

## **Balkans Trip 2019 (Illustrated!)**

(Videos are available by email or FB Messenger)

During October I traveled by train and bus around Europe, mostly in Balkan countries. The excuse for the trip was a mid-month Democrats Abroad (DA) regional meeting in Athens. I decided – mostly on the way back – to visit as many Balkan countries as I could, but I wanted to be home by Ellinor’s Halloween birthday, so time in each country would be strictly limited.

I also realized that I could visit an old Zen teacher in southern Germany on the way down. Other than in Germany, I had lovely mildly-warm weather until the last two days, and I had a wonderful trip overall, a fantastic time. I enjoyed all the countries very much.

I also had some adventures (and disasters), including: sleeping in an “abandoned” (empty, under remodeling) hostel in Bulgaria; being stranded at the Greek border for six hours in the middle of the night; an electrical fire in Albania; a couple of hitchhiking episodes in Romania (one successful, the other ending in an encounter with Hungarian border police and a €165 taxi ride to Budapest). Here’s what happened.

### **Interrail Pass mistake**

When I started planning the trip, I thought I could do it all by train, so I bought a one-month discounted (senior rate) Interrail Pass, like a Eurail Pass, but for residents of Europe. I blocked out a general route and started making reservations, but it quickly became clear – confirmed by answers to a question I posted on a Facebook group for travel in the Balkans – that train connections in Albania and most of former Yugoslavia were nonexistent, unreliable, or exceedingly slow. Everyone said to take buses instead. The site Rome2Rio.com was recommended for checking alternative travel modes and routes, and proved invaluable.

It turned out that – because I took buses so much in Albania and former Yugoslavia – I could have used a cheaper Interrail Pass good for any 15 days of travel within two months, even though I didn’t need the second month. But it was too late to change; and there would have been a refund-fee anyway, so I wouldn’t have gained so much.

### **I know nothing (Zen)**

I first took an overnight train to Basel, coming in more than 10 minutes early, which scared me as the train was continuing on and I had just awakened and wasn’t finished packing up yet. The attendant also had my passport overnight and hadn’t given it back yet, but it worked out okay.

We arrived at the “German” train station but were actually in Switzerland, which I didn’t realize at first. The left-luggage locker wouldn’t take Euros, even after a nice passerby helped me get what I thought was the right change. Someone referred me to another set of lockers that took Euros, but they were closed for repair. In order to get Swiss francs in change, I tried to buy something in Coop (a small grocery store) with Euros, but I had misunderstood a price and got less change than I needed, so – over protest – I got the purchase refunded so I could try again.

Finally I bought something and got sufficient change (I thought) for both that day and Sunday – when I’d be moving on towards Athens – but by then the only available small (cheaper) locker had been taken, so I had to use a much larger (and more expensive) one. Oh well, off to see the city.

I had a telephone plan allowing a large amount of data and a large number of text messages within the European Economic Area, which – because it includes Liechtenstein – I mistakenly thought included Switzerland as well. But when Ellinor noticed that the cash-balance on my phone had gone down drastically, I realized that I was getting charged for data-access in Switzerland, or sometimes even when in Germany but close to the border (this happened again later, when I was in Bulgaria but close to the Serbian border).

In the afternoon – after visiting the Basel Historical Museum in the old Barefoot Church – I took a local train and bus out to Dharma Sangha. It’s a Zen Buddhist residential center in the Black Forest of southern Germany founded by Richard Baker-roshi who was the abbot of San Francisco Zen Center (SFZC) and Tassajara Zen Mountain Center (monastery) when I lived there 1973-75. I

hardly knew Baker-roshi then because, while he was at the top of the pecking order, I was one of the newest, lowest, and most emotionally confused students. One time at Tassajara, when no one else was around, he bowed to me – as Zen people are wont to do – when passing perhaps 30 yards away. Not thinking he could be bowing to me – not believing that he could even SEE me – I was confused and didn't respond. (On other occasions he had shown great sensitivity to me, so I should have known better; perhaps I'll describe my earlier experiences with him separately.)

I hadn't seen Baker-roshi since a 1977 visit to SFZC's Green Gulch Farm in Marin County, across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. He left under a cloud in 1983 – in what's been called "the Apocalypse" as reported in Michael Downing's book *Shoes Outside the Door* – and I had long wondered how he was doing. He has a center in Crestone, Colorado, and some years ago I'd learned that he also has the center near Basel. When I started travel-planning, I realized that I could go by way of Germany, where a special event for 25-30 of his senior Zen students was happening the weekend before I needed to be in Athens. I asked if I could attend as well.



On the morning after I arrived at the Zen center, we sat two 40-minute periods of zazen (sitting meditation) early – wake-up was at 4 a.m. – then chanting and bowing service, followed by breakfast. Then I went to see if the office was open so I could pay what I owed for the event.

Just then someone with luggage arrived and looked at me very intently. Thinking it was someone else new like me and needing direction, I said, "I know nothing." He said, "You know NOTHING?" Then I recognized Baker-roshi and, laughing, said "I thought you were a new arrival." "Well, I am!", he said. When I introduced myself – I had corresponded, of course, and he knew that I was coming – he replied, "Can I get a California hug?" "Sure."

If you know something about Zen, you'll probably understand why I thought that conversation (about nothing) was quite funny.

Baker-roshi seemed to love having me there, and was very welcoming, perhaps because I had reappeared from before that 1980s cloud. When it came my turn to describe my practice to the

group – after mentioning how poor a Zen practitioner I’ve been over the years, with often lapsed individual and group practice – I mentioned my constantly seeking to find a balanced (vertical) and relaxed sitting posture.

In response to Baker-roshi’s earlier comment that “why anything exists at all is a mystery,” I commented that, although we – who grew up in the Christian tradition – usually say that “God created the universe and then [stuff happened]”, in fact our perceived universe could go “poof” at any moment, so it might be more accurate to say that God **is creating** the universe from moment to moment. (The fact that I’ve had cancer twice – tongue-base and bladder – and heart failure once, may contribute to my awareness of transience, impermanence, evanescence...)

I also mentioned that I often don’t know what to do, or why God – again, in that tradition – created life. What are we supposed to do? The usual answer is that our purpose is to worship God: But what is worship? I think that just existing in the universe... is worship (I paused, and Baker-roshi finished my thought).

On the last morning, I had dokusan – private interview – with him. I felt very honored to have been included in the group, and told him so, then asked about my mother-in-law’s recent death.

Mormor had a hard time dying – not because she was afraid to go (she was a God-fearing woman, very aware of avoiding the Seven Deadly Sins throughout her long life), but because she had either extreme pain, or disorienting and debilitating pain-medication – and couldn’t die when she wanted to. Why wouldn’t He come and take her away? Her final advice was “Don’t have children!” because they might have to go through something similar. (Of course Ellinor and I are long past that, our children are full grown.)

Would more or better “practice” (perhaps zazen) have helped her, perhaps helped with her pain? Baker-roshi didn’t know, though we agreed that, in general, zazen helps, practice helps.

He had mentioned to the group that he’d like to see more discussion among the group, not always directed to him, or waiting for him; though since he needs (and I needed) a translator – amongst all those German speakers – it happened easily that discussion got directed to him.

Still, I was uncomfortable with the “guru culture”, and mentioned that to him. As a graduate of the St. John’s College “Great Books” Program based on discussion and questioning, it doesn’t seem healthy to me. I would like it if people felt more comfortable to question or challenge – or perhaps even interrupt – the teacher as they would anyone else.

On the other hand – I mentioned to him – look at this beautiful center that he’d created with all these fine people, perhaps at least partly due to that guru culture. Perhaps Buddhism – and related traditions – have evolved it because it works. (Perhaps America – and Germany – will find out if a more “democratic” Buddhism can survive and thrive?)

