

Trip Journal

Viking River Cruise, Passage to Eastern Europe, June 2015

Monday, June 1 / Tuesday June 2

Arrived very early at Logan for our flight to Paris/CDG. We had a late lunch at Vino Volo in terminal A (highly recommended but pricey) — wine flights and small sandwiches. Our flight was on time and went smoothly; we opted for Delta's Comfort Plus, which gives you slightly more room, early boarding, and only two seats across. We arrived early at Paris's CDG airport and easily made the connection to our Air France flight to Bucharest. Once there, we were promptly met by a Viking representative, who whisked us and our fellow travelers off to the Radisson Blu hotel in downtown Bucharest. As usual, the trip was exhausting — 7 hours on the first leg, 3 on the second leg, two hours of connection time, and almost no sleep. We checked in to our hotel, quickly cleaned up, and decided to go exploring and then have an early dinner. The weather on arrival was glorious — 85 degrees and sunny. The Viking concierge had a great recommendation for a nearby restaurant serving high quality, affordable and traditional Romanian food, so we walked there to check it out, then discovered a shop selling all manner of Romanian folk crafts, including amazing embroidered blouses, painted eggs, rugs, and so forth. Had to buy something, of course. We did discover that there are some issues with using US credit cards in Europe. Our American Express card that we got specifically because it has an embedded RFID chip requires a PIN and we don't yet have a PIN associated with it so it was pretty much useless. Some stores don't accept American Express, but so far it appears that Visa (even with the old style stripe) still works. We'll continue to work on this mystery over the coming week. Since every country we will be in has its own currency, this is a potential hassle over being able to just use Euros. On the plus side, these non-Euro countries are cheaper. Dinner was a perfect example. We had drinks (plum brandy, similar to slivovic) and cherry brandy (sweeter, less strong), called Visinata and Afinata, followed by an appetizer platter of assorted meats, cheeses, and Romanian spreads. Then a lovely bottle of local Romanian Merlot and two national dishes — a stuffed cabbage dish called Sarmale and a mixed grill platter called Tochitura. We finished it with fresh local strawberries and whipped cream, and espresso. Dinner came to under \$40 for the two of us!! Then back to the room to crash, and get ready for a busy day tomorrow, when we tour Bucharest and then are taken to our ship.

Wednesday, June 3

A very early morning since bags have to be in the corridor for pickup by 7. We have a sumptuous breakfast, check out, and then wait for the 9 a.m. bus which takes us to the Village Museum, a fascinating expanse laid out in the form of a 1700's Romanian village, with all the structures actually transported from villages around various regions of Bulgaria for the purpose of preserving them. Most are open to explore and the setting and grounds are lovely. We then travel to the Church of St. Demetrius, the patron saint of Romania, with its magnificent gold leaf interior that shines of gold. Then on to a walking tour of the old town of Bucharest. From there, we travel to a restaurant for lunch and are treated to one of the highlights of the trip so far — a performance of Romanian dance and music that exceeds all expectations. The fiddle, pan flute and cimbalom are spectacular, and the dancers do exciting choreographies and are great to watch. We get pulled into a Romanian hora at the end and get to dance with Romanians in Romania. Fabulous! From there, we drive to Giurgiu where we board the ship, the Viking Aegir. Dinner is outstanding! Lobster and crabmeat in a coconut milk for an appetizer and Chateaubriand that melts in your mouth. After dinner Michael, the program director does a

presentation on one of Romania's most famous persons, Prince Vladimir III Dracus, better known as Vlad the Impaler or just as Count Dracula. We learn that we was not a monster but just did what was necessary, however gruesome, to resist the invading Ottoman Empire and keep Romania from falling. The honorific "Dracus" means dragon, and is meant to indicate fierce soldier-like qualities. The entire legend of drinking blood is made up and was, even then, known by intelligent folk to be false. Before we retire for an early evening, we go up on deck so that we can look at the Danube, and at Romania on one side and Bulgaria on the other.

