

Eastern Europe Part 1: Romania

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Part 1: Romania – Dracula, Gypsies and Political Intrigue

August 31, 2008

Dateline: Bucharest, Romania

Latitude at Bucharest 44.25 degrees North, Longitude 26.04 degrees East

Since the “Iron Curtain” has more or less rusted, and tourism, along with McDonald’s, Pizza Hut and Pepsi Cola, is now booming in the area the formerly known as the Eastern Bloc, we decided to embark on a tour to see first-hand how things are coming along. Fancying ourselves world travelers (what our German friend Klaus tells us is known as “weltenbummler” in his country), we felt we needed to go here since this is an area of which we largely ignorant and have neglected in the past. We booked, along with our good friends and neighbors, Stu and Sharon, a river cruise on the Danube starting in Romania and ending in Vienna, followed by 3 days in Prague, a visit with our German friends and fellow “weltenbummlers” in Munich for Oktoberfest and then venturing behind the “Curtain” once more in the former East Germany.

Our expectations were many, largely colored by clichés formulated in the Cold War era and by Hollywood, so it was interesting to see how these panned out. Plus the Balkans, prior to the Soviet era, have always been a hotbed of war, intrigue and mayhem (e.g. WWI started with an assassination in Sarajevo that really probably could have been settled with a

duel had it happened anywhere else). Historically the Balkans have been sort of a cauldron of discontent that boils over periodically, some in squabbles, some in all out war, primarily over those perpetual favorite causes: possession of land, religion, and ethnicity. In any event, we hoped to avoid any such "boil-overs" on our trip, including warfare in general and gunfire in particular.

We arrived in Bucharest via New York and Budapest, and thus it was well after dark by the time we got here. Gary had bought a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue at the Budapest duty free shop so he had a sip of that before bedtime. Unfortunately we had flown across the Atlantic on Malev, the Hungarian Airline and we enjoyed the Hungarian Wine so much en route, Gary didn't realize that it was priced in Euros, not dollars, and having priced the same liquor at JFK Airport's duty free, thought he had happened upon a bargain. Unfortunately this is not the case so he is sipping that really slowly.

Our cliché based expectations for Romania would concern mostly Dracula, gypsies and big drab blocky looking buildings, a gloomy city in gray-scale or black and white. We envisioned the occasional citizen/vampire with rather longish canine teeth to be lurking in the shadows. I further envisioned a stern tour guide, shaped something like a bowling ball, maybe named Ludmilla, with an excess of facial hair and perhaps an unfortunate warty-mole on her lip, perhaps sprouting some of that aforementioned facial hair. She would threaten us with a KGB -type interrogation/torture on our first offense - perhaps tardiness or talking while she was lecturing us on the virtues of the communal society. Or perhaps it would be a behemoth named Igor, with a shaven head and little slits for eyes, a cruel mouth . . . but I digress, here's what really happened.

Our first adventure started with the taxi ride from the Bucharest Airport with Sky Taxi. It was a wild ride with great weaving between construction cones, scattering of intimidated

pedestrians and barreling through parking lots offering short cuts. Stop signs were ignored (I think the rule must be you don't have to stop if nobody's coming and nobody can come if you aren't looking). You would have thought the paparazzi was in hot pursuit. Our taxi was a little Peugeot that had a heavy duty mesh screen between the baggage compartment and the backseat, which was we assumed, intended to keep passengers from being bludgeoned to death by their own luggage if the driver had to stomp on the brakes to avoid disaster. We sorely missed having seat belts and a roll bar. Our driver did ask if we minded if he smoked. His driving was so scary we thought about asking if we could bum one ourselves to calm our nerves. We thought he might have to slow down while smoking, since he was now steering with only one hand – but, of course, this was not the case. We feel certain he doesn't have to worry about the long-term health effects of smoking – odds are he won't have a long term. And oddly enough, he has a lot of company. We learned that all cab drivers here drive that way. Despite the driving, we didn't see a single vehicle with any dents so it must work okay for them. We checked into the JW Marriott, a little haven of sanity, amid the chaos with blessedly soft toilet paper, but the towels are a bit rough so you have to sort of pat yourself dry or else risk drawing blood. Maybe there is a sadistic Ludmilla in the laundry room.

September 1, 2008

Dateline: Bucharest, Romania

Our first myth was busted at breakfast when we met our Tour Guide. Instead of Ludmilla, we got Bogdan Curea, who goes by "Boggy". Boggy is a knowledgeable, quite personable Romanian, who looks like a thinner, younger version of Drew Carey. He tells us his last name in Romanian means "belt" and his first name, quite popular with first time mothers here means "God's gift". He is actually quite a modest fellow, his name notwithstanding. Our driver is Ramos – no explanation on that name, but he does a good job of keeping our tour bus with

the shiny side up in this kamikaze traffic, which is always appreciated.

We took a tour this morning and were able to confirm one clichéd image. The city is indeed full of dingy Communist-era blocky gray buildings, crumbling concrete, squat and graceless, both apartments and government buildings. The streets and sidewalks are also crumbling and are in various states of disrepair. It seems the Communists did away with all the smart people who knew things like how to make good concrete, how to wire and plumb buildings, and how to design a building that has even the smallest vestige of artistic merit beyond the “Communist Renaissance” style. We called this style Proletariat Drab. We wanted to go in search of pre-Communist structures from a far more aesthetically pleasing era and fortunately we found several.



