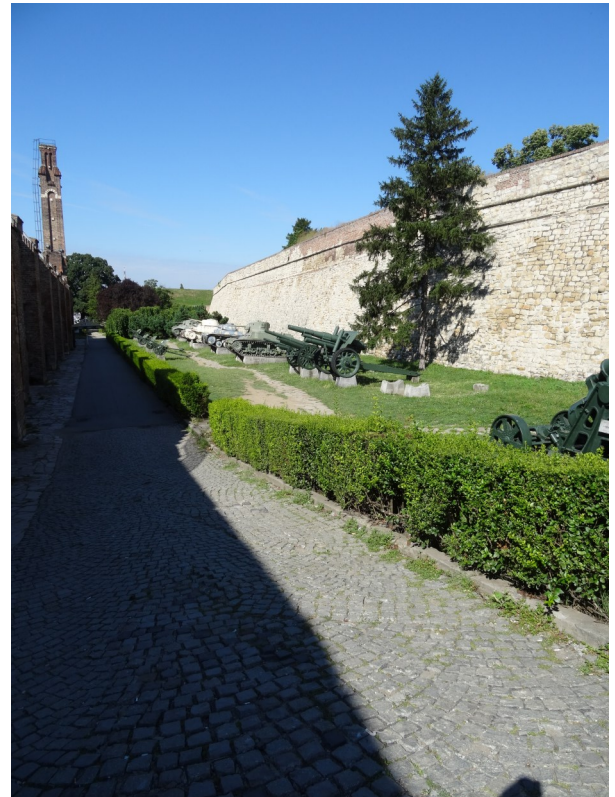


Monday July 4

Today was a full day in Belgrade, Serbia and the weather was very cooperative – sunny, not too hot and a cooling breeze.

We started with a four hour tour of the city during which we spent about 45 minutes in the fortress high above the Danube and Sava Rivers. This has existed for centuries and has been overtaken and re-captured dozens (maybe hundreds) of times over the years and is therefore a symbol for not only the city but the entire country. Our guide referred to Serbia as the crossroads of Europe and it is not difficult to see why this particular city was key with its strategic location and impressive position on the hillside.



Belgrade Fortress and views over the Sava and Danube Rivers

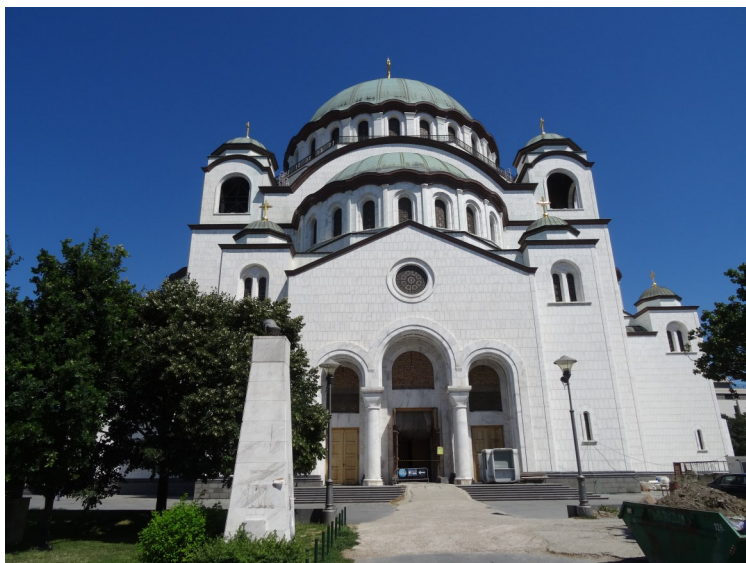
Belgrade Fortress consists of the old citadel (Upper and Lower Town) and Kalemegdan Park (Large and Little Kalemegdan) on the confluence of the River Sava and Danube, in an urban area of modern Belgrade, the capital of Serbia. Belgrade Fortress was declared a Monument of Culture of Exceptional Importance in 1979, and is protected by the Republic of Serbia. Belgrade Fortress is the core and the oldest section of the urban area of Belgrade. For centuries the city population was concentrated only within the walls of the fortress, and thus the history of the fortress, until most recent times, equals the history of Belgrade itself. The city has been in existence since 300BC and has been part of the Roman, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires, to name but three periods of its long and varied history.