Before I left at the end of our four days of group conversations, I mentioned possibly coming to visit Baker-roshi’s center in Colorado, where he spends half of the year, and he said enthusiastically that he’d meet me at Denver airport.

### **Awakened in Munich**

After lunch on Sunday I packed up and then took a walk to explore the village of Herrischried-Großherrischwand and this beautiful landscape in the midst of the Black Forest.



I found a wonderful standing-Buddha statue that Baker-roshi had bought and installed under a tree near a small creek.



Then I caught a bus and train into Basel. Earlier I'd seen a pretzel shop with so many kinds that I'd never seen before – first, they weren't thin, crunchy, hard-baked pretzels like Americans are familiar with, but rather thick and bready – some with poppy seeds or sunflower seeds or other toppings. I looked for the shop to get some for my next two days on trains, but it was closed.

I wandered along the Rhine in the dark, admiring the occasional drop-nets suspended along the bank for fishing. I also admired the parking "lane" which included half the sidewalk on some streets. Once in Washington DC I was ticketed for "blocking the sidewalk" with our '69-VW "hippie flag car" when – in order to work under the car – I had parked with two wheels on the curb, separated from the sidewalk by two feet of grass! I wouldn't have gotten a ticket in Basel.



I stumbled across the Tinguely (Carnival) Fountain with lots of sculptural machines spouting water in a pond. When I stopped to take pictures, hungry ducks paddled over to beg (see video 1).

 1-Tinguely Fountain in Basel wi

It was getting late but I still had time to kill so I checked movies and went in to see Downton Abbey, then double-checked my departure time and had to leave halfway through – when they took an intermission! – hopping a tram back to the German station in pouring rain.

Just before 23:30 I boarded a train for Karlsruhe – arriving just before 1:30 a.m. – then boarded another train and took half a Stillocht (Ambien, Zolpidem) so I could sleep sitting up, as the train

had no sleepers. Less than four hours later we arrived in Munich, where – after all the other passengers had left the train – I was awakened by the attendant.

### Good and Evil in Craiova

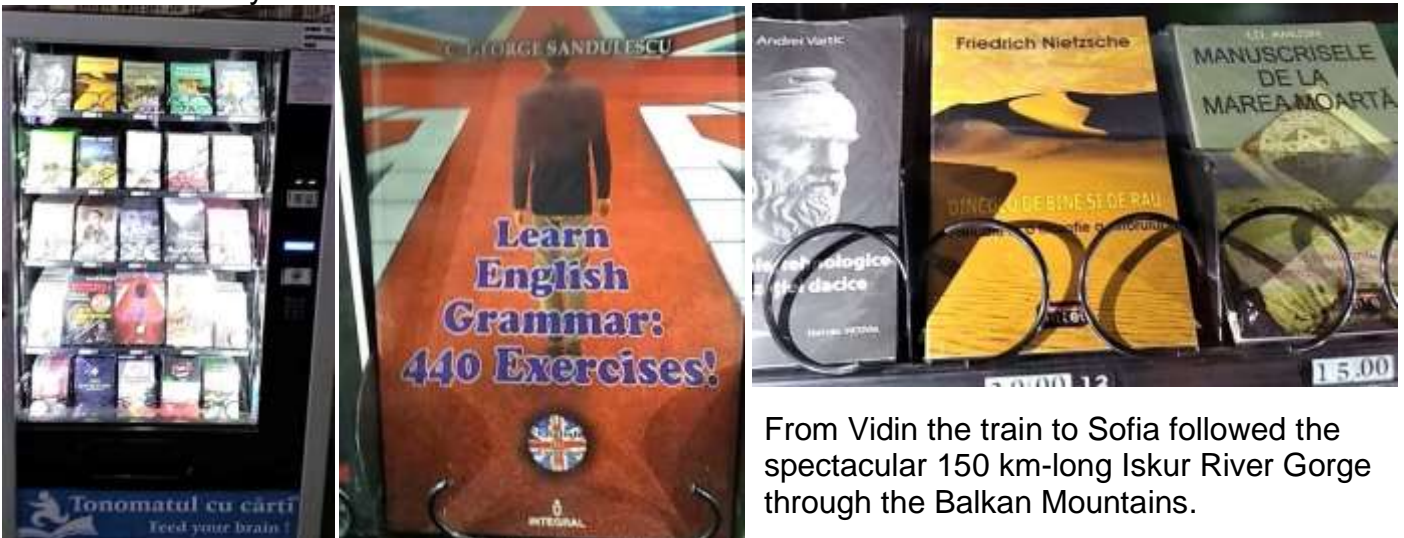
I got something to eat and caught my next train, via Salzburg and Vienna – both of which I slept through – arriving in Budapest mid-afternoon and changing to yet another train, to Timișoara, Romania.



On that train a young psychology student – on her way home from a “psy-music” (psychedelic, techno, or trance music) party with friends in Budapest – started talking with me, and promised to show me around if I came through Timișoara later on my way to Bucharest, an offer which I gladly accepted. She mentioned that she had several times attended the huge summer Ozora Music Festival in Hungary, which sounded fun.

For when I came back to Romania later, I needed to book reservations which I hadn't been able to book online. I had reserved a sleeper from Bucharest to Iași – at the Moldovan border – and now I tried to reserve the rest of the way to the Moldovan capital, Chișinău. But I realized that I'd then have to change sleepers in the middle of the night, so I cancelled the reservation I'd made online and booked straight through from Bucharest to Chișinău, and back the next night.

I had a sleeper from Timișoara but – after just six hours sleep – I arrived in Craiova before 5:00 a.m. There I had several hours until catching a “local” train to Vidin, just across the Bulgarian border. Wandering around the early-morning train station, I came across an automat selling paperback books, including Learn English Grammar in 440 Exercises and a Romanian translation of Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil.



From Vidin the train to Sofia followed the spectacular 150 km-long Iskur River Gorge through the Balkan Mountains.

## “Abandoned” hostel in Sofia, Bulgaria

I had time to stop in Sofia, Bulgaria, on the way to Athens, and had booked a hostel for two nights. I arrived at dusk after nearly two days on trains from Basel, tired also from walking a kilometer from the station with my backpack and daypack. There was a sign saying Italian House Hostel outside what looked like a tall apartment building, but there was no response to the doorbell.

I hadn't thought to look for a plug-in on the train and my phone was dead, so I got a passerby to call the hostel for me. Instead of just letting me in, the person I talked with asked questions to verify that I had a reservation, then gave me the door code, which worked and I went in.

There was NO ONE THERE! The building was apparently being remodeled, all torn up, with pipes exposed and plaster everywhere.

Thinking there must be people here somewhere, I went up a floor, but no one was there either, nor on the next. On the 4<sup>th</sup> floor I looked around and found a bed and a pillow and a blanket – no pillow case or sheets, but hey – so I decided to sleep there.

I reorganized my gear for traveling. Power was on, so I charged my phone. Hot water was on, so I took a shower and washed and hung up a couple quick-drying shirts.



Because I was leaving my backpack there, I double-checked the door code before going out to find dinner. I found a good restaurant nearby: braised lamb's tongue; broccoli with blue cheese & cream sauce; wine (of which I saved half for later); crème caramel for dessert; all for €15

(perhaps \$16.50). It was quite dark when I returned, so – not wanting to attract attention by turning on lots of lights – I used a flashlight going upstairs, and set a small night-light under the window.

During the night I realized that, of course, I couldn't stay there ANOTHER night, because I couldn't leave my bag there and risk its being found while I was out seeing the city. In the morning I looked online, found another place nearby, and booked for that night. I had printed my reservation so I wrote a note at the top – “I HAD a reservation!” – and left it on my obviously slept-in bed.