Bucharest's
Government
Buildings

On the positive side, there are still palaces and churches scattered among (and often secreted behind) the architectural monstrosities that line the major avenues. They also have a charming (or at least it has the potential to charm) Old Town called the Lipscani. The Romanians are working on this area, trying to revitalize it and it will be quite interesting if it turns out as envisioned. Unfortunately, the Communist dictator Nicholas Ceausescu (more on him later) razed thousands of historic structures to build his hideous building. The hotel where we are staying (the JW Marriott) was

started by Ceaucescu, but after his fall, it was finished and opened by Marriott, and they were able to make several cosmetic and structural improvements. We were told they made one room out of every two that he had planned. I guess Ceaucescu planned on bunk beds since our room is pretty much standard in size now.

The local people are generally on the trim side, especially compared with us more full figured American tourists. Although with the arrival of American fast food chains, I'm thinking the youngsters may be shopping in the Plus sizes themselves before they reach adulthood. Romanians are attractive people and appear to be mostly fair skinned with dark hair and eyes. The older generation dresses in mostly drab clothing. The younger ones dress in clothing indistinguishable from American teenagers, also in drab colors, but it's fashionably drab – the same stuff the kids at home wear. Some of the women seem to favor the hennaed look for their hair (no drab colors here) with riotous shades of red not found in nature, so this is apparently a fairly universal trend. There are gypsies, but not so many as we had imagined, since according to Boggy, many have migrated to greener pastures in Western Europe. Boggy says most of the cut flowers in the open air markets are sold by gypsies, (more on them later), but for the most part they are unemployed in the traditional sense of the word. There are also open air markets scattered around the city including ones that, in Boggy's words, offer "table clothing" which I finally determined is a market selling table cloths.

Romania, is a Latin island in a sea of Slavic countries. It has been occupied for millennia, and was called Dacia when it was part of the Roman Empire. The Romanian language most closely resembles Italian, and like other Romance languages, it is based on Latin. It has been free of Communism since a revolt on December 21, 1989, which resulted in the death of over 1,000 Romanians, before the bad guys decided to decamp. They still have an economic dependence on Russia to some

extent since they get 60% of their gas and oil from them, and we're told that if they criticize Russia, the price goes up accordingly. Since the fall of Communism, the retirees have suffered the most, with the wealthiest people being the younger workers. Unemployment is extremely low now and there is a very respectable economic growth rate here. Bucharest has 2.5 million people, close to 85 per cent of whom own their own houses. People don't make much money here by our standards, and rents are high, but when the Communists left, the new government allowed people to buy their homes for practically nothing in order to make at least partial amends for nationalization of all personal property in 1947 when the Communists took over. They have now joined the European Union, but have their own currency, the Leu (pronounced Lee-euw,) which is worth about 50 US cents, and the plural is lei (just like the Hawaiian word). RON is put on prices to indicate it is the new Leu vs. the old one. They dropped several zeroes to make it more reasonable to carry money around.

Boggy pointed out that Romanian drivers are quite "exuberant" in their driving techniques. They make several brands of cars here, including the local "Dacia". Boggy attributes the wild driving to close cultural ties with the French and Italians. The sidewalks here are used as much as for parking as for walking. While it is not legal, the offenders so far outnumber the tow trucks, most people take their chances. We have found everyone to be polite and friendly, even as they are bearing down on you in the crosswalk in their Dacias. " Good Morning" is Bona Niminaza (the spelling is all my own) and Bono Sera is "Good Evening". However, English is so widely spoken, you can easily get by.

Bucharest has been referred to in pre-Communist times as the Paris of the East (wide boulevards, a smaller version of the Arc d'Triomphe, lots of Parisian Architecture) although Ceaucescu almost single-handedly turned it into the Harlem

Housing Projects of the East during his tenure here.

Romania fought Germany in WW1 and lost over 1.5 million people, due in large part to a rather glaring flaw in their national defense plan. They had bought guns from the Germans and ammunition from the British and unfortunately, once at the Front, they discovered that the two would not work together. As you can imagine, things went pretty badly for them for a long time, but they did get Transylvania in the peace deal. They also didn't fare so well in WWII when they allied themselves with Germany. Then came the Russians, who invaded and did not leave, followed by the Communists and Ceausescu, so this democracy they have now is pretty new for them. Romania had only won independence from the Turks as recently as 1877 so they didn't have long to enjoy their freedom the last time around.