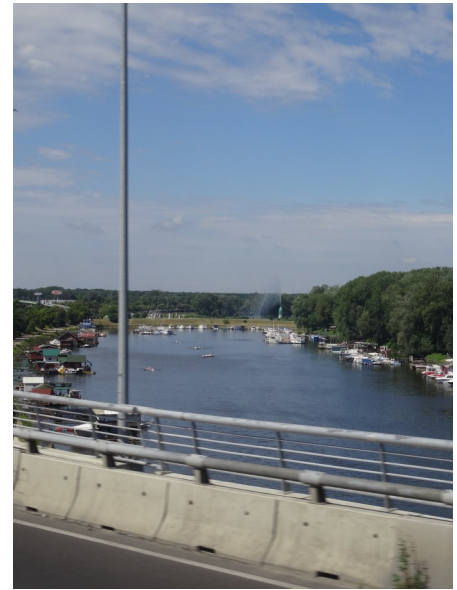
The Statue of Victory



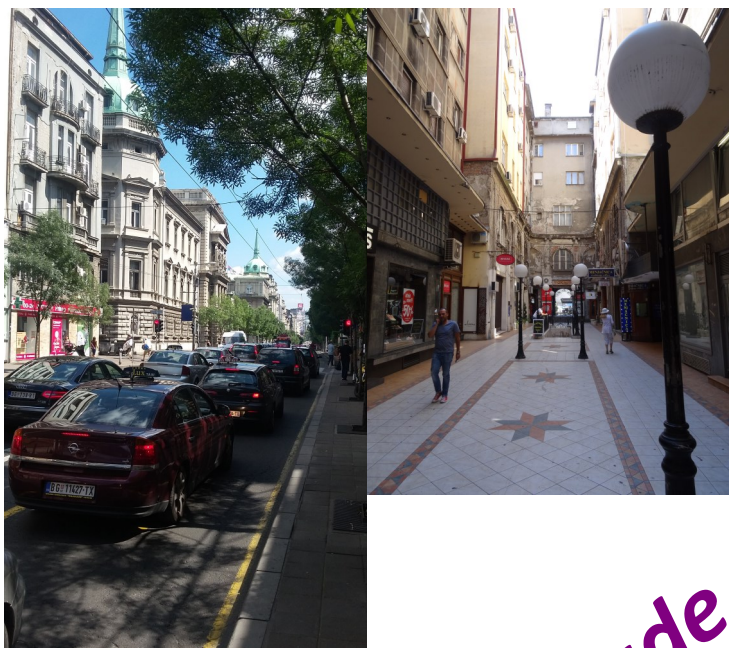
We also visited St Sasa Cathedral – a work in progress for almost a century but billed as the second largest Orthodox cathedral in the world. The outside looks essentially complete but the inside is still to be finished and decorated, so services are held here only very infrequently. It will have room for 12,000 worshippers when finished.



We spent time in the central part of town and thought it was perhaps the most impressive of the cities we have visited so far on this cruise. It has many wide boulevards, lots of green (38% we were told) and some buildings that would fit well in Vienna or Paris. It had a an air of prosperity about it, although it too (as with those in Bulgaria and Romania) is still re-building following the Communist era (although it was never a Soviet state) and, in particular, from the Balkans war of the 1990s, which led to the ultimate breakup of Yugoslavia. However, that separation does not seem to have been widely accepted by Serbians who still feel nostalgic for the Tito days.



In the afternoon I walked back into town and strolled along a beautiful pedestrian walkway and enjoyed the sunshine and the sights – not least of which was one of the highest concentrations of beautiful young women that I have ever seen!



Belgrade



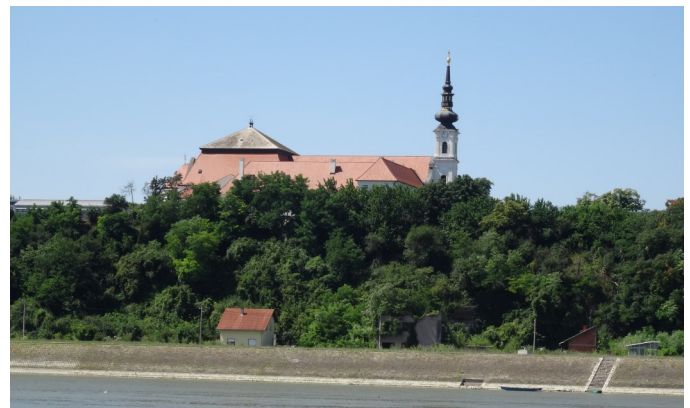
In the early evening we listened to a talk by a local professor about the history of Croatia and learned something of the events of the past 1000+ years that (by his reckoning) were ultimately responsible for the war between Croatia and Serbia – and the ultimate breakup of Yugoslavia – in the 1990s. After dinner we watched a very good local dance troupe and then went to the sun deck as we sailed from Belgrade and back north on the Danube.





Tuesday July 5

We had a morning of sailing today so we were able to relax and walk on board until lunchtime. After docking in Vukovar, Croatia we took a bus through the town – which had suffered very badly in the war and is now much less important than it had been in its prior history. This was the first place attacked by the Serbs and there remains here a water tower proudly flying the Croatian flag which was placed there by a young local boy as a sign of resistance when the fighting started.