I had propped a chair against the door during the night, but now realized that the door opens out, so it wouldn't have kept anyone out, though at least I might have heard it fall if someone came in.

I heard noises in the stairwell. As I started out with my bags, down from the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, I heard and saw workmen on the 3<sup>rd</sup>-floor landing. They turned and went into the 3<sup>rd</sup>-floor rooms just as I passed, so they didn't see me. And I was out unchallenged.



I called on the door-telephone at the new place I had booked but was told I couldn't leave my bag there until check-in time in the afternoon. I asked the nearby restaurant where I'd had dinner the night before if I could leave my bag there – telling them that I planned to come back that night (which was true) – but they said “not possible”. (I was miffed but had dinner there again anyway.) A nearby hotel also said “not possible” in the same monotone way: Did they learn this bureaucratic response during Communist times?

So I took my big backpack as well as my daypack with me to the Ethnology Museum. I had no Bulgarian money and couldn't pay with a card, so the museum attendant referred me to the museum's gift shop. I looked through the lovely variety of items on sale but didn't see anything I wanted, so just asked if I could change Euros. The cashier hesitated, then realized that it was so that I could enter the museum, and said sure, even giving me a complimentary candy. Later we happened to spot each other on the street and she waved gaily as though we were old friends.

In the museum I was struck by a primitive plow which appeared to be a spade attached to a wooden frame so it could be pulled through the field. There were also Easter breads with painted eggs baked in.



I had lunch (cherry pelmeni, dumplings) at a Russian restaurant (Arbat) with view of the onion-domed Russian church across the street.



I checked in at the new place (Belle Stelle) and dropped off my bag. When I explained what had happened the night before – the hostel under remodeling, and no one there – the manager was VERY apologetic about not accepting my bag that morning, even though she would have had to come across town to let me in, as she didn't live there.

After visiting the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral – built to honor the hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers who died fighting for Bulgarian independence from Turkey in the late 1800s – I walked by Sofia University and sent a picture to a friend who has taught there.



In a park across the street was a statue of the patron saint of the university, Clement of Ohrid.



I walked by Starbucks, and now see on Google Maps that there are three in the city center, and two further out. How reassuring.



I called HostelBookers.com and told them about the “abandoned” hostel – so they wouldn't book anyone else there while it was being remodeled – and they refunded my booking fee.

While riding a tram I spotted an Office Depot (!) and hopped off to buy small post-it notes, which I hadn't found in the one office-supply store I'd asked in Göteborg. (I usually buy such supplies in the States.) It took a while – miming – to communicate what I wanted, but finally we found them.



I rode another tram to the end of the line. Since it hadn't gone by the train station – which I wanted to know how to get to for when I would be leaving the next day – I wanted to go back. The driver didn't speak English, but she said "Out" very commandingly. I got on again after the tram turned around.

At "my" restaurant, among other things, I had *shkembé* (which they had translated as "paunch", i.e., stomach, tripe) with cheese, and later strained yoghurt with crushed walnuts and honey for dessert.

After checking out the next morning, I left my backpack at the hostel – the manager allowed me to keep keys so I could get in to get it in the middle of the day, when no one else would be around – and visited the wonderful Archaeological Museum. As so often in this area, the exhibits included stone age and bronze age finds, Roman statues, early Christian works, and then evidence of early Bulgar settlement. On Facebook Messenger I sent Ellinor a picture of a lovely Roman white-marble statue of a couple in which the man was nude while the woman was clothed. My "full-time feminist" wife approved.

A large ancient ceramic vessel with neck shaped like a bird's head also caught my eye.



When I headed for the station there seemed to have been an accident or mechanical delay of the tram I needed. I asked some young Asian-looking school-girls standing nearby if a different tram would take me to the station. They suggested that the subway was easier, then – since I hesitated – they went with me to show me the way, as they were going that direction anyway.

### **No train to Thessaloniki**

The train towards Greece that I needed was listed on Platform 13, or rather 1<sub>3</sub>. But when I went to platform 13, I didn't see it listed as departing from there. I waited a while but then got nervous and went back to ask at the ticket office.

No, no, 1<sub>3</sub> isn't 13. That "subscript" symbol indicates *западно* (west) for short trains leaving from that side of Platform 1, while other short trains could be leaving from the other side going (or at least starting) east. Our train had an ancient-looking locomotive and just two cars.



In 1969 I flew from New York to Luxembourg and booked a train to Athens. But nowadays, perhaps because most travelers fly instead, train connections in Europe are fragmented. Just to get from Sofia to Athens required four segments:

- a local train (from platform 1<sub>3</sub>) going close to the Greek border;
- then – across the border – a minivan scheduled for a bit later, but actually just waiting for whoever came off the train;
- then a local train into Thessaloniki;
- and finally I had booked a night-train to Athens.

But after the minivan, the local train didn't arrive to take us to Thessaloniki.

There were only five of us, waiting together on the platform: a charming young Austrian fellow; a slightly older Zimbabwean/South African guy (with Afrikaner and British ancestry); and two rather old Bulgarian men, one of whom told us in badly broken English about climbing mountains all over the world, which we somewhat doubted. The station master told us that the train might come in an hour or two – or they might send a bus – and that there was no food in the area, we were in the middle of nowhere. (I had long before eaten the rusks and kefir I'd brought along for the trip.)

Then we got no more information for a long time, and had to just laugh at being stranded with no idea what would happen next. Fortunately the weather was pleasant. And the platform was crawling with thousands of millipedes, which provided some amusement (see video 2).

The station manager allowed us to charge our phones in the office, and asked eventually if we'd like pizza. Yes! He called and ordered three large pizzas, although – since the Bulgarians had their own food – two would have been sufficient.



2-Millipedes on railway platform near

Perhaps I should have assumed that the train company was paying, but – since the pizza deliveryman was waiting to get paid – I asked if we should pay, and of course was told yes. The Zimbabwean/South African/British guy couldn't find any Euros in his bag of various currencies, so I ended up paying for him as well as myself.

We tossed the crusts to two street dogs that had been hanging around the platform (see video 3). One dog was clearly dominant, so I tossed a small bit to him, off to one side, then threw a much larger bit to the other one.



3-Street dogs on train platform near (

After about six hours a locomotive went by towards Thessaloniki. Wait, wait, where are you going? But it went to get train cars, two whole cars, for the five of us. (We could have just jumped on the locomotive.)

We got to Thessaloniki about 4 a.m. – my night-train to Athens had left about 11 p.m. – so, after breakfast of bougatsa custard phyllo pie with cinnamon, and fresh-squeezed orange juice, I caught the Friday morning train at 6:30. Fortunately, although I had tried online, I hadn't been able to book a ticket for the morning Acropolis tour, which I would have missed. And since I hadn't known about it when I made my travel plans, I missed a reception given by the DA delegation from Romania on Thursday evening.

I wanted to book a bus ticket to Tirana for the following Monday morning (after the weekend DA meetings), and – although I didn't have a precise address – I knew which street the bus company was on, and it was on the way to my hotel (Hostel Fivos). The name was different, but when I

spotted a bus company advertising passage to Tirana, I assumed they had changed their company name and booked a ticket for 8:00 on Monday.

### **Boat to Aegina instead of bus to Tirana**

On Friday night in Athens there was another reception for Democrats Abroad people, but I had neglected to look up the address and mark it in the hiking GPS that I use when traveling. Instead I looked up the address on my phone, but I wasn't used to using that GPS and didn't know how to interpret it. On my hiking GPS I can easily see how far I am from my target, and whether I'm heading towards it or away. Now I found myself getting further and further away from the reception.

After wandering along several connected walking streets packed with restaurants and their guests, I ended up clear around on the south side of the Acropolis. Eventually I got to the reception, which had a wonderful view of the Parthenon (from the north).

