the goods made in Bulgaria and Romania lost their captive customer and, almost overnight, the factories closed and were abandoned. Many still stand as concrete reminders of another age even today.

Consequently, a large percentage of the population was out of work as Russia presumably looked inward for its provisions and the satellite factories in Romania and Bulgaria were apparently too inefficient to compete with others in Europe. Returning to a farming community after 45 years in cities was also difficult despite having the land returned; only recently have large farming companies brought back what was once the bread basket of Eastern Europe.

Bulgaria seems to have suffered more than Romania (which has, for example, a large car manufacturing industry) but both have lost significant numbers of their population to other parts of Europe, particularly since joining the European Union less than ten years ago. Most towns and cities it seems have lost as much as 10 or 20 percent of their population and many of their youth now go away to university and never return. It remains to be seen what will happen with continuing stronger ties to the West and the European Union in particular.

Once through the locks we were on a particularly beautiful stretch of the Danube called the Iron Gate area. On both sides (now Romania and Serbia) the land rose very steeply, with limestone cliffs, forested areas and higher mountains beyond providing a spectacular scene to both east and west. There were perhaps more small towns and villages on the Romanian (right) side but otherwise the two countries appeared similar and equally impressive.



We passed a number of points of interest as we sailed and a commentary was provided for those outside on the sun deck and others in the lounge. It was not broadcast to the cabins so I suppose some passengers took advantage of the quiet and watched the scenery drifting by from their balconies.

Trajan's Bridge or Bridge of Apollodorus over the Danube was a Roman segmental arch bridge, the first bridge to be built over the lower Danube. Though it was only functional for a few decades, for more than 1,000 years it was the longest arch bridge in both total and span length. The bridge was constructed in 105 AD by instruction of Emperor Trajan by Greek architect Apollodorus of Damascus for the deployment of Roman troops during the conquest of Dacia.



We passed an old Roman tablet which marked the way that the Empire had spread east across the river – although in Roman times the river at this point was undoubtedly

much narrower since we were now just above the locks and sailing essentially in a man-made lake. Even today, however, the river narrowed between sheer cliffs to what we were told was its narrowest (for this day) at 450 feet.



Perhaps the main attraction on this stretch was a huge face carved into the rock which had been commissioned and presented to the world in the 1950s. It was the face of a Roman era god and we were told that it was larger than those on Mount Rushmore (although, I think, not as well carved) and only slightly smaller in overall height than the Statue of Liberty. There were, in addition to a number of cruise ships like ours, dozens of smaller boats with tourists and locals getting a close up view of this amazing sculpture.



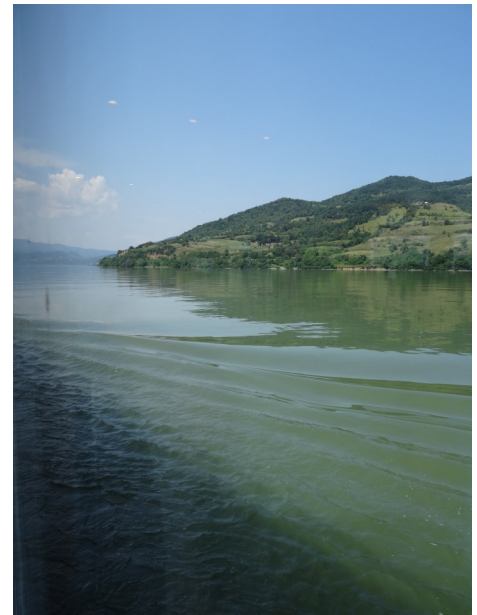
Nearby was a small monastery (**Mraconia Monastery**) built right at the river edge which had been built – so legend had it – in response to a vision of a priest who had wanted to cross the river at this point. After a number of failed attempts, he had successfully walked through relatively shallow water, following the “instructions” to build this church and gain the right of passage – quite literally, apparently. Following flooding of the monastery as dams were built, the monastery was reconstructed in 1968.



The rest of the day we sailed through this same type of scenery under almost clear skies so the whole experience made a beautiful contrast to the busy days of touring that we had had since arriving in Eastern Europe.



Cruising the Iron Gates



The pleasant day of sailing also gave me the opportunity for a four-mile walk (fifty laps!) on the sun deck walking track. Finally, of course, we had another good lunch and dinner on board as we sailed towards Belgrade. Interestingly, Serbians remain very proud of Marshall Tito and the former Yugoslavia, to the point that a large crest bearing Tito's name was clearly visible on our left side shortly after we had left Bulgaria to the south.

In the evening we listened to a very interesting talk by the Cruise Director about his early life growing up in Communist Romania. It was a somewhat sobering account of a very difficult time so it was good to relax afterwards and listen (and dance) to the music of Abba.