When the Communists took over, they deposed the then current king, Mihail, and held one of their famous elections with only one candidate on the ballot, who happened to be their candidate, Ceausescu's predecessor. Ceausescu was quite a success story considering he was a pretty dim bulb and had only a 4th grade education, but as it turned out, a dim-bulb puppet was just what the doctors in Moscow ordered in order for Communism to flourish. Ceausescu's father was reportedly a drunk, who when selecting a name for him, apparently forgot he already had a son named Nicolae and gave him the same name. Anyway, Nicolae #2 was apparently charismatic in a crazy-man Adolf Hitler sort of way, prone to garbled speeches. He met the leaders of the Communist Party while in jail and once he got out, he became their messenger boy. He continued with his winning ways to become President in 1965 in a one candidate election and proceeded to further wreck the country, which the Turks and Romanian monarchs had already given him a pretty good start on. Ceausescu, never one for small plans, had a vision to make Bucharest a port on the Danube and spent a lot of the country's funds on a canal, but it was never finished

The Ceaucescus remained in power for 27 years because he was always miraculously re-elected by the people, which probably has something to do with the fact that a long string of his political opponents" committed suicide" just before the election.



Transylvania
Farmhouse with
Eyebrows

Our first visit was to the Village Museum which is a showcase for the 3 regions of current day Romania – Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania. Each of the regions was represented with typical housing in the region from the olden days. For example, Transylvania which is in the mountainous region, had steeply pitched roofs with small vents cut in them, looking strangely like little cartoon eyebrows, rather than chimneys. They would put meat up in the attics and smoke it with the fires they used for warmth. The phrase “raining cats and dogs” comes from this area. Animals kept outside would often shelter in the eaves from the rain. If it really started pouring, they would get washed down into the yard. It’s understandable how the cats could get up there, but the dogs you have wonder about.



A Traditional
Farmhouse
Window

There were also a number of Romanian Orthodox churches (a mix Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox) Whereas Muslims do not allow any representational art of anything created by God, and the Christians are just the opposite, the Orthodox Church is in between. Images are okay, but are not allowed to be 3 dimensional. They have their icons which painted on every available indoor surface, but they were not allowed to have them on the exterior of the churches during the Communist era. Because so many people were illiterate in the olden days, they used the illustrations on the walls as a teaching tool for Bible



A Romanian
House at the
Village Museum

study. The exterior walls were also used in the rural churches before Communism. The Transylvania houses also had carvings on their beams and eaves with sharp edges to prevent icicles

from forming in winter. Almost all of the structures were wood, although no nails were used. They made a caulk to seal the boards with a combination of clay and horse manure (that of cows and goats will not do). Boggy told us that as a child during the Communist years, horse dung was at a premium since they confiscated all personal property including horses. His grandmother used to send him out with a pail looking for it and it was not uncommon for children to get into fist fights over it. You know the times are hard when you are fighting over horse poop. While the Transylvania houses had shingled roofs, the houses in the other two areas had thatched roofs. In areas bordering Turkey, they were



A Low Profile
Romanian
Farmhouse

actually built underground with the roof line only a few feet off the ground. The Turks were notorious raiders and so many Romanians chose the camouflage models. As in current day Bucharest, there isn't much sparkle in these old houses, (they are universally dark brown), and the Communists weren't even here yet, so maybe they aren't totally to blame for the lifeless colors we've seen here, but at least these homes have architectural interest.

Our next stop was a Collector's Museum, as we learned, was one of the few in the city open on Mondays. It was pretty much a



A Old Windmill
at the Village
Museum

snoozer, mostly stuff that people had collected from various parts of the world. One of the most interesting things were Impressionist paintings of an Impressionist I have never heard of, Nicolae Grigorescu (the suffix “escu” means “son of” in the Romanian language, much like Johnson originally meant “son of John” in English.) One thing the museum was full of was religious art – those same flat images we saw at The Village Museum. They were, in my unlearned opinion, very amateurish drawings, flat expressionless eyes and those halos that bear a remarkable resemblance to gold dinner plates, appearing to be attached to the heads of the saintly. I guess that is why they call them icons – they are intended to symbolize, rather than replicate as did the artists from the West who sought a more realistic approach. The other interesting part of the museum was in the basement where there were decorative pieces from a monastery torn down under Ceausescu. The story was more interesting than the pieces. Apparently Mrs. Ceascescu (Elena) was really looney tunes. She did not want to see any churches as she drove around town so several enterprising engineers managed to jack them up and move them back from the major boulevards and ugly Communist Renaissance buildings were put up to block the view of them from the street. People could still go to church, but it was rather “dangerously unfashionable” to do so, and thus no one who was anyone in the Communist party would be seen going to church. Mrs. C also did not like to see any laundry hanging from the balconies on her ugly apartment buildings, so that offense had dire

consequences as well. Mrs. C. was quite an interesting, if universally despised, character. Like Mr. C, she had no more than a 4th grade education, and she fancied herself a chemist, arranged to be awarded unearned or fake degrees, built herself a laboratory only slightly smaller than the Parliament building and often read scientific papers on TV which she passed off as her own. However, her cover was blown for good one day, when she saw H₂O (H-2-oh) in her document, but read it aloud as H-twenty. And of course any smirking or giggling would have been dealt with harshly by the Thought Police, so there were no jokes (at least that anyone survived the telling of) in this regard.