Vukovar, Croatia

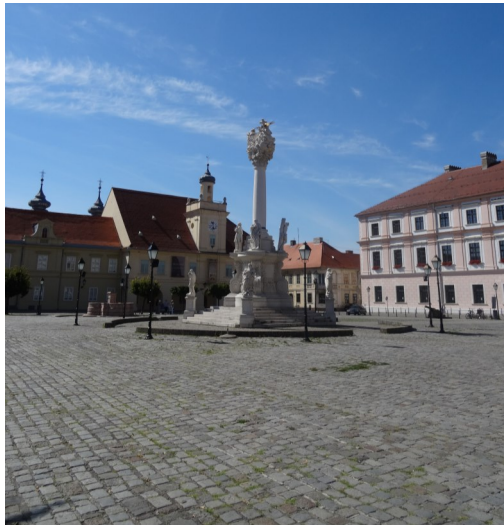
On the drive from Vukovar to Osijek - a much larger city and one that seems to have recovered a little more from the war – we learned the Croatian side of the story from our guide who was as passionate as those we had listened to in Serbia. All the talks, however, have attempted to be impartial and not to show continuing animosity to the neighbors but it is clear that distrust still exists on both sides. What is equally clear – at least from those who remember – is that Yugoslavia provides generally good memories of happier and more stable times.

We also stopped along the way in a small village that had been almost completely destroyed in the war and from which residents had been evacuated or forcedly removed. We went in small groups of about eight to visit a home. The lady of the house for our group was about 60 years old and spoke excellent English. She and her young children had been evacuated to Hungary where they spent about seven years before being allowed to return home – or to what was left of their home. They have since completely rebuilt the house and furnished it much as it had been in 1990. It is now a beautiful home with a fantastic garden and she now runs a small B&B there.



We were given two samples of cakes and a choice of two liquors, as well as white wine or juice – all made by our hostess. Four of us also had a Turkish coffee. It was a very interesting – and quite moving – forty five minute visit.

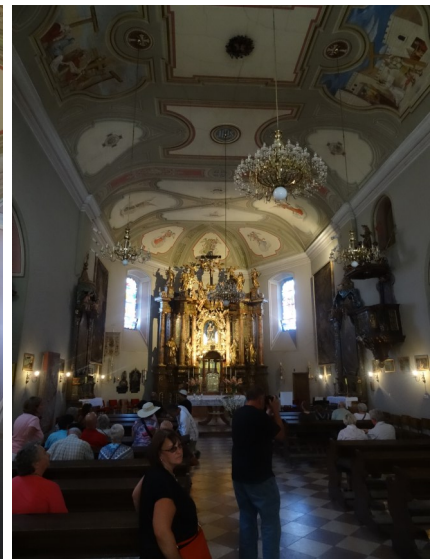
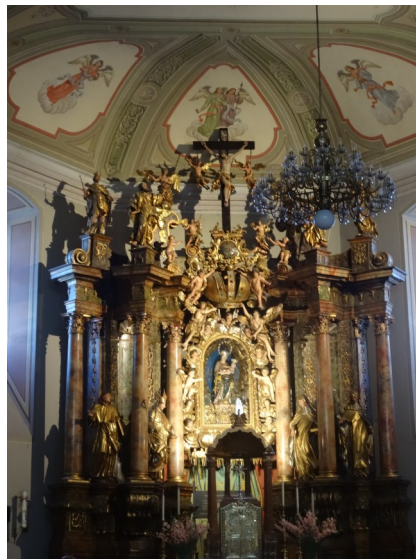
In Osijek, we spent about an hour in and around the old fortress. As with Belgrade, Osijek sits in a strategically important position above the River Drava and has seen many attempts to be overtaken through the centuries. In fact, not only was it part of the Ottoman Empire for a long time but was part of the Hapsburg and Austro-Hungarian Empires. Many of the buildings in the city are reminiscent of those in Budapest and Vienna.



*The main square of
Osijek*



We also visited the Church of St Joseph and not only did we see the interior of a beautiful facility but we were treated to a short concert by a 20 year old student (Osijek has a large university) who had a beautiful voice and accompanied herself on the piano.



The town (or the part we visited) didn't appear to be very big (although we were told it has 100,000 inhabitants) and was very quiet, but I got the impression that it would be worthy of more than our one hour stay.

Back on board we were given our disembarkation instructions (for Thursday) and then had dinner which tonight was followed by a Broadway Musical quiz. Our team had the second highest score – but no prize! This ended our very brief visit to two of the countries of the former Yugoslavia (inseparable it seems from Marshall Tito), during which we learned a little of the recent conflict—and once again felt a need to return at some future time.

Yugoslavia (Bosnian, Croatian, Slovene) was a country in Southeast Europe during most of the 20th century. It came into existence after World War I in 1918 under the name of the **Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes** by the merger of the provisional State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs (itself formed from territories of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire) with the formerly independent Kingdom of Serbia. The Serbian royal House of Karađorđević became the Yugoslav royal dynasty. Yugoslavia gained international recognition on 13 July 1922 at the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris. The country was named after the South Slavic peoples and constituted their first union, following centuries in which the territories had been part of the Ottoman Empire and Austria-Hungary.

Renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia on 3 October 1929, it was invaded by the Axis powers on 6 April 1941. In 1943, a Democratic Federal Yugoslavia was proclaimed by the Partisan resistance. In 1944, the king recognized it as the legitimate government, but in November 1945 the monarchy was abolished. Yugoslavia was renamed the Federal Peoples' Republic

of Yugoslavia in 1946, when a communist government was established. It acquired the territories of Istria, Rijeka, and Zadar from Italy. Partisan leader Josip Broz Tito ruled the country as president until his death in 1980. In 1963, the country was renamed again as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

The constituent six socialist republics that made up the country were the SR Bosnia and Herzegovina, SR Croatia, SR Macedonia, SR Montenegro, SR Slovenia, and SR Serbia. Serbia contained two Socialist Autonomous Provinces, Vojvodina and Kosovo, which after 1974 were largely equal to the other members of the federation. After an economic and political crisis in the 1980s and the rise of nationalism, Yugoslavia broke up along its republics' borders, at first into five countries, leading to the Yugoslav Wars.

After the breakup, the republics of Serbia and Montenegro formed a reduced federation, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which aspired to the status of sole legal successor to Yugoslavia, but those claims were opposed by the other former republics. Eventually, Serbia and Montenegro accepted the opinion of the Badinter Arbitration Committee about shared succession. Serbia and Montenegro themselves broke up in 2006 and became independent states, while Kosovo proclaimed independence in 2008.

Josip Broz Tito was a Yugoslav revolutionary and statesman, serving in various roles from 1943 until his death in 1980. During World War II he was the leader of the Partisans, often regarded as the most effective resistance movement in occupied Europe. While his presidency has been criticized as authoritarian, and concerns about the repression of political opponents have been raised, Tito was seen by most as a benevolent dictator due to his economic and diplomatic policies. He was a popular public figure both in Yugoslavia and abroad. Viewed as a unifying symbol, his internal policies maintained the peaceful coexistence of the nations of the Yugoslav federation.

After the war, he was the Prime Minister (1944–63), President (later President for Life) (1953–80) of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. From 1943 to his death in 1980, he held the rank of Marshal of Yugoslavia, serving as the supreme commander of the Yugoslav military, the Yugoslav People's Army. With a highly favorable reputation abroad in both Cold War blocs, Josip Broz Tito received some 98 foreign decorations, including the Legion of Honor and the Order of the Bath.

Josip Broz was born to a Croat father and Slovene mother in the village of Kumrovec, Croatia. Drafted into military service, he distinguished himself, becoming the youngest sergeant major in the Austro-Hungarian Army of that time. After being seriously wounded and captured by the Imperial Russians during World War I, Josip was sent to a work camp in the Ural Mountains. He participated in the October Revolution, and later joined a Red Guard unit in Omsk. Upon his return home, Broz found himself in the newly established Kingdom of Yugoslavia, where he joined the Communist Party of Yugoslavia.

Tito was the chief architect of the second Yugoslavia, a socialist federation that lasted from 1943 to 1991–92. Despite being one of the founders of Cominform (the International Communist Movement), soon he became the first Cominform member to defy Soviet hegemony and the only one to manage to leave Cominform and begin with its own socialist program. Tito was a backer of independent roads to socialism (sometimes referred to as "national communism"). In 1951 he implemented a self-management system that differentiated Yugoslavia from other socialist countries. A turn towards a model of market socialism brought economic expansion in the 1950s and 1960s and a decline during the 1970s. His internal policies included the suppression of nationalist sentiment and the promotion of the "brotherhood and unity" of the six Yugoslav nations. After Tito's death in 1980, tensions between the Yugoslav republics emerged and in 1991 the country disintegrated into a series of wars, inter-ethnic conflict and unrest that lasted the rest of the decade, and which continue to impact many of the former Yugoslav republics. He remains a controversial figure in the Balkans.

Wednesday July 6

We were awakened just before 6:30 (we had been warned) as we had just entered Hungary and, it being a Schengen country, we had to present our passports to the local authorities. It was a very quick and painless procedure. Once up we decided to stay up so I got in my walk before breakfast. At 10:30 we were invited to the Captain's cocktail reception (yes, 10:30AM) as former passengers on Viking. Lunch was at noon and we started our shore excursion at 1:30.

We were docked in the Hungarian town of Kalocsa which is the center of the paprika growing area of the country and one of the oldest towns in Hungary. We drove first through the edge of town to the old part where we walked a short distance to the cathedral – another dedicated to St Joseph. The church was quite spectacular in its own right but the highlight was a short organ recital, which was excellent.



The Cathedral of St Joseph



We were then driven another 20 minutes or so to see the Horseman of Puszta where we saw a very interesting show of horsemanship in a large arena and which was very reminiscent of Cossack horse shows we have seen in the past. This is perhaps not surprising as many of the Hungarians originally came from the east and specifically in this case from Mongolia.