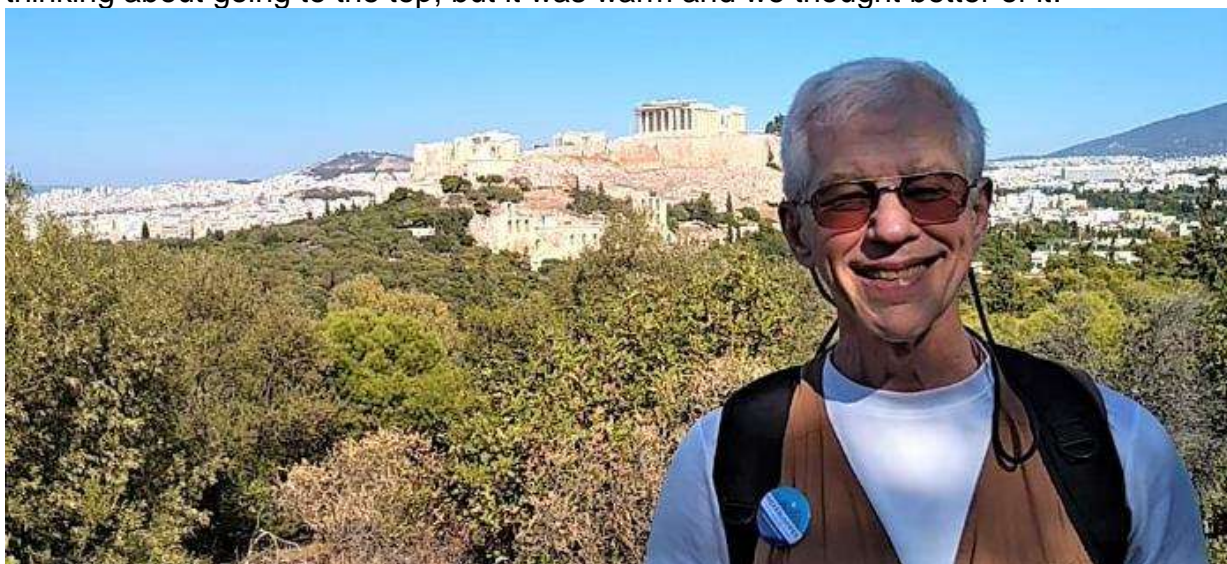


On Saturday we had lunch on the roof of the conference hotel with another wonderful view of the Acropolis and Parthenon.



We had excellent Democrats Abroad meetings, all day Saturday and then Sunday morning, mostly focused on preparations for our Global Presidential Primary coming up in March, when we would determine which presidential candidates our delegates to the National Democratic Convention would vote for in Milwaukee the following summer.

As I was wondering what to do Sunday afternoon, the chair of DA's global Resolutions Committee – on which I volunteer – asked if I'd like to go for a walk. We went around south of the Parthenon, thinking about going to the top, but it was warm and we thought better of it.



We saw the cave referred to as “Socrates’ Prison,” then Susan mentioned the Piraeus and we took a train out there and walked around the port, finally finding something to eat at a small café, before catching a bus and then train back to Athens. I packed up and got to bed early.

On Monday morning I had early breakfast at the hotel, then walked to the bus company, arriving well before 8:00. They checked my ticket and asked if I’d like to sit down and have coffee. I was puzzled because, for a bus that was scheduled to leave at 8:00, not much seemed to be happening. Well, it’s Greece, but still...

Eventually – embarrassingly long after 8:00 – I finally asked what was happening. “You’re early!” they told me, and showed on my ticket that the bus was scheduled to go at 8 p.m. (20:00)! (The other company, that I’d been looking for, has a bus at 8 a.m.)

OK, what to do. I found the Metro and took a train out to Piraeus again, this time looking for a boat going somewhere. The closest island is Aegina, about an hour away, and a boat was leaving soon, so I bought a ticket. Spotting a map of the island showing various trails and historical points, I thought about a hike to some of them... then – in the heat – decided to have lunch at a quayside restaurant, then dessert at another, and walked around the village on the way back to the boat.



I took a train back to the center of Athens but was early for the bus, so I continued to the end of the line and back, then couldn’t get through the turnstile at the station where I wanted to exit because I’d been in the system over 90 minutes. Now time was short and I was panicked, but a passer-by used his card to let me out.

I put my backpack – which the bus company had kindly kept for me during the day – in the luggage compartment under the bus, then realized that, because I had packed for a daytime bus, I didn’t have lots of things in my daypack that I needed for the night. In the dark under the bus I managed to find my bag – now buried rather deeply under other people’s bags – and got out what I needed. Unfortunately, I didn’t think about pain pills, and by accident took a milder (over-the-counter) sleeping pill than I intended. I managed to sleep on the bus – and had both a good back pillow and good wrap-around neck support – but I woke up frequently with terrible back pain. At least there was a helpful Albanian woman sitting next to me who woke me up when there was a pee-break and when we needed to show our passports at the border.

### **Fire in Tirana**

I had booked a hostel in Tirana, Albania, for Monday and Tuesday nights, but now arrived early on Tuesday morning. Heading for my hostel – thinking perhaps to sack out a little after the very painful all-night ride on the bus – I spotted a small electrical shop that was open. I had brought along my electric shaver and power cord, hoping to find a 120 Volt outlet somewhere like we have in our bathroom in Göteborg. But the charge was getting low, so I asked a DA friend in Athens if perhaps there was such an outlet in his hotel room. No, but doesn’t it work on 240 Volt power as well? When I looked: yes, it does! OK, but then I needed a plug adapter, which I hadn’t brought along. But this little shop had one; problem solved.

No one was awake at Vertigo Hostel (!), but doors were open so I went in and sat down in the kitchen. Again my phone was dead, so I plugged it into an outlet over the kitchen counter. BOOM! The outlet exploded in a mass of flames! How could such a large fireball flare up instantly? I panicked: What have I done? Should I run away? But I managed to blow out the flames. A few minutes later flames flared up again, but again I blew them out.

Something had started beeping – a fire alarm? – but I couldn't localize it. I opened windows and tried to air out, and scrubbed the soot off the wall. Finally the owner came into the kitchen. I apologized and said I'd have to pay for the damage. He was very businesslike, turning off the power, pulling out the outlet and cutting and taping the wires, then getting me checked in and set up in my room. Fortunately, my phone and charger had not been damaged, so I plugged in again.

Looking for pastries and herbal tea – I avoid caffeine almost entirely – I went into a “café” only to be told that, as the name implied, they served coffee and that was it, nothing else. There seem to be many such “coffee shops” in the Balkan countries. However – after finding pastries at a tiny street-bakery – I found a place where I was able to get tea, in a tiny cup, like a Swedish coffee cup. They even had a big-screen TV with news in English.



I saw Stockholm Coffee & Lounge, and next to the hostel a place named Gothenburg! OK, Swedes drink a lot of coffee, but really? (I much prefer the Swedish spelling Göteborg, however.)



On the street there was a notice board featuring a huge pineapple with sunglasses, nose, and teeth, and the green top as hair. What it meant I have no idea.

In the National History Museum I admired a large silver and gold Christian artwork with holes where the faces of Mother Mary and Baby Jesus should be. I imagined letting visitors take pictures standing behind with their own faces showing.




Another striking artwork in the museum was a line of headless papier-mâché “humans” of all shapes and sizes, with description (by Bujar Vani): “Blindness on the red path: During the 20<sup>th</sup> century took place the drama of the denial of liberties, where ideas were transformed into ideologies and the ruling ideologies killed freedoms. The Fascist, the Nazi, and the Communist dictatorships converted man to an ideological programmed machine who kills, destroys, and annihilates everything that is out of this machine program. Part of this painful drama was the Albanian people too, who for 50 years tasted one of the most brutal Communist dictatorships.”