The Palace of
Parliament

After our tour we walked to Old Town, crossing the Dambovitza River in search of a restaurant called Caru cu Bere, which translates at Cottage with Beer. Our path took us (mistakenly) in a circuit around the Palace of Parliament, which proved to be no small undertaking since it second only to the Pentagon in terms of size. In fact Mr. C. ordered it to be built larger than the Pentagon, but the architect made a mistake, and we hear, fled to France before Mr. C's death squad could deal with him harshly. Our hike included a stroll down Bucharest's version of the Champs Elysee – the chic shops and restaurants seem to be



A Life Size Topiary

missing, but it does have the trees and it also sports fountains spurting water down the center which the French version does not. It is called (probably a holdover from Communist days), Boulevard De Unirii, which translates as Unity Blvd. And in a Ceausecu display of ego, it is one meter wider and one meter longer than the original in Paris. We did find the Caru cu Bere and had a delightful meal. Gary ordered the cabbage rolls and has vowed to sample them whenever and wherever he can. He did pause for a moment when it was listed on the menu as stuffed with “force meat”. At first we thought it might be a typo and they were offering “horse meat”, but with further inquiry we were able to ascertain it was pork, ostensible forced through a grinder, and Gary and Sharon both pronounced it delicious. We walked back to the hotel and had a few cocktails at the hotel and it was off to journal-writing and bed well before dark.

September 2, 2008

Dateline: Bucharest, Romania



Peles Castle –
Transylvania

Today we set off for a castle tour after Boggy asked us each individually this question: "Are you having your passport? We all confirmed, that yes we each were having it, and off we went. En route we learned a subtle distinction: palaces are basically for royalty to live in, whereas castles are meant to be fortresses to fend off one's enemies, or perhaps just the local rabble who are thinking they might want a new king. We also learned, first hand, that democracy breeds traffic jams. It was never like this under the Commies, but of course no one had a car to speak of either. The Romanians were subject to repression under 42 years of Communism and 400% inflation in the post-Soviet era (there is a local saying that the only things worse than Communism is what comes immediately after it) It appears that they were deprived of material possessions for so long, they are now becoming "material girls" and boys with a vengeance, in particular, with the purchase of cars. They don't seem to be deterred by the price of gasoline, running around \$8.00 per gallon. Unfortunately, they have the same road infrastructure that they had the Communist era, and the result is nightmarish traffic. And thus, of course, we felt right at home.

The largest minority here is Hungarian, with the second largest being gypsies, numbering about 800 thousand. Romania is the largest and most populated Balkan country, about the size of Oregon, with they think, (those gypsies are hard to pin down on those census forms) close to 2-3 million people here in Bucharest. Romania's name means "people of Rome" and they were once a Roman state from about the time of Trajan, who built the first bridge across the Danube. Gypsies, who prefer to be called Roma, actually got their name from the British (who have a penchant for renaming things to their own liking (e.g. Bombay for Mumbai and Peking for Beijing). The Brits were under the mistaken impression that the "Roma" people were from Egypt. Subsequent scholarly studies have shown that they actually originated in India and comprised a lower caste of people who fled India, hoping to improve their

fortunes. It is believed that they actually first migrated to Western Europe, but were forced out and ended up settling in Eastern Europe. There was actually, as far back as the 1400's a "diaspora" of the gypsies which certainly served to, if not create, then re-enforce their nomadic lifestyle. They were persecuted, along with the Jews, for centuries, including being sent to death camps in the Nazi era. A common accusation was that the gypsies cast spells that poisoned the wells in communities where they lived. It is much more likely that the polluted water supply and disease were actually a result of rapidly increasing population which was unaware that it was a very bad idea to dump raw sewage into their local stream, and thus when more and more people started doing it, the next thing you know there was a typhoid epidemic and things went downhill from there

Under the Communists, they didn't really discriminate against the gypsies as a group. They more or less discriminated against anyone who was not in the "Party". The Communists first confiscated all the property and wealth and then redistributed it. Some people went from a mansion to a tiny apartment in an ugly block of cloned apartments, while others went from extreme poverty to those same apartments, but of course they were much more appreciative. In the case of the gypsies, they refused to conform (sort of a passive aggressive thing) in that they moved into the housing, but used any available wood for camp fires and sold the windows on the black market.

Another more or less bright spot, in addition to no traffic, under the Communists was that everyone had a job. Of course it was assigned to you and you had it for your whole life regardless of your performance or skills or intelligence. And while you made money, there was nothing to buy with it, but that was brushed off by the Communist Party as a minor detail to be worked out. Other than these bright spots, life was pretty bleak, indoctrination not education was the rule of the

day, and essentially fun was banned in all its manifestations.

The Communists created a lot more problems than they solved, such as the plethora of stray dogs and cats as people were forced to abandon their pets when they were moved into government provided housing. However, the most truly hare-brained ideas came from the Ceaucescus. Take, for example, the widely publicized orphan problem. They had the bright idea that Romania needed more people so Romania could have more workers to build more ugly buildings. So no form of contraception was allowed. Families who already had several children were having more that they could afford. There were also a record number of children born out of wedlock and these were taken from the mother at birth. Consequently, there were a lot of back-alley abortions performed by unqualified people in unsanitary conditions, resulting quite often in the death of the pregnant woman. Because the widowed husband, more often than not, could not manage to take care of the children, they were sent to overcrowded, understaffed, unsanitary orphanages where they were treated like caged animals. Thousands of these children were adopted after the fall of Communism. However, today there are very few orphans, and it is illegal for Romanian children to be adopted outside the country.