The show presented horsemanship on one to as many as ten horses and was not only spectacular in the riding sense but displayed many of the facets of horse training that are unique to the area and particularly useful in times of battle.



The 45 minute show was followed by a bread and dripping (lard) snack with the obligatory shots of local brandy. On a beautiful sunny afternoon in the rural country side it is difficult to imagine a nicer way to start our three days in Hungary – and certainly provided a contrast to the city sights we will have in Budapest starting tomorrow.

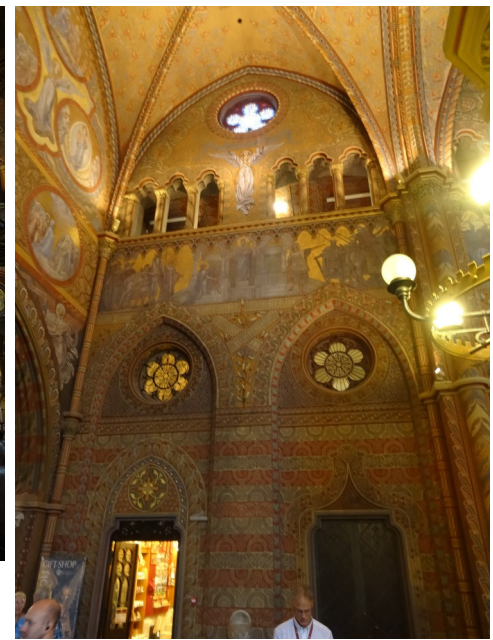
Tonight was our last night on the ship and, as usual, Viking did themselves proud by providing a cocktail hour, a great final dinner and a Hungarian show to complete the evening. I suspect most passengers, including us, we were not ready to leave and we envied those staying with the Viking Lif all the way to Amsterdam.

Thursday July 7

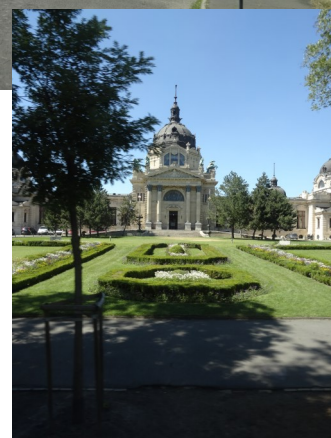
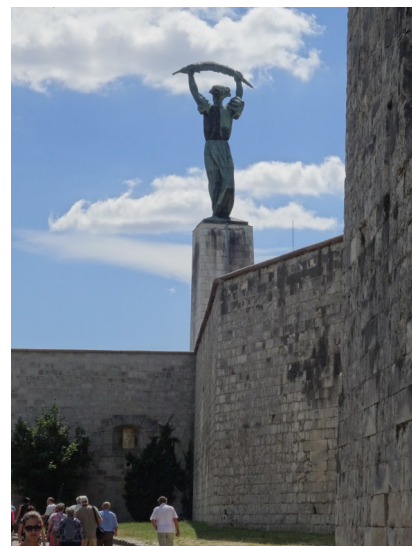
When we woke up at 7 today we were already docked in Budapest. We had our final breakfast on board and then left on a six hour city tour. This included the castle area on the Buda side of the Danube as well as the central downtown area in Pest. We saw the magnificent St Matthias cathedral (actually next door to our hotel), the citadel and had some fantastic views over the entire city from the hilly Buda area.



Buda—and the view across to Pest



We then crossed one of the seven bridges connecting Buda and Pest (all relatively new or reconstructed as each was bombed as the Germans left the city in 1945) and spent 1 1/2 hours in the huge indoor market where we also had lunch. We were driven to Heroes Square and past the iconic Parliament Buildings along the riverside.



*Beautiful
Budapest*

At the end of the tour we were taken to the Hilton hotel where we are to stay two nights. Our tour is officially complete now and we are essentially on our own for the time in Budapest and then in Prague.

Tonight we walked just a few minutes from the hotel to a local restaurant where we had a very good meal sitting outside on a very pleasant evening. Actually, by the time we were walking back it was beginning to feel a little chilly with the breeze. By now, of course, it was dark and the view from our room had changed to one of floodlit buildings and illuminated bridges. We certainly couldn't have asked for a better picture – night or day.