In the museum – spotting a fire extinguisher – I wrote down it's Albanian name and started asking people where I could buy one. (The first people I asked were Turkish Airlines passenger-attendants visiting the museum on their day off, so not much help.) Finally I found a fire extinguisher store (!) and bought a small one, suitable really for a camper-truck, but as I explained – when they tried to sell me a much larger one, more suitable for a house – it's not MY house! When I gave it to the hostel owner, he said that he'd known there was a problem with the outlet, and had put up a sign saying don't use it, but someone using the kitchen had apparently (accidentally?) removed the sign.



On a main street I admired traffic signals where not just the usual lights lit up but also the entire pole, turning from green to yellow to red (see video 4)!

 4-Lighted traffic signal poles in Tiran



Of course I visited the weird pyramidal building opened in 1988 as the Enver Hoxha Museum – to honor the former long-time communist dictator – but which has long since fallen into ruin.



In the main square – where a statue of Hoxha stood until it was pulled down by an angry mob in 1991 – I admired the equestrian statue of Skanderbeg, a mid-1400s aristocrat who led an Albanian rebellion against the Ottoman Empire.



Across the street from the weird pyramid was one of the small defensive bunkers of which 750,000 (!) were built during Hoxha's somewhat paranoid rule. It also wasn't well cared for, and someone had defecated inside.

On Wednesday morning I asked if there was any tea to have with breakfast. Reaching to a high shelf for a paper bag full of dried plants – picked (she explained) high in the

mountains – the housekeeper offered me Çaj (chai) Mali (ironwort, genus *Sideritis*, aka "mountain tea"). Later in Kosovo I bought a commercial package of this tea, which I have since brewed and drunk here in Sweden, but not succeeded in finding more, despite trying.



On the bus leaving town I snapped pictures of interesting architecture: a modern building with a dramatic overhang several storeys up, and another that appeared to have a small forest growing on the roof.

Then we headed out through orange groves and masses of oranges being sold by the side of the road.






I had been asleep coming into Tirana, so can't report on roads from the south. But when I asked about buses to Skopje, Macedonia (now officially "North Macedonia") – which is east of Tirana – I was encouraged to first go northeast to Pristina (Kosovo), then south to Skopje, as that route was much faster due to better roads. And in fact the road to Pristina – though it also goes over

mountains – is mostly super-highway (double-divided, restricted access, I believe), as is the road south from Pristina to the Macedonian border. (Where did they get the money for such great roads?) Then the road degenerates considerably, but it's not far to Skopje.



We stopped for lunch at a very modern rest-stop with a beautiful view over a large reservoir and sun-shades apparently donated by .



### Salep in Skopje

On the minibus from Pristina to Skopje I chatted with a young Indian man (from India). He's got three Masters degrees, he told me proudly – in business, tourism, and something related; at least two from European universities – and he had been to lots of countries in Europe and Asia. When he heard about my trip, he asked me somewhat scornfully, with his slightly Indian accent: "How can you learn anything in just one day in each country?" (I offer this document in response.)

His phone died so he had no GPS, and he didn't want to pay the asked-for price for a taxi to his hostel. I was walking, but City Hostel, where I was going, was in a different direction, so I couldn't help more than pointing him in the right direction.

It was quite dark and the gate was locked, so I tried the bell and banged repeatedly until a slightly-drunk voice (of another guest, I believe) finally responded and let me in. I changed Euros for local currency with the owner, and he offered me a shot of rakia (strong home-brew), which I had to



water down substantially because my mouth is still so sensitive to alcohol (as well as spicy food, etc.) nine years after radiation for tongue-base cancer.

I found a good local restaurant where – though the menu was not in English – a helpful waiter made excellent suggestions for dinner, including cheap but good wine, as I found throughout the Balkans.

On the way out in the morning I made friends with the hostel's "lion dog", fortunately chained up, because he was very rambunctious and could easily have overpowered me.



I passed interesting architecture on the way downtown.



I had pastries for breakfast here and there. Passing the equestrian statue of Alexander the Great in front of the Parliament building, and the Pella Gate – part of the old city wall – I crossed the statue-infested ornamental stone bridge across the Vardar River to the museum area.



A helpful sign advertised a restaurant.

As always when visiting history and ethnography museums, I was so impressed with human ingenuity, how fragile our culture and our technological civilization are, and how long it would likely take us to recover if key institutions or technologies were lost in some global catastrophe.

Leaving the National Museum, I was struck by several museum vehicles appearing virtually abandoned in the parking lot, with weeds growing up through their bumpers.

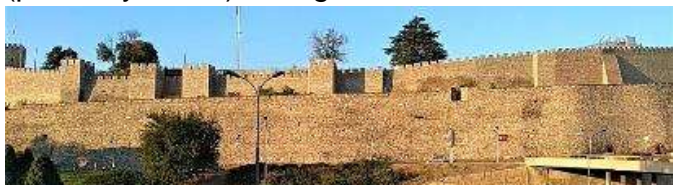


Finding a restaurant with what looked like a bar, I asked if they had beer, but was told that no one in this



area – presumably Muslim, near a mosque – would serve alcohol. Asking what else they had to drink, I was told “salep”. What is salep? “Well, it’s salep!” OK, I’ll try it (along with rice custard). It’s very good, milk thickened with starch from an orchid root, flavored with cinnamon. Later, in Pristina, I bought two packages of salep mix to take home. Now I’m looking for a source in Göteborg, where it goes very well in the cold, damp, dark winter.

I wandered around the large and impressive ruins of Kale – the late-Roman (Byzantine) Skopje Fortress – decorated with a “modern” (probably WWII) field gun on one side.



At the “bar” where I’d gotten salep, the women I paid – perhaps the mother of my young waiter? – had spontaneously told me about how many ethnic Macedonians live outside of “North Macedonia” (in the Greek province of Macedonia, as well as in Bulgaria). It was clear that many (most?) Macedonians would strongly like all their ethnic brothers and sisters incorporated into the same nation.

The same message came through clearly at The Museum of the Macedonian National Struggle, where a map of “Macedonia” clearly included large segments of Greece and Bulgaria. No wonder the Greeks insisted on a name-change (to North Macedonia, not just Macedonia) before allowing the country into NATO or the EU. And here, I’d thought, what’s the problem? Be reasonable! Oh well... (The Greek province actually includes Pella, Alexander the Great’s ancient capital.)

I've been to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. In Skopje there's a smaller version, which I believe got exhibition-support from the one in DC. It's excellent, memorializing in particular the fairly large Jewish community of Skopje, which was essentially wiped out under the Nazis during WWII.

As I was packing up in the morning I sent a picture to Ellinor of the painting of Tinkerbell stenciled on the wall in my room.

On the way to the bus station – passing a street vegetable market on the way (pictures left and below-right) – I got breakfast of cornbread, burek (spinach & cheese pie), and yoghurt (two kinds).



**Bill Clinton, Madeline Albright, and shoe repair in Pristina**

Local buses don't connect to the international bus terminal in Pristina (Kosovo), so – turning down lots of taxi offers – I walked towards town. Much to my surprise, I came to Bill Clinton Boulevard, with a large portrait of him on the side of a tall building, and a statue as well.



Later I also came across a statue of Madeline Albright, the U.S. Secretary of State during Kosovo's struggle for independence, which she and Clinton supported.

I caught a bus that I hoped would take me towards Hostel

Istanbul, but when I explained to passengers on the bus where I wanted to go, they very helpfully told me where to get off and which other bus to take instead.

At the hostel I was struck by a very old clothes-iron the likes of which I'd never seen before.