Thursday, June 4

Up early for the bus trip to Arbanassi and Veliko Tarnovo for a full day's tour. After a bus ride of about an hour we stopped at a hotel in the ancient capital of Veliko Tarnovo for a rest stop, coffee and pastries (including Bonitsa, a delightful Bulgarian cheese pastry), and a view from the bridge onto the town. Then on to Arbanassi for a tour of the Church of the Nativity, an Orthodox church built in 1632 and decorated entirely on the inside with frescos covering every inch of the walls. Lunch was in Arbanassi — traditional Bulgarian fare (bland, but a tasty chicken stew) and watch another fabulous folk performance, this time Bulgarian dancers doing an assortment of racenicas and paidusjkos, in full costumes and accompanied by a gaida, tupan, and gadulka. The dancers are fabulous and, when they are done, they form a line to do a pravo horo, and of course we join in. The afternoon sees a return to Veliko Tarnovo, and a visit to the fortress, where we learn the story of three young men who rally the city to fend off the invading Byzantines to retake the city, and the country, beginning the second Bulgarian empire that will last for centuries before falling to the Ottomans. The day-long tour concludes with a shopping visit to one of Tarnovo's famous shopping streets, as quaint as it is a shoppers' paradise. We buy some earrings made from polished and decorated copper and a decorative plate. Dinner was surf and turf, a yummy piece of tenderloin and a jumbo shrimp. For dessert we have tiramisu and a cheese plate. The cheese plates are all served with a savory chutney; this evening it is mango. After dinner we compete in the 10 minute trivia contest, subject: rivers. Our team gets 12/20 but the winners get 15, and they get to split a bottle of the ship's worst bubbly, Chateau Gangway. Ah but to have had 3 more points!

Friday, June 5

Today is a half-day tour, so we have a little relaxation in the afternoon. At 9 we board the busses for an hour long trip to Belogradchik, literally "little Belgrade", to distinguish it from the capital of Serbia. We stop at a hotel for coffee, more pastries, and a rest room break, along with scenic views of the rocks from the hotel balcony. Then we proceed to the fortress, where we walk around the grounds, and then climb the rocks. There are three viewing options. First is level one, requiring no climbing, and then levels two and three, requiring more and more climbing. We climb to the top, 150 stairs total, but the climb is tougher than it sounds, because many of the steps are stone, often uneven or crumbling, and in many places with no handrail. We make it all the way up to the top — an especially tough climb in the 90 degree heat — but are rewarded with spectacular views of "the rocks", amazing sand and limestone protuberances that rise majestically out of the ground. The view is one of the most amazing natural things I've viewed. After the rocks, our bus returns to port in Vidin for a bus tour of the city and then to the ship, where we have lunch and then a free afternoon. We opt to skip walking around Vidin in favor of attending a folklore performance in the ship's lounge. Today is a youth group performing Bulgarian dances, and a young singer who has now won 11 gold medals in her age category for singing the traditional *a capella* style. The dancers are fabulous and the singer is extraordinary.

There are no words to describe how fabulous the music and dance is. I do have videos that attempt to capture it. After the performance, the dancers once again form up a line for a pravo and we join in. Following this, three of the oldest dancers (age 17 through 18) join us in a Q&A session where we learn about life growing up in modern Bulgaria. Near the end, one audience member asked them if they would show us one of their favorite dances, so the two guys do a complexly choreographed kopanitsa. Then a random passenger asks us (Laura and me) if we would do one of our favorite dances, so we are put on the spot and do a basic kopanitsa with a few variations. It's a real blast dancing for the Bulgarians, who can't believe we know this stuff!!!

Dinner is monkfish ceviche (Meyer) and quail (Laura) for appetizers, pork chops in applesauce and gravy, and mango sorbet and a cheese plate. After dinner, another 10 minute trivia, this time on ships in literature, and our team gets 13 out of 20 but the winners get 14! One point and we would have had lousy champagne!!