The history of Budapest began with Aquincum, originally a Celtic settlement that became the Roman capital of Lower Pannonia. Hungarians arrived in the territory in the 9th century. Their first settlement was pillaged by the Mongols in 1241–42. The re-established town became one of the centers of Renaissance humanist culture by the 15th century. Following the Battle of Mohács and nearly 150 years of Ottoman rule, the region entered a new age of prosperity in the 18th and 19th centuries, and Budapest became a global city after its unification in 1873. It also became the second capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a great power that dissolved in 1918, following World War I. Budapest was the focal point of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, the Hungarian Republic of Councils in 1919, the Battle of Budapest in 1945, and the Revolution of 1956. Cited as one of the most beautiful cities in Europe, Budapest's extensive World Heritage Site includes the banks of the Danube, the Buda Castle Quarter, Andrásy Avenue, Heroes' Square and the Millennium Underground Railway, the second-oldest metro line in the world. It has around 80 geothermal springs, the world's largest thermal water cave system, second largest synagogue, and third largest Parliament building. The city attracts about 4.4 million tourists a year, making it the 25th most popular city in the world, and the 6th in Europe.

One interesting question about this beautiful city and its many wonderful buildings was answered today by our guide on the organized tour earlier. Why would a city of two million in a country of no more than ten million have such a vast number of churches, castles, palaces, official buildings and enormous squares and monuments? The answer is partly because it was once part of the very powerful Austro-Hungarian Empire but equally because the country has shrunk in size (by about 2/3 and in population by a half) due to recent wars and political changes

that have occurred throughout Europe. Hungary used to comprise the land she owns today but also quite large parts of what are now neighboring independent countries so its overall power has diminished significantly but (fortunately for tourists and locals alike) its architecture remains.

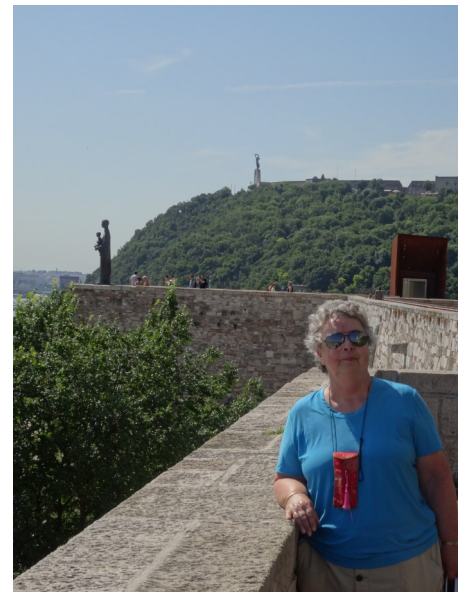
Friday July 8

We had breakfast in the hotel and then we did a walking tour on our own for the next four hours. It was yet another beautiful day and, at least before noon, was not too hot.

We decided on a tour of the Castle area of Buda, not only because of its interest but because we were right in the heart of it where we were staying. We literally walked out of the hotel and began the tour. Right outside our hotel, for example, was the massive cathedral we had visited yesterday (St Matthias) and the Fisherman's Bastion. The latter is a 19th century monument to the fishermen of Buda who were also part of its army defending this area above the river, and it is a major tourist attraction due to the fantastic views it affords of the city of Budapest and the River Danube.



The castle (which has existed here since medieval times in one form or another and probably sits on even earlier fortresses) has been built and re-built five times over the centuries,



the latest time being after World War II. We have been told at almost every stop on the eight day river cruise that the city or state we were visiting was "the center of Europe" or "the cross-roads of the World". Obviously each could put forward a plausible argument for its claim and of course the River Danube played a large part in whatever title might be chosen. However,

Hungary – and specifically Budapest – can and does make similar claims which are supported by the number of times it has been attacked and defended right up to very recent times under Soviet rule.



We walked all the way around the grounds of the vast fortress (now primarily museums) on the steep hillside and once again had magnificent views in all directions. Equally interesting, however, were the nearby streets and smaller buildings and the history that they include. Thanks to a good guide book, we were able to not only admire the facades but understand a little of the reason for their existence and some of the culture and politics of the area. For example, one street here had been the Jewish ghetto but is now a rather exclusive residential area.





Our walk covered a little over four miles and took us about four hours to complete; not exactly an Olympic pace but nevertheless a very interesting and beautiful area to visit. We had a coffee at a local street café in the middle of the afternoon and completed our stay in Budapest with another very good dinner just a few minutes' walk from the hotel.



Farewell to Budapest

Saturday July 9

We were up before eight and had breakfast in the hotel which then gave me time for a forty minute walk before leaving. We took a short taxi ride to the train station and left Budapest at 11:25 on a 6 ½ hour ride to Prague. The time went by quickly as we had a light meal in the buffet car and watched the countryside go by – Hungary, Slovakia and finally the Czech Republic.

The train arrived on time in Prague and after a bit of a hassle getting a taxi we checked in at the Courtyard hotel around 7pm. We had a quick wash and change and then set out to find a place for dinner. The hotel receptionist had recommended two local Czech restaurants in the area but neither appealed so we walked almost a mile to a very nice Italian restaurant that I had read about online. We had an excellent meal sitting outside again on a very pleasant evening. We then tackled the Metro system – only a couple of stops to the station closest to our hotel – and found it to be rather easy. This is perhaps as well as our hotel is over a mile from the main part of the city.