I accepted dinner when the hostel owner offered. I asked where I could buy salep (thinking of a grocery store or a market stall, but I didn't make that clear). He sent me to Sultan Pasticeria, which turned out to have wonderful pastries and other desserts (the best chocolate pudding ever!). They didn't have salep, but from a 5-gallon jug the owner offered me a mild home-brew drink, boza (or bosa) – a malt drink with thick consistency, a low alcohol content (around 1%), and a slightly acidic sweet flavor – made by fermenting grain (thank you, Wikipedia!).



I got to chatting with Naser, the owner – an engineer and widower – who invited me upstairs to his apartment where I met his “sambo” (that’s a Swedish word meaning “same-living” = living together) and his charming 12-year-old daughter Harisa. When I asked what subjects she liked in school, she said English, math, and physics (her father is an engineer, after all!), and she strongly recommended the archaeology and ethnography museums, which I visited.

Naser no longer works as an engineer – the country is too corrupt, he said – but he’s planning a big new restaurant on the mountainside outside of town. He wanted me to see the site with him the next day, but I wanted to visit museums and check out transportation alternatives for the following day. He was totally charming until he started complaining about refugees – “Syrians, Africans, and other monkeys” – getting help from European governments, while he himself is no longer even allowed to travel visa-free in Europe, as apparently was possible before Yugoslavia broke up. Nevertheless he was so friendly – and would “stand up for America” – that I stopped for tea and another great Sultan dessert the next evening.

Throughout the trip I’d been wearing American political buttons, in particular one saying **Hickenlooper 2020** which came from John



Hickenlooper's failed campaign for the Democratic nomination for president (he's now running for U.S. Senator from Colorado). John is an old family friend and god-father to our kids, so I continue my support. No foreigners asked about or otherwise commented on the buttons, but at the Archaeology Museum three men – two from Colorado – recognized Hickenlooper's name, so I told the one living in Pristina about Democrats Abroad.

I had broken out with "hiker's rash" on my ankles already in Greece, possibly an allergic reaction to the synthetic hiking socks I had been wearing on the trip (it also happened last year during my Siberia trip). Besides treating it with cortisone, I started wearing the socks rolled-down (like "sports socks"). When the rash persisted, I stopped wearing shoes and socks completely and switched to my Birkenstocks (sandals). But since I'm used to wearing them with socks – and only indoors – they were too loose for walking long distances, and the soles began separating in places.

After the very irritating and painful rash spread to the side of my foot, I finally killed it with Betapred (a stronger steroid medication), then found a pharmacy that sold me Prednizon (without prescription) in case it recurred. I also went looking for someone to punch more holes in the straps of my sandals – to tighten them up – and to glue the soles. It wasn't as easy as I thought it would be, but I eventually found a small shoe-repair shop. The man punched holes and glued the soles. When I pulled out my wallet and asked him how much the work cost, he held up his hand and said, "No, no." I don't know what he meant. Surely it wasn't such a trivial job as not to charge me anything? I gave him €10 but he gave back €5 and seemed happy. (Although Kosovo isn't – yet – in the EU, it uses the Euro as local currency.)

### Train or bus to Montenegro

I was going next to Cetinje, the old capital of Montenegro. (Perhaps because I was born in Iowa City, I have a penchant for old capitals.) But I would probably need to connect through the current capital, Podgorica. Because the area is so mountainous, connections from Pristina to Podgorica are indirect, one route going first far to the north, the other far to the south. To the north there's a morning train to Peja (aka Peć), which would allow me to use my Interrail Pass for the first time since Athens. It wasn't clear that it would get me there in time for the bus to Podgorica, but it seemed like the best bet, and if I missed the bus, perhaps I could hitchhike? When I told this plan to my hostel owner, he persuaded me that the train was too slow and I should instead take a bus to Shkodër, Albania. In fact he had other guests – three Norwegian ladies – going that direction in the morning, and we could share a taxi to the bus station. So we did that.

At a lunch stop I had delicious red peppers baked with cheese. In Shkodër I was told there were no buses to Podgorica until the next day! What to do? The Norwegian ladies were staying on the same bus to Ulcinj, and from **there** I was told that I could get a bus to Podgorica (and then to Cetinje). So I stayed on the bus.

In Ulcinj I had over an hour until the next bus so – while the Norwegian ladies went out for lunch – I walked to the beach, then hopped a taxi back to the bus station.



The bus from Ulcinj to Podgorica went through Bar, where the Norwegian ladies were going, so we ended up on the next bus too. Since I had arranged lodging ahead of time everywhere that I was going, I was impressed with them that they had not done so, just figuring that they would find someplace to stay (hopefully at a reasonable price).

In Podgorica I soon caught a local bus to Cetinje, getting in after dark. On the way to Hostel Holiday I stopped for dinner at TavèRna – first an appetizer plate of Njeguši smoked ham with thick streaks of fat, slabs of bland local cheese, and smoked carp – then cabbage rolls.



So it was quite dark by the time I got to the hostel, and I couldn't find it. Someone on the street pointed up a dark alley. I went a ways in that direction, then – not seeing anything promising – came back to ask again. This time he showed me all the way to a gate and a house. There was no response when I knocked, but after I opened the door and called out, other hostel guests greeted me and called the owner's daughter (a Girl Scout!), who came and checked me in. I saw in the morning that they had a sign near the gate, but I told them they needed one out by the street as well.

Cetinje is a small town and totally walkable, yet has lots of museums, many of which I visited. First I stopped at another restaurant (Kole) for "Montenegrin breakfast" which was again smoked ham and local cheese, plus olives and a fried egg.



The most special museum – which I happened upon without knowing it was there – concerned money and banking. The young woman attendant gave me a thorough tour which, via coins and bills, summarized the history of Montenegro from pre-Roman times onwards. A historic minting machine (see video 5) was a recent gift from Austria.



5-Mint machine gift from Austria to Mon

During WWII Nazi German forces printed "American" \$10 bills as propaganda!

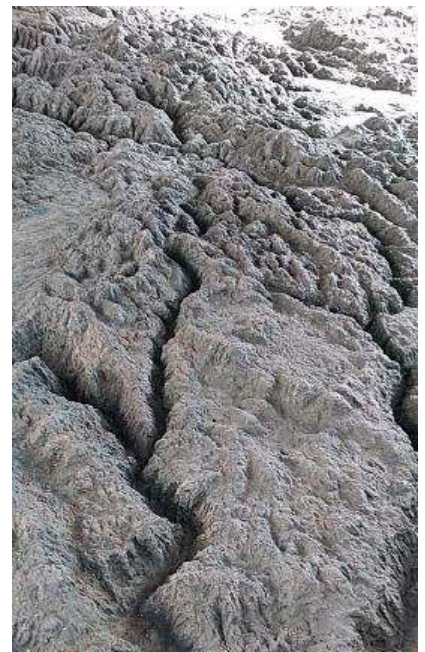




In an art museum I admired a wonderful stylized bull. From the historical palace I sent Ellinor a picture of a "corner chair" about which she commented, "Good for man-spreading!"



Outside was a wonderful very large-scale raised-relief map of Montenegro, made by the Austrian Army to help in planning their occupation during World War I. Looking at mountains, mountains everywhere, I understood why routes I'd considered the day before were very round-about. The long deep Tara River Gorge stood out, perhaps a goal for another trip.



In the ethnography museum was a wonderful old set of wool combs.



Between museums I stopped for lunch of soup with sausage, bread, and local "kajmak", "a creamy dairy product similar to clotted cream, made from the milk of water buffalos, cows, sheep, or goats" (thanks again, Wikipedia). It seemed to me essentially butter, and there was WAY too much of it. (Perhaps I should have put some in the soup?)



The sidewalks were quite broken and uneven, as well as shaded by trees and poorly lit – and, as I get older, my eyes don't register light as well as they used to – so at night I found myself walking in the street, as I noticed other people doing too.