A word about the Program Director. His name is Michael; he's from the UK; and he has a delightful sense of humor as well as an extensive knowledge of all things travel. After trivia he corners us at the bar and we spend a delightful hour talking about everything, from wines and single malts to Balkan culture and dance and river cruising. He's a truly interesting guy and it's a pleasure getting to occupy so much of his time to regale each other about travel experiences.

Saturday, June 6

Today is an at-sea day with no tours, but we arise at 7 so we can be on deck at 8:30 for our transit through Iron Gate lock #1. The Danube, which here forms the border between Romania and Serbia, rises 200 feet in a series of two consecutive locks. We have already passed lock #2 but the passage through lock #1 is quite impressive — a double chamber lock that raises the ship 50 feet and the another 50 feet. Before the locks were built it took shipping an extra 4 1/2 days to make this part of the passage.

After the locks we pass through the Iron Gates themselves, a series of four gorges where the river narrows to 150 feet and passes through sheer granite cliffs towering hundreds of feet above. At the first gate is a statue carved into the sheer granite face. It is a carving of the Dacian king Decebalus, at 40M high it is the tallest sculpture in Europe. Roughly inspired by Mt. Rushmore, it is higher the Mt. Rushmore.

Until a recent dam calmed the water, this was an area of violent rapids and extremely strong current that made navigation through it like sailing into an iron gate. The cliffs are breathtaking. But compared to 8 or 9 hour tours, it is nice to sit out on deck and enjoy the scenery moving by while sipping a glass of wine and chatting with friends or taking a nap. Temps are in the upper 80s, the sky is blue and the humidity is low. What a perfect experience.

Then more food! At 3:15 we have a Serbian tea, followed at 6 with the returning guests cocktail hour with appetizers and drinks and of course the mandatory glass of Aquavit for a toast. Dinner was sturgeon or chicken crusted with nuts and jalapeño peppers. Dessert was lemon sorbet and a cheese plate, and after dinner we have a talk by the captain about the ship, sailing the rivers, and all things nautical.

Note: the captain asks his audience some questions to see if we have learned anything from him. We all give correct answers and he announces that we have passed the test to become

captain. Laura asks him when do we get our stripes. He comes over to her and puts his jacket on her and informs her that these are her stripes!!!!

Sunday, June 7

We gain an hour as we sail from Bulgaria but lose half of that as we depart the ship early, at 8:30, for a tour of Belgrade. The tour takes us by bus through the Balkan side, over the Sava River to the Central Europe side, take a quick tour around this ultra-modern part of Belgrade built under Tito's rule, and then return to the Balkan side to visit the St. Sava Memorial Church. The story behind this church is amazing, and our Serbian tour guide makes it come to life and many of us (including Srdan, our guide) are brought close to tears. It turns out that in 1589 the Turks who ruled Serbia had become fed up with Serb resistance to being incorporated into the Muslim faith; the Serbs stubbornly clung to their Orthodox Christianity as a way of maintaining their Serbian heritage. One day in 1589 the Turks forced all the Serbs to gather on a hill where the sacred remains of St. Sava (patron saint of Serbia and founder of the Serbian Orthodox Church) were assembled and burned while the Turks ridiculed the Serbs and their religious beliefs. The Serbs vowed revenge, and in 1924 they began construction of the St. Sava Memorial Church on that very spot. Construction is still ongoing. The outside structure is now complete, made of reinforced concrete to support the enormous semicircular dome. The church is the third largest Orthodox church in the world and the ninth largest overall. The Haji Sofia in Istanbul could fit inside. The ugly concrete interior will ultimately be entirely covered by mosaics, millions of tiles, including a mosaic of the "white angel", a painting made in the 14th century that is still amazingly bright today. The white angel was the image sent from Europe to America after the Cuban Missile crisis to show European solidarity (send peaceful images, not missiles), and was the first digitized image sent into outer space to send a message to alien races.

We proceeded to the pedestrian shopping area of downtown Belgrade — vibrant and bustling on a Sunday afternoon — and then on to tour the fort of Belgrade. Then back to the ship for lunch.