Prague is the capital and largest city of the Czech Republic. It is the 15th largest city in the European Union. It is also the historical capital of Bohemia. Situated in the north-west of the country on the Vltava River, the city is home to about 1.26 million people, while its larger urban zone is estimated to have a population of nearly 2 million.

Prague has been a political, cultural, and economic center of central Europe with waxing and waning fortunes during its 1,100-year existence. Founded during the Romanesque and flourishing by the Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque eras, Prague was not only the capital of the Czech state, but also the capital of the Holy Roman Empire. It was an important city to the Habsburg Monarchy and its Austro-Hungarian Empire and after World War I became the capital of Czechoslovakia. The city played major roles in the Bohemian and Protestant Reformation, the Thirty Years' War, and in 20th-century history, during both World Wars and the post-war Communist era.

Prague is home to a number of famous cultural attractions, many of which survived the violence and destruction of 20th-century Europe. Main attractions include the Prague Castle, the Charles Bridge, Old Town Square with the Prague astronomical clock, the Jewish Quarter, Petřín hill and Vyšehrad. Since 1992, the extensive historic center of Prague has been included in the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites.

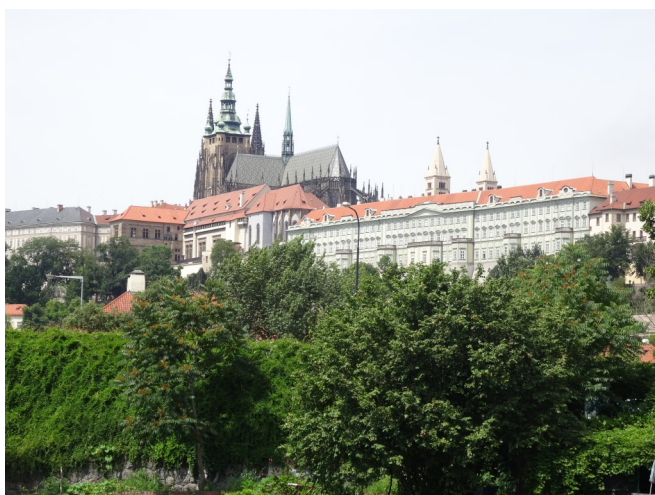
Prague is the fifth most visited European city after London, Paris, Istanbul and Rome. Prague's low cost of living makes it a popular destination for expats relocating to Europe.

Sunday July 10

We wanted to use the Hop On/Hop Off bus today but first had to get downtown so we used the metro once again. After emerging to daylight we were essentially in Wenceslas Square which we thought was near the bus line and is also a major tourist hub. We found a Starbucks (!) for breakfast and then bought our bus tickets.



There are three routes that the bus follows and we chose the most central one first. This took us across the River Vltava (Moldau) and up to the castle area. We planned to spend a longer time here tomorrow so we continued back to the Old Town and, after another coffee break, we took the included one hour river cruise. This gave us a good overall view of both sides of the river and it was very pleasant sitting on the open top deck – with a beer in hand!

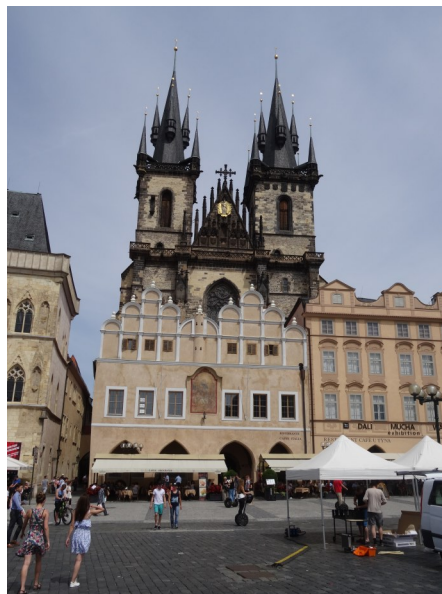


After the boat trip we walked into Old Town and found a very nice sidewalk café for lunch and an equally nice place for people watching. And, on a sunny and warm Sunday afternoon, there were lots of people to watch – local families and tourists from all over the world.



We finished our sightseeing day by getting another bus route which dropped us off about a ten minute walk from the hotel. Prague was quickly occupied by the Nazis at the very beginning of World War II and consequently suffered very little bombing, except towards the very end. Consequently it is perhaps the only major European city that has maintained the vast majority of its buildings that had been built over its 1000 year history. And what an impressive collection of architecture it is; from the massive

fortress to the “100 spires”, to the cathedrals and synagogues and to the marvelous entertainment and civic buildings. Every street contains many buildings that would be a major tourist attraction almost anywhere else and it is impossible not to get a good picture no matter where a camera is pointed. Despite 40 years of Soviet occupation and the occasional concrete monstrosity from that era, the city is stunningly beautiful. It seems even more beautiful now on our third visit as the dirt and grime of the Communist era has mostly been removed and most buildings are now clean and apparently freshly painted and decorated.