I went home and packed up, then went out for dinner of “clam chowder” (actually fish: It had bones!) and black risotto – colored with squid ink – with mixed seafood. The oil-and-vinegar cart caught my eye.



### **Meeting the bus on the road to Sarajevo**

I had booked a night bus to Sarajevo at 11 p.m. but it wouldn't leave from the Cetinje bus station, which closes at 9 p.m., and I didn't know where to get it. I had asked at the bus station and they advised me to get a local bus to Podgorica – before 9 p.m. when they closed – and then wait there for the bus to Sarajevo. But I wanted to get on the bus earlier and get to sleep, because the night would be short, arriving in Sarajevo at 6 a.m.

Though he didn't speak much English – and communicated with me using a speech-recognition and translation program on his phone – the owner of my hostel very kindly took on this problem and solved it. He called the bus company and got the number for the bus driver, then found out where I could meet the bus. Then he drove me there – on the outskirts of town, at a spot I would never have found by myself – and waited with me until the bus arrived, even calling the driver again to verify that it was still coming, when it was late and, worryingly, another bus passed us by.

On the bus I took pain-killers – two Paracetamol and two Naproxen (don't tell my nurse-wife or my doctor-daughter) – as well as half a strong sleeping tablet, and had a much better ride than I had from Athens to Tirana.

### **The Siege of Sarajevo**

Even though I wouldn't arrive until morning, I had booked Hotel Victoria within walking distance of the bus station. I checked in, crashed a while, then had breakfast, for which they tried to charge me €5 though my reservation said it was included.

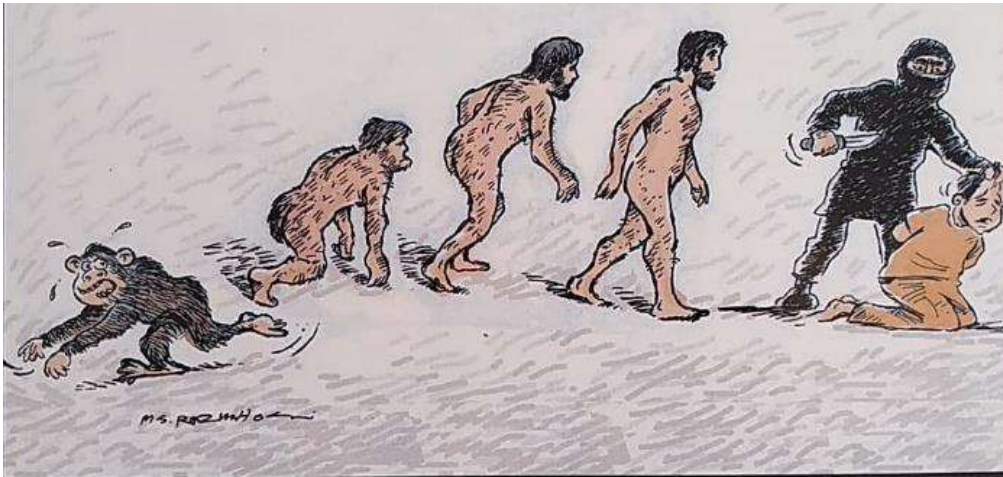
I walked to the Sarajevo Tunnel, which – running under the exposed airport runway – had been the lifeline for the Bosniak (Muslim) city during the nearly four-year-long Serb bombardment in the mid-1990s. It was now a museum – though the displays could be better – and they took cash only, no Euros.

I found a bus and then rode the rickety tram line slowly into town, far from the airport. I had arrived at the “Serbian” bus station – called “East Sarajevo” station although it's actually in the west – but I was booked to Belgrade the next day on a bus from the main station in the center of town (at 6:00 a.m.!), and I wanted to verify that. Some very modern architecture reminded me that this isn't just a historic city.

At an art museum I was struck by an Iranian artist's depiction of human evolution.







MOHAMAD SALEH&RAZM HOSSEIN  
IRAN

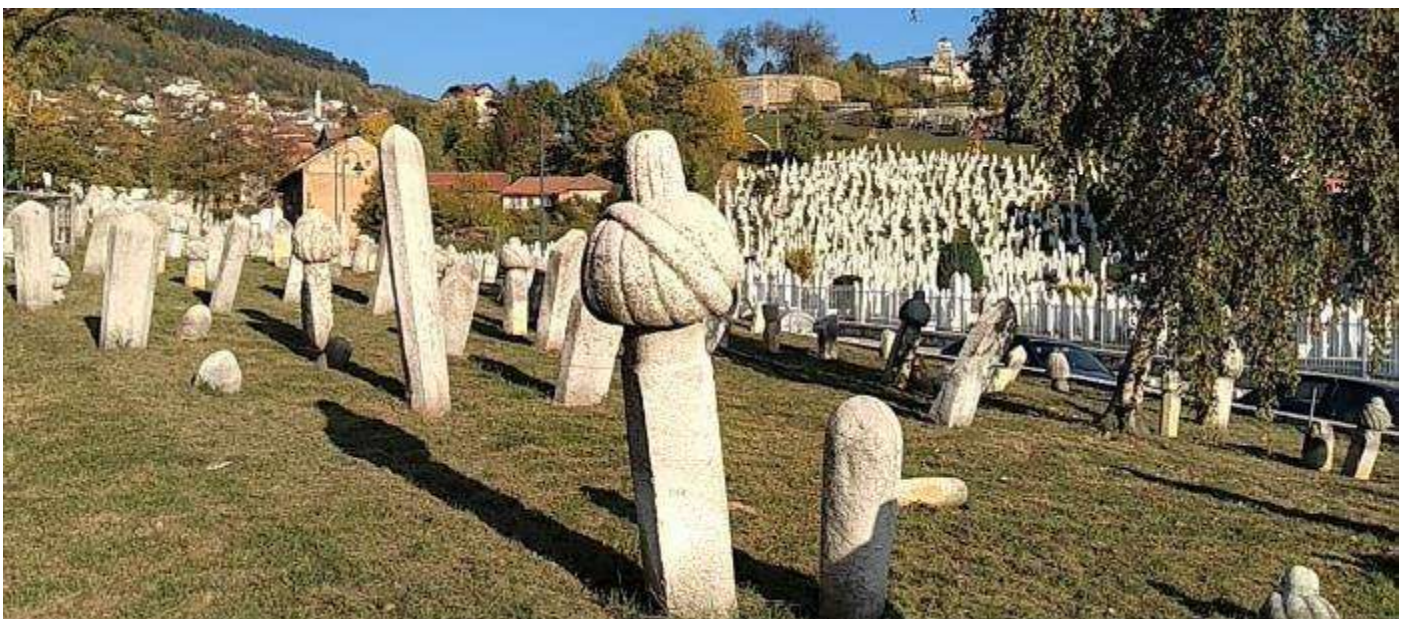
I had tea and cheesecake at a very fancy café/restaurant (Metropolis), which also offered “pumpkin pizza”, something new!



I caught a tram east nearly to the end of the line and walked up into the hills – past a



huge Muslim cemetery – but was too late now for other museums. Grave markers in the cemetery were mostly white pillars – round or rectangular or hexagonal – but some had “turbans” near the top. I asked a passer-by what that signified, but other than “something special” I didn’t really get an answer.



Heading back towards town, down steps that led to very nice walking streets, I stumbled upon the Swedish Embassy!



In front of the Sacred Heart Cathedral I saw advertising for the Museum of Crimes Against Humanity and Genocide as well as for a film exhibition showing **Sarajevo Under the Siege** (by Paul Lowe) and **Miss Sarajevo** (by Bill Carter), both very moving.



Perhaps it was here – in the context of ethnic strife – that I heard about **The Bridge Over the Drina**, written by Ivo Andrić, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1961. I'm reading it now.