Romania offers free medical care for its citizens, but the doctors and nursing staff are so poorly paid and the wait is so long that many people use private doctors if they can afford it. Boggy tells us that it is a common practice to tip your physician and nurses prior to any medical treatment. They swear they give the same service regardless of the gratuity, but it would give one pause for reflection as to the consequences of not offering a tip.

Our first stop was to be the Mogosoaia (pronounced Mow-gush-shy-a" with the accent on "shy") Palace, but before I get to that, I have to relate a sight I have never seen before, not even in India where the weirdest of the weird sights can be seen. We were on our bus, sitting in traffic inching toward

the palace when we glanced out the window to see one of the locals (we assumed) in a compact car (perhaps the Dacia that is manufactured here) inching along going the other way with a casket strapped to the roof. We could only hope it was empty. Anyway, back to the palace. The name means "wife of Mogush" who is the person the land for the castle was purchased from. This land purchase was actually kind of odd, since most royalty in the olden days just took whatever they wanted.



The Gardens at
Mogosoia
Palace

The palace was completed in 1702 by Constantin Brancoveneau, who was the ruling prince, who ruled at the pleasure of the sultan of the Ottoman Empire. The Sultan's pleasure included receiving tribute (gold was his favorite) from the various ruling princes around the Empire. In the case of Romania, this went on for about 500 years. Most ruling princes didn't last long since the Sultan was really touchy about any number of issues, but Constantine was able to hang in there for 26 years. However, this all came to an abrupt halt, on a visit in 1714 to Constantinople (modern day Istanbul) to see the Sultan. More or less upon arrival, the Sultan gave him the ultimatum to convert to Islam or else. Constantine said "no thanks", he was sticking with his Romanian Orthodox. As it turned out, the "else" happened to be a beheading for Constantine, along with his four sons. Their heads were put on pikes and paraded through town and their bodies were thrown in the sea. Mrs. Brancoveneau and her daughters were imprisoned, but somehow managed to get out and she hired someone to

retrieve the headless bodies (no word on where the heads wound up) so she could bury them back in their own country. There are conflicting accounts as to how many were “fished” as Boggy put it. Constantine, it was later determined, was a martyr for the faith and was declared a saint. As a side note, if you were required to pay tribute to the Sultan and did not have gold, you could send your male children to be trained as soldiers of the Ottoman Empire. Then they could be, and often times were, required (again at the Sultan’s pleasure) to come back to your country to kill you. So while it was good to be Sultan – it was not so good to be a mere ruling prince.



The Cotroceni
Palace

We then visited the Cotroceni Palace, which is today the home of the current president. Ceausescu lived here too, but he called it the Pioneer Palace. Romania also has a prime minister who has more of the executive duties to run the cabinet. The president is more figurehead than worker bee. He (and maybe one day she) is elected by popular vote, whereas the prime minister is selected by the majority party in the legislature, (similar to the system in Great Britain). The Cotroceni was built by the first king of Romania, Carol I. This was not a woman – Carol was the Romanian version of Carl, Karl or Charles, depending on where



On the Grounds at Cotroceni Palace

you live. After the Ottoman Empire crumbled, Romania became independent, but apparently decided, or someone else decided for them, than rather than a democracy, a king would be just the thing. This was in 1877. The king idea only lasted until 1947, when the Communists took over the reins of government. The Cotroceni is much more elaborately decorated than the Mogushaia with different themes in different rooms – Japanese, French, Moorish, Norwegian, and so forth. Carol I was married to Elizabeth, a royal princess from Scotland. Their only child died at the age of 4 and with no other heirs, they adopted his nephew, Ferdinand, to succeed him on the throne. Ferdinand married Mary, who was the granddaughter of Queen Victoria and also related to the Romanovs of Russia, so this was a good alliance. However a problem emerged later on because Ferdinand was related to German royalty, and when the World Wars broke out, they had family members going at each other like the Hatfields and McCoys. Romania fought against Germany in WWI, which proved to be a good choice since it allowed them to take back Transylvania from the Hungarians in the peace settlement. They had a similar family dilemma in WWII, but this time they first sided with Germany due to family ties, but later switched sides to team up with Russia. Unfortunately, by that point, they had a serious credibility issue, and both sides were bombing them for a while, which demonstrates rather dramatically the dangers of a flip-flop at high levels of government. Then WWII ended, paving the way for a Communist takeover and that was pretty much that for ruling monarchs in

Romania.

When the Ceaucescus lived here, they replaced all the leaded crystal windows in the palace with stained glass. Mr. C was apparently paranoid about people looking in at him, which, given the evil he perpetrated during his tenure, thinking someone might be out to get him was probably a valid concern. He redecorated a suite of rooms anticipating a visit from Queen Elizabeth II, however her aides, put him off, ever so subtly by scheduling her state visit 11 years into the future, by which time Mr. C was more or less history.