After lunch we opted to return to the downtown area and the Square of the Republic. We had hoped to spend some time in the Ethnographic Museum, which our Viking daily planner said was open on Sundays until 5, but in fact it had closed at 2:00 and we just missed it. So we wandered the downtown shops, bought some chocolate to bring home, and listened to the street musicians playing Serbian music for tips. Then back to the ship.

Overall impressions of Romania, Bulgaria, and Serbia: the most apparent difference, in the cities and larger towns, is that the communists in Romania and Bulgaria left a dreary landscape of nondescript concrete buildings. Although Bucharest had some interesting architecture mixed in with the communist "dormitories", the overall impression was of a people beaten down by the communists and just now trying to rebuild and recover their economies and their identities. Serbia by contrast seemed to do well under Tito and is a thriving country.

The cocktail hour talk is one of the most amazing experiences I have had. The guy who was our guide and gave the tear-rendering explanation of the day of remembrance and of the construction of St. Sava was also the featured speaker before dinner, giving a talk on "Serbia — Past, Present, and Future". It was amazing. In one hour he covered 3 millennia of Serbian,

Balkan, and other history, and did such an outstanding job putting into perspective why the Balkans and Yugoslavia are so historically important but also such a hotbed of turmoil — and he made you truly feel it. He tied what happened in the time between 1100 and 1800 into modern history in a way that made you truly feel like you understood the underlying causes of WWI, and the issues behind the formation of Yugoslavia, its flowering, and its demise, followed by the foment that caused WWII and ultimately, the Balkan wars of the 1990s. Srdan was amazing in explaining what is perhaps the most complex part of the continent,

Dinner was a Balkan buffet; quite amazing. It came with the usual infinite glass of wine but also came with all the Slivovic you could drink. I think we had four, but who's counting :-). And after dinner, in a cruise where the ethnic performances have been one of the real highlights, we had a Serbian troupe performing both music and dance that was over the top! Athletic, fabulous choreographies, unbelievable music. They used melodies we knew well — Serbian Medley #1, Dutam, Sestorka, and Ludo Kopano. We could have gotten up and done the dances, until of course the choreography went beyond the traditional music. Their dancing was just amazing. Now, during dinner the troupe's accordionist was performing for the diners, and Laura flirted her way to getting him to play at our table. But afterwards, she sought him out and asked if he knew Niska Banja, which of course he did. He played it for us, and we got to dance it. What a thrill! To do a traditional Serbian dance, in Serbia, accompanied by a traditional Serbian musician!!

One last item that makes the evening, and says volumes about the Viking experience: Michael, our Program Director, showed up at dinner wearing a Bulgarian embroidered shirt. Laura admired it, and Michael knew of our love for this culture. He volunteered that he had purchased a second shirt but it was too small for him, and suggested that Laura might try wearing it. He ran off and immediately brought the shirt to us. Then Laura went and tried it on. It fit her fine. So — — Michael gave it to her!!

Go find another cruise line that will do that!!!!

Monday June 8

We awoke to find that technical difficulties had altered some aspects of the rest of our trip. Of the four generators on board Aegir, one of the large generators failed during the night. In order to conserve power consumption, the ship decided to eliminate air conditioning in the public spaces, suspend passenger laundry, and slow our forward speed. To make up for the inconvenience, they announced an open bar for the remainder of the cruise. The change in speed meant that our scheduled 9:30 arrival in Vukovar, Croatia slipped to 1:00. That in turn meant that we missed a chance to explore Vukovar and also missed the 11 a.m. performance of Tamburitza music on board. Instead, we spent a delightful morning on the sun deck watching scenery go by.

Note on the weather: it has been in the 80's with sun or part clouds every day; some days a most pleasant low to mid 80's and some days a very warm low 90's. The only rain we saw were thunderstorms that began after we returned from our afternoon tour. Consequently we have not needed an umbrella or jacket the entire trip and the weather for sitting on the sun deck has been delightful.