Although there are many cities that can boast their beauty, particularly in Europe, if one wanted to see architecture at its finest and most prolific, Prague must surely be the one city to visit. And today, after the end of Communism and the peaceful breakup between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Prague seems to be very prosperous. It is a wonderful city and we look forward to another day here tomorrow and, hopefully, a return visit someday.

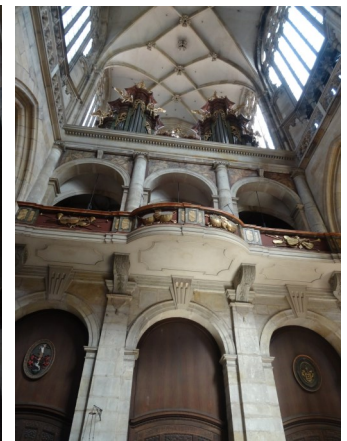
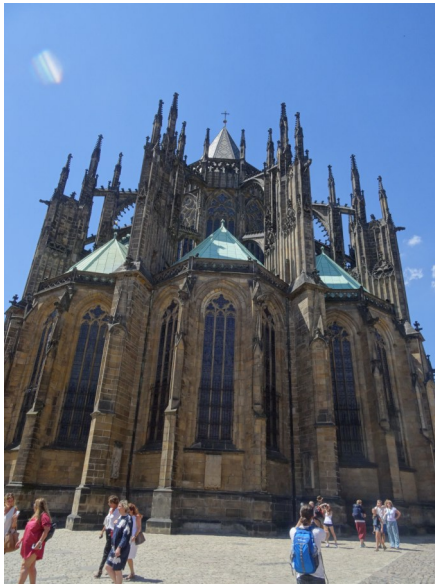
Tonight we made reservations at what is supposed to be one of the best restaurants in the country, so we have another Metro ride (surely we should arrive in a limousine) to La Rotonde. The food and service were excellent but sadly there were only a few tables occupied. Perhaps the warm weather or the Sunday brunch had contributed. However, we had a very pleasant evening and we were even presented with a bottle of the house wine as we left.

Monday July 11

It was much warmer and more humid today as we took the Metro once again to Wenceslas Square where we had breakfast. Then we took the Hop on/Hop off bus to the entrance to the castle high on the hill overlooking the river. Actually the Castle is a walled area with many buildings, two magnificent churches and lots of cobbled streets to wander and admire. We planned to spend most of our sightseeing day here.



Once inside the grounds our first major stop was at the Cathedral of St Vitus. This is an enormous structure built over hundreds of years, beginning in the 13th Century and consequently having three distinct types of architecture. It has some beautiful stained glass windows – most of which are quite modern – and a number of Dignitaries from the past are commemorated and/or buried here, including King Wenceslas.



St Vitus Cathedral within the Castle grounds

It is interesting that, under Communism this was no longer a place of worship and became more a symbol of the city and a tourist destination. Since the 1980s the Church and State have debated who should have ownership and apparently have only recently reached a compromise in which both will share responsibility and ownership. It would appear that there are now some services held here but there were no restrictions on dress inside the building so it would appear that it is still more of an attraction than an active church. We have been told that the Czech Republic is by far the most atheistic country in Europe (over 60% declared) so perhaps no one is too upset with the state of affairs. Regardless, it is a beautiful building.





The Church of St George (still within the castle) is even older than St Vitus, having been built originally in the late ninth century. It is much more sparsely decorated and simple in form but nevertheless a lovely, rather small (by European standards) church.

Finally within the walls (actually built in to the walls) is a series of small houses that collectively are known as the Golden Walk. It was originally thought that the name derived from this being a place where alchemists were trying to convert base metals into gold, but it seems more likely that it was based more on its prosperity. Certainly that may be the

case today as each home now is filled with souvenirs for the million plus tourists that visit each year.



Completing our castle visit we once again had some superb views over this beautiful city and then we took the bus back to Old Town and had lunch at Hooters of all places. We walked some more in this spectacular area of Prague and then got the Metro back to the hotel.

Tonight we dined at Aromi again and enjoyed another very good meal. In fact, we were remembered from our previous visit on Saturday and treated very well, including a complimentary Limoncello to finish the meal.

Tuesday July 12

We walked to the local shopping mall for breakfast at Costa and then relaxed in the hotel until almost 11:30 when the hotel car took us to the airport. We arrived there in plenty of time for our 2:15 flight to Amsterdam. This left just a few minutes late but arrived on time which gave us just sufficient walking and passport control time to make our onward flight to Leeds and our six week stay in Yorkshire.

This concluded another interesting and enjoyable trip in which we saw several places for the first time and re-visited two of our favorites—Budapest and Prague. The Danube River cruise was a great way to get introduced to the countries of Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia and Croatia and left us eager to explore more at some future date.