We were on our own for lunch so we walked to a restaurant in the old town (in a rather circuitous fashion since we had just enough of an idea of where we were going to travel well beyond where we should have stopped for directions). It was called the Ladies Terrace (or in Romanian, the Terasa Doamnei) and we had a wonderful lunch in an outdoor courtyard. Our waiter (we think his name was Don, but it could have been something with a lot more syllables) was quite a character and we had a lot of fun with him as he more or less made our lunch decisions for us, something along the lines of, although much more cordial than, Seinfeld's Soup Nazi. Stu was allowed to have his calamari, but it was border line for a while there. Gary was allowed the cabbage rolls, continuing his cabbage roll taste test research across the Balkans. Don decided we should have a truly decadent dessert called "papanosh" (spelling is phonetic and may be off a few consonants – accent on the "nosh"). It was basically a hot donut, crowned with the donut hole with icing and strawberry sauce on it. We made an afternoon of it with a couple we met from Iowa, and had a few cocktails outdoors at the hotel that evening enjoying the summery weather.

September 3, 2008

Dateline: Transylvania, Romania

Today we are heading north into Transylvania and the heart of the Carpathian Mountains. Transylvania literally translates as "beyond the forest". Our destination is the town of Sinaia, (pronounced "Sin-nye-ah" with the accent on "nye") It was so named by the founders of a monastery built in 1695 after a visit to the Sinai Peninsula. On the way out of town, we passed Press Square, whose name comes from the adjacent building housing a local newspaper. Strangely enough, this is where the Communists chose to erect a statue of that not so great friend of the free press, Lenin, and take over all publishing in the country – all propaganda – all the time. This statue was pulled down as the revolt against the Communists unfolded on December 21, 1989. The Romanian flag at the time was Blue, Yellow and Red with a hammer and sickle on the middle yellow portion. Since there wasn't much money for new flags, people just cut out the offending symbol in the middle and flew it anyway. Today they have the same tri-color as the official flag, minus the offending Communist symbol. However, from time to time, people still fly the old flag with a hole in the middle in a virtual thumb-nosing to the departed Soviets, even though almost 20 years have gone by.

Our drive takes us through Ploieste, the site of the Romanian oil fields that were bombed by the Allies in WWII that were so key to the Nazi War effort. They are still producing oil today and we see pump jacks and drilling rigs in the surrounding countryside. One of the things we have noticed on the big blocky buildings in the is large advertising banners that often stretch across multiple floors and multiple balconies. We learned that apartment residents get paid by advertisers to hang these ads across their apartment facades. As for the businesses, I guess it is cheaper than erecting a billboard, and the residents get to trade drab for tacky.

Leaving the city behind, the countryside is really lovely, well tended fields, flocks of sheep, orchards laden with ripe apples, and the Carpathians looming in the distance. There is

also mile after mile of fields of sunflowers ready for harvest. Here they use the sunflower oil for cooking, rather than olive oil. We also saw a number of gypsies (a.k.a. "Roma") in horse-drawn wagons, which are built with two levels. The family sleeps on the lower level and they store their goods to sell (e.g. jewelry, farm produce, or whatever) on the upper level. They make a brandy from fruit called *tuicha* (pronounced "Tweak-ah) that is their specialty. When you toast each other in Romania you say "Narack" (my spelling is probably off, but it rhymes with Barack). The Roma do have tribal leaders (literally Gypsy Kings – not to be confused with the band by the same name, although they are musically inclined as a rule) and they do have some laws all their own, but even those are frequently more suggestion than enforced laws. E.G., girls may marry from age 14 to 16 and boys at 18. The boy's family pays a dowry to the girl's family for the loss of income her absence will purportedly cause. They also believe red and green are lucky colors and it is perfectly okay to wear stripes and plaids together. They are extremely superstitious, E.G. they will not wash the top half of their clothing with the bottom half. I don't know what is supposed to happen if they do, but our local guide, who is clearly not fan of the Roma, says this is not a problem, since they don't invest any time in personal hygiene anyway. Also, the Roma are reportedly very religious, but apparently think God was only kidding about that not stealing business.



Rural
Transylvania

Our plan was to visit the monastery and two castles, although

regretfully, not that of Bran, which is reputed to be the home of Count Dracula, per the Bram Stoker novel. However, the family castle in question is actually several miles to the west of Bran and is in ruins, but Bran makes much better theater. It's dark and foreboding, perched on a rock between two mountains, looking like a real life version of the lair of the Grinch who stole Christmas. Dracul, which is the actual family name, in the Romanian language can mean, "Dragon" or "Devil" and thus Dracula means the son of the devil (or dragon). There were a long line of Counts Dracul, although the one everyone thinks of as the vampire is one called Vlad, the Impaler, (in Romania it would be Vlad Tepes) who lived during the 1400's. This nickname came about when Vladimir, (Vlad for short) established a reputation for impaling scores of people who incurred his displeasure on long stakes with sharp points, causing them a slow and painful death. Depending on to whom you talk, some say he only impaled those who really had it coming, and in fact he is considered by most Romanians to be a hero for standing up to the Turks. One story that does have some historical basis in fact says that he left several miles of impaled enemy captives (some 20,000 in one day as the story goes) for Turkish invaders to see to more or less discourage them from further invasion. This would certainly cause the average invading soldier to stop and perhaps realign his priorities. I proved an effective way to get his point across—no pun intended. The contrasting view is that his impaling of heads was cruel, wanton and random and that he impaled anyone who crossed him and anyone whom he thought might cross him in the future.