After arrival at Vukovar and an annoying delay while the border police held us up, we took a bus trip of about 30 minutes to the town of Osijek, where we toured the fort and had a chance to

shop briefly. We then went on to a "home visit". Each bus subdivided into groups of about 10 people, and each group was taken to a home in the village and had time to have coffee with a local resident and discuss life in Croatia and ask questions. It was a lovely way to see what real life is like. Dinner featured lamb chops and a heavenly dark chocolate mousse, and after dinner we had a trivia session about dances from European countries: we listened to a dance, then got a point for identifying the country, a point for doing the dance, and a point for answering a trivia question about the country. Everyone wanted us on their team! We were in great demand, but formed a team with our friends. After two previous losses we were psyched, and our team got 24 / 25 to win the grand prize, a bottle of champagne and 6 straws. The champagne never arrived but since we had an open bar, no one really cared.

Tuesday June 9

Two rude awakenings on a day when sleeping late should have been possible. The first was a false alarm at around 4:45 a.m. when, apparently due to the lack of air-conditioning in the kitchen, a heat detector went off and we hear the alarms go off. Then at 7 a.m. we get an announcement that the Hungarian border police want to do a passport face check, so we are up and dressed and processed, all before breakfast.

The morning is spent on ship because we have a series of disembarkation lectures, one for each "group" depending on whether you are staying on for the continuation cruise to Amsterdam, going on to a post-cruise extension in Prague, or departing. After lunch we board busses for a tour of Kalocsa and a visit to the Archbishop's Palace. Then on to a Puszta, a traditional horse farm. We start with the traditional bread dipped in lard and coated with a mixture of spices including paprika and salt. It was surprisingly delicious! We sample some cherry brandy and then a glass of red wine while we watch the horse show. Riders in traditional garb demonstrate the level of training of the horses, then compete in a number of games intended to show off horsemanship, and we are treated to a display of a special breed of cattle pulling a wagon, followed by a 3-horse pulled wagon, a 6-horse pulled wagon, and 8 horses with rider standing on the backs of the last two. The riders also display their prowess with whips, including a "whip concert" where the whips are cracked in perfect synchrony. Afterwards, we have a chance to go on a wagon ride pulled by four magnificent horses (for each wagon, done in shifts because we are so many).

The day concludes with the the Captain's cocktail hour / toast, and then a farewell Captain's dinner.

The white wine was Grüner Veltliner, and the red was a Hungarian red, Tüzko. We started with Salmon Caviar & Crunchy Potato Cake, then Artichoke Bisque with polenta and spinach fritters, then Scallop Ceviche with wasabi sabayon, then Balsamic Marinated Beef Tenderloin with white asparagus, potato gratin, and baby onions, and for dessert Mascarpone & Sour Cherry Cake with brownie streusel, and a cheese plate with apricot chutney.

Wednesday June 10

We dock in Budapest. Our first view out our French balcony upon awakening is of the Chain Bridge, and the magnificent buildings on Castle Hill on the Buda side (we are docked on the Pest side, with our stateroom facing out towards the Danube).

We leave the ship! After putting out our bags, we have a last hearty breakfast from the buffet, then board busses for a tour of the city, designed to give us a good overview of the city, some free time, and still get us to the hotel Le Meridien in time for check-in. The tour shows us first a bit of the Pest side, driving by the hotel, then over the bridge to the Buda side, where we head for the top of Castle Hill. There we are treated to fabulous views of the river, the various bridges crossing the Danube, and the Houses of Parliament. We walk around the Castle Hill area, filled with lovely buildings, statues commemorating famous Hungarian patriots, the castle itself, and the magnificent church and Fisherman's Bastion. We get a quick tour inside the church, and then are left with free time to explore. We climb to the top of the Fisherman's Bastion for views of Parliament (we swear that's where Viking takes those magnificent views of a long ship sailing in front of Parliament, one of the hallmarks of their TV commercials) and then wander back along the many shops until we re-board our bus.

From there the tour takes us back to the Pest side, where we drive through the Jewish quarter, stop at Heroes' Square for a photo-op, and then to the Farmer's market, where we have more free time to shop and have lunch. Finally, back to the hotel in time for check-in.

Le Meridien in Budapest is a fabulous five star hotel with luxurious rooms. We unpack, shower, and head out to explore, after asking the Viking concierge (yes, Viking provides a separate one just for it's guests) for dinner recommendations with a Hungarian theme that are not too far away. He recommends two, makes reservations for us, and we set out on foot to explore, and also to find the restaurants.

The late afternoon is a great time for people-watching in the two lovely parks we walk through on our way to the Parliament buildings. We get lots of photo-ops of the lovely, grand architecture on the way, and then more of Parliament — of course, we can only photograph from the Pest side looking toward the river, and the sun is towards that view so the light isn't great. We vow to return tomorrow morning.

Back to the hotel for somewhat (very?) overpriced drinks and then to dinner at Aszu on Sis Utica. We choose to eat outdoors, since the weather is so lovely, and dinner is fabulous. All Hungarian specialties, with a gourmet chef presentation, and pricey but not too expensive. Meyer wanted to try a bottle of Tokaj, Hungary's most famous white wine. We were unsure about whether a dry or a "semi-sweet" would be better. The waiter suggested the semi-sweet was not too sweet and would go nicely with food. We were uncertain, so he brought us a taste of each! (We went with the semi-sweet and it paired perfectly). After dinner, we walk around this lovely, picturesque city after dinner while digesting, then back to the hotel.

Thursday June 11

Our full day in Budapest. We eschew the optional morning and afternoon tours and go off on our own; first back to Parliament for photos in the much better morning light, then we check out the situation with tours of the Parliament building, but we find out that the next English tour is at 2:30 and for non-EU members it is very expensive, so we decide to pass. Instead we visit the very lovely Ethnographic Museum — a wonderful stop both for the folk crafts and way-of-life exhibits inside but also for the fabulous setting — the building used to be the Ministry of Justice, and is all polished marble and gilt. We head to the pedestrian shopping district right behind our hotel to explore the stores and have a lovely lunch at an outdoor bistro — we share a very

generous appetizer portion of a hunter's sampler of grilled meats, and a Hungarian beer (Meyer only).

After lunch we explore the pedestrian area and then head up Androssy Blvd., a wide, tree-lined street with upscale shops, and we get to the Opera House in time for their 3:00 tour, which we decide to take. The Opera House is similar in design to the one in Vienna, but smaller in capacity (Franz Joseph insisted it be so) but some say it is more beautiful, and the rumor is that the emperor only visited it once, refusing to return because he said it was more lovely than the Statsoper in Vienna. We had a rare shower for our walk back to the hotel, then drinks in the hotel bar, and off to dinner.

Dinner was at Rezkakas, the most highly recommended restaurant on our Viking list, across the street from Aszu, and once again we opted to eat outdoors, even though there was supposed to be live Hungarian music inside. The waiter suggested a drink to start and was delighted when I asked about a Palinka. He brought us two glasses of an elixir you just wanted to smell, and savor, it was so lovely. (Palinka is Hungary's equivalent of Bulgaria's slivovic or Serbia/Croatia's rakia — a fruit brandy). Dinner was fabulous, similar to last night's dinner at Aszu but the preparations were over the top. After splitting goose liver pate, Meyer had chicken stuffed with foie gras and Laura had rack of lamb. Ironically, while eating outside, a couple we knew and liked from Aegir sat at the table behind us. We could only chat with them briefly, but after dessert they decided to retire inside to check out the live music and get another drink, so we followed them and sat at the bar for another glass of Palinka as we chatted for a good hour, discussing our trip and plans for future trips. The music was mostly pop, very little Hungarian, so we were glad about our initial choice to sit outside. It was a very pricey meal but one of the most memorable ever, and our way of saying goodbye to Hungary.

Friday June 12

Farewell to Budapest. We leave our luggage by the door, check out of the hotel, and have one final breakfast before boarding the bus to the airport. With their usual efficiency, Viking representatives meet the bus at the airport and escort us to the correct check-in line, scan our passports in the kiosk, print out our boarding passes, and then point us to the baggage drop off line.

In all, a fabulous trip!