Regardless of what you believe, (as they say , one man's vampire is another man's patriot – or maybe they don't say it and I just made that up myself) you have to think that the man was really looney tunes in a very major way. It is said he liked to test people for honesty by overpaying a merchant. If the merchant returned his money, there was no problem. If not, the merchant would come out, not on the short end, but on the

sharp end of the stick. He also liked to leave coins in the street and see who picked them up and what they did with them. Wrong choices, of course, had serious consequences. Some of his defenders say the whole story about his drinking blood, creating a whole batch of vampires in his wake, etc. is either total fiction created by Bram Stoker, or else a smear campaign started by his enemies. But if his escapade with the Turks is any indicator, he may have done all the evil deeds attributed to him, just to keep his reputation intact so nobody would mess with him.

As for Bran Castle, it was built to defend against raids by the Ottomans, served briefly as a customs house and eventually, was given as a gift to Romania's Queen Mary in 1920. Even today it is widely believed to be haunted. And perhaps there was something to the haunted castle business at Bran, which was the Queen's favorite hangout. As the story goes, she was so fond of it, she asked that her heart be cut out of her body when she died and be buried in the courtyard, while the rest of her was to be carted off to some official royal cemetery to be buried with her husband. It seems unclear whether her wishes were carried out. She was more than a little on the unconventional side. She was reportedly the first woman ever to be seen smoking in public. Her life and eventual demise were beyond bizarre. She became Queen in 1914 when her husband, Ferdinand inherited the throne. She was considered to be the power behind the throne and is credited with getting Transylvania back for Romania at the end of WWI. However, prior to that she had a number of illicit affairs, several resulting in children, not fathered by her husband. One was reportedly sent away, but after the next few, Ferdinand must have decided to go with the flow and declare them his. I do have to interject here his rooms at the palace at Peles are decidedly feminine while Mary's have got the usual kingly décor and manly knick-knacks, so she might have worn the pants in the family, so to speak. But I'm getting ahead of myself. More on Peles Castle after I dish the dirt on

Their Majesties.



The Sculture
Garden at
Peles Castle

The five siblings proved to be rambunctious children, including two girls who were nicknamed “Ducky” due to her squeaky voice, and “Mignon” which roughly translates as “petite”, as in Filet Mignon. Her two sons, the heir to the throne, Carol and his younger brother Nicolae were beyond rambunctious, often fighting with each other using lethal weapons. While summering at Bran, they got into a particularly nasty brawl, involving a knife fight, and when Mary intervened, she was stabbed (unintentionally as the story goes) by Carol. She died some time later, according to rumor from complications from the wound.



The Church at
Pelisor Castle

Since Carol, of course, was the Crown Prince, this incident was more or less swept under the rug, along with Mary’s own

infidelities and other assorted family scandals. King Ferdinand died shortly after, and Carol, the oldest son, ascended to the throne as King Carol II. However, he was more commonly known as the “Playboy King and he had trouble focusing on the business of actually being king. His portraits show him to be handsome in a James Dean sort of way, but regretfully, with a weak chin to match his weak character. He ran off to Paris and Monaco with his mistress du jour, Magda , and back home in Bucharest his son Mihail, a child at the time, was declared King. However Carol II came back some time later and was again declared king. Apparently he had tired of Magda, or exile or whatever, but he did not apparently tire of illicit sex since he had two children with his high school age mistress upon his return. His wife Elena divorced him – no surprise there. Carol II died in 1940 and Mihail got to be King again, but then the Communists came along in 1947 and he was sidelined until the 1989 revolt. Then the people decided they didn’t really need a monarch since public funds could be wasted quite well without one and they’d had plenty of being bossed around by the Communists. And so Mihail, still alive today, is more or less still warming the royal bench.



Peles Castle –
Summer Home of
Romanian
Royalty

We visited Peles Castle, named after the Peles River, which was the summer home of King Carol I and Queen Elizabeth. From the outside it resembles a Bavarian Lodge (albeit a giant one) and on the inside it has the most ornate and elaborate

carvings imaginable. There are over 170 rooms in the palace. The style is actually called German Renaissance, which translates as Big Time Gingerbread, with carvings and curlicues on every surface. It was started in 1873, but not finished until 1914. Then we went to Pelisor (which means little Peles) which was the summer home of Ferdinand and Mary, just down the road from Mom and Dad,



Pelisor Castle

and the site of many of the aforementioned shenanigans. It is only a modest 70 room palace furnished in the Art Nouveau style. Both palaces were among the first in Europe to have central heating, but air conditioning is strictly al fresco. We were told that Ceaucescu wanted to take over Peles as his summer residence, but the local caretakers cleverly fibbed to him (brave souls) telling him they had found bacteria growing in the walls and it would be bad for his health. Hypochondriac that he was, that was more or less the end of that.



The Monastery

at Peles

From there we visited the monastery and church which is still functioning today. Carol and Elizabeth lived here part time when Peles was being built. This is a Romanian Orthodox Church, different in several ways from Roman Catholic. E.G. they make the sign of the cross in reverse order and then they touch the ground, signifying the "dust to dust" aspect of the Gospel. They also kiss certain icons in the church, have confession face to face with the priest twice a year, but often chat with him regarding things that concern him throughout the year. Priests have to be married in order to have a church. Otherwise they will be



Monastery
Gardens —
Peles

monks. Mass lasts approximately 3 hours and the attendees stand during that time. There are elaborate liturgies, no hymns and it is highly ritualized, although it seems disorganized to the drop in casual observer. On an egalitarian note, the iconography is no more skillfully rendered for the royalty than for the commoners as far as I can tell.

September 4, 2008

Dateline: Bucharest, Romania



The Palace of Parliament

Today we visited the Palace of Parliament, first dreamed up and started by Ceaucescu in 1984, He ordered blocks and blocks of historic buildings torn down, including no fewer than 22 churches, in order to erect this behemoth. A massive earthquake in 1977, centered in Bucharest, only further aided the cause. The Romanians also call the building the Casa Populari, or the people's house, which has a nicer ring to it than Ceaucescus's White Elephant. Something we noted here and around much of Bucharest is the lack of care given to lawns. They mow, but they don't eradicate weeds so any given lawn is a blend of crabgrass, dandelions and other sorts of noxious weeds intermingled with desirable varieties of grass. However, we were told that during the G8 Summit here in April, gardens bloomed, weeds were beaten into submission and stray dogs disappeared from the streets, so apparently it is a matter of priorities. As a side note: Brigitte Bardot provided money to sterilize the stray dogs of Romania, but she must have either lost interest or run out of money because there are lots of puppies running around.

The Palace of Parlilament project was not completed before Ceauscescu and the Communists were booted out, and they were both so hated, the general consensus was to tear it down, but it was at a point where it would cost more to demolish than to finish. Mr. and Mrs. Ceaucescu were eventually convicted in a rather speedy trial of various crimes against humanity, theft,

misuse of public funds, etc. and eventually executed by firing squad in December of 2007, so apparently justice isn't too swift in Romania either. I understand that a video of their execution can be seen on You Tube and other websites, in case anyone is interested in watching. Mrs. C was even more hated than Mr. C. During their tenure (his official title was General Secretary of Romania), she insisted that her picture be on the first page of every text book in the land. After the revolt, there were millions of textbooks with that page ripped out.

Although Ceaucescu never got to have the big moment in front of the crowds from the gigantic balcony of the Palace of Parliament, the one major world figure who did was Michael Jackson, greeting an estimated (perhaps exaggerated) 1 million fans who had hoped to see him here in concert. Unfortunately, Michael made just the smallest of bloopers when he came out and said



The Potato on
a Stake –
Downtown
Bucharest

“Hello, Budapest”. The local citizens apparently didn't take it too hard since his concert was a sellout, but Michael ended his remarks rather abruptly after the gaffe. Bucharest also has some interesting post Communist modern sculpture which the locals usually give irreverent nicknames. My personal favorite is the one called the Potato on a Stake (I thought of an impaled baked potato and wondered if there is a connection

to Vlad) on a tall spire and another called The Cookie, which is indeed cookie shaped with a cross formed by holes cut in it.

Since the 1989 revolt, Romania has had a series of presidents – some with more integrity than others. I didn't get the names, but it seems they all end in "escu". One of these "escus" in particular was pointed out as being the worst of the worst (next to Ceaucescu that is). He supposedly sold the Romanian Navy Fleet for scrap and pocketed the money.

We made a brief visit to a Greek Orthodox church, I found that herein dwell the drab Ludmillas of the Eastern Bloc that I had envisioned. She and a clone were guarding the church against improprieties committed by the tourists wandering in off the street. She was built like a fireplug and had a no-nonsense demeanor that convinced us all she could take us down and rip our hearts out for the slightest infraction. Every church we came to visit seems to have their own Ludmilla guarding the portals. They also sell votive candles for you to light for a small fee. In this church, they are lit outside in little metal oven-like structures with vents. I'm not sure why – possibly they are afraid of fire since in subsequent churches they were lit inside with the candles supported in a layer of sand covered by water. Another theory is that they would smoke up the church and obscure the iconography.

We had lunch at the Pescarus Restaurant (translates as the Seagull) and were entertained by native folk dancers and a small musical group playing both classical and the classics with a very gypsy sound, with a few polkas thrown in for good measure. The closing dance number was called the Chicken Dance, although the music and execution of dance moves is very different from the US version. It is done at weddings by the bride and groom for the purpose of collecting wedding gift money from the guests. They use a real chicken (plucked and cooked), but for purposes of this dance, they were the gag gift rubber type and they were collecting tips from the

tourists.



The Port of Giurgiu

After lunch we drove by bus to Guirgui, Romania, the port on the Danube where we boarded our vessel, the *River Explorer*. We had dinner on board and then departed for the Bulgarian port of Silistra. We are going down stream toward the Black Sea to enable us to visit Varna tomorrow, before turning upstream and heading west to continue our adventure.

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