It was late so I caught a tram west towards home, thinking to find something to eat somewhere along the three kilometers (two miles) I would need to walk at the end since I didn't know the bus routes. But everything was closed and I ended up back at my hotel very tired and very hungry.

Fortunately, when at the Zen place in Germany, I had been asked to grate a lot of parmesan cheese for spaghetti dinner, and told to toss the rind (crust), which I had instead saved as emergency food. I also still had some dried figs that I'd bought in Athens for the same purpose, so now – despite the VERY strong cheese flavor – at least I didn't go to bed hungry.

I got up very early (3:30!) and – after morning exercises, sitting zazen (20 minutes as usual), and shower – got a taxi to the bus station. The bus ride to Belgrade was quite long, but I had a good macaroni-stew (including mashed potatoes!) when we took a break along the way.



## Sunset birthday cruise on the Danube

Arriving in Belgrade mid-afternoon, I asked for later about getting directly to Bucharest or Timișoara. There were no direct connections: “No interest,” I was told! Has there been recent bad blood between Serbia and Romania? I ended up getting a bus ticket to the border, where I hoped to take a taxi across and then catch a local train into Timișoara.

But first to explore Belgrade: I caught a tram towards B&B Apartamento S and, since I again didn't know the bus routes – and hadn't thought to ask for directions – I walked the last two kilometers.

The owner provided very helpful information for getting a bus into town the next day and, even more immediately, directed me towards a cheap but excellent café just a few blocks away. Soup with wonderful bread would have been enough, so I struggled with the ham & cheese crêpe I had mistakenly ordered as well. Grape brandy – diluted with lots of water because of my radiation-sensitive mouth – helped it down.



In the morning – after changing rooms because the owner had given me a double room, but now needed it for two people – I took the bus to the tram downtown and – on the terrace of the wonderful old Hotel Moskva – had tea and “fresh fruit with yoghurt”, which seemed more like commercial blueberry yoghurt, however.

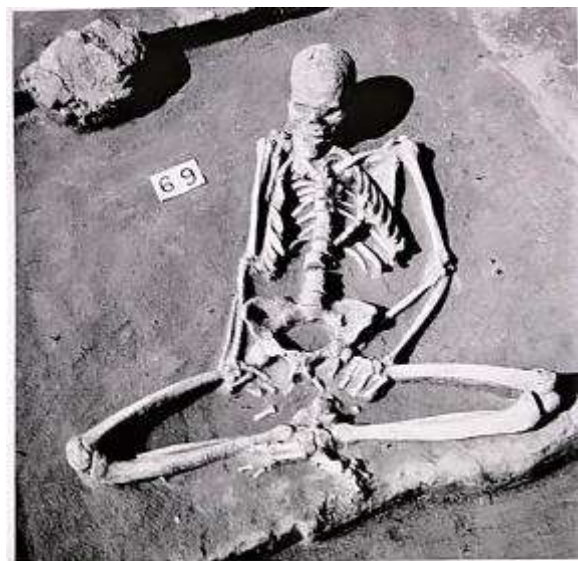


Nearby was a statue of Nikola Pašić, an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Serbian politician. I thought it was Lenin, but I wasn't totally wrong, as it's on what was until 1992 the Marx and Engels Square.



At the Serbian History Museum was an exhibit about World War I's effects in the region, as well as one about Princess Elizabeth of Yugoslavia. A human rights activist, she was deposed as a child (in 1947) and returned as an adult to try to calm the conflicts that tore Yugoslavia apart in the 1990s.

At the large and wonderful National Museum I was struck by human remains from Lepenski Vir buried in sitting position. An early meditator?



Мушкарац стар око 60 година сахрањен у седећем положају, гроб 69, Прото-Лепенски вир

Male aged c. 60 years buried in the sitting position, Grave 69, Proto-Lepenski Vir

Also from Lepenski Vir (but later) were Europe's first monumental sculptures, hammered and chiseled Mesolithic boulders.



Then there was a sculpture of a man hammering something, perhaps the monuments above, or the duck-wagon (three-wheeled bird-drawn votive chariot) nearby?



This whole region was later incorporated into the Roman Empire. The museum explains that “As justification for conquering and domination, the Romans promulgated *humanitas*, a concept... [that] meant philanthropy and humaneness, but can also be understood as civilization. *Humanitas*... presented Roman rule as being able to provide conditions in which all other peoples could become civilized as well. Thus the Roman Empire was able to integrate a whole spectrum of others from different conquered societies – including barbarians – who were led by the example of an educated, humane, and civilized elite.”



As the museum also noted, the Roman Empire fell in this region at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, under pressure from tribes – such as the Germanic Quadi, Vandals, and Gepids, the Sarmatians, the Huns, the Herules, Avars, and Slavs (many of which I'd never heard of) – which had been migrating to and fro across the Eurasian land-mass, fighting and conquering, since time immemorial. (Perhaps they got tired of being lectured to by the Roman elite?)

In later Serb history, I was struck by a portrait of a very large (fat) man riding on a rather small horse (a pony?).

I followed walking-streets to the old fort controlling where the Sava River flows into the Danube. After the Military Museum there – with its wreckage of an American F-117 Nighthawk stealth aircraft shot down in 1999 during the Kosovo War – I took a lovely sunset cruise on both rivers to finish celebrating my 73<sup>rd</sup> birthday. (The young woman who sold me the ticket at the fort had Norwegian connections and spoke some Norwegian!) We started in the Sava, went past the fort and out into the Danube, up to the top of a large island, then back and up the Sava under several bridges.



Walking from the wharf back to the center, I practiced awareness of mortality by stepping off a curb just as a bus came around a corner from an unexpected direction. Shaken but not stirred, I caught a tram and bus home – noting where to make the reverse connection in the morning – then had local soup and bread again, and got to bed.

I hoped for early breakfast but the owner didn't show up with it, so I found street food – a "fruit pie" – at the bus station, and then found my bus to the border. I'd misread its departure time – and the

previous bus at the same stall left a bit late – so I almost got on it by mistake, but (as usual) friendly and helpful people set me straight.

### Hitchhiking to Timișoara

At Vrsac, the last small town on the Serbian side of the border – situated by a high hill in the middle of wide, very flat plains – I found a taxi to take me to Stamura Moravita and the small rural Romanian train station on the other side. But Romania is in the next time-zone east, an hour later, so I had missed the train to Timișoara and would have 3+ hours to wait for the next one. The station wasn't far from the road to Timișoara, however, so I decided to try hitchhiking. There wasn't a lot of traffic – but as I always say, it only takes one – and it was sunny and I enjoyed being on the road and the challenge of getting to Timișoara before the train.



I had carefully spent down my local money – as I always try to do – but I still had some small Serbian bills, worth less than half a dollar, which I tried unsuccessfully to give to a young person passing on a bike. (I should have given it to the taxi driver, but hadn't remembered it.)

After about 20 minutes of sporadic traffic but no one stopping, I was tempted when people on bicycles told me there was a “bus station” not far up the road, though now I realize they probably meant just a bus stop. But then a middle-aged man in a pharmacy truck stopped. He was heading home to Timișoara and seemed happy to take me along, dropping me near the railway station. After dropping my bag at Left Luggage, I found a snack – tea and pannacotta with blueberry jam – since I hadn't eaten since Belgrade.



### Walking tour of Timișoara

As mentioned, on the way to Athens I had met a young psychology student who offered to show me around if I came back to Timișoara. Now it turned out that I would have all evening there, until catching a night-train to Bucharest.

So after her classes were over, Eva showed me the big beautiful squares and wonderful connected walking streets with restored and painted old buildings.



Timișoara was full of life (see video 6) – perhaps the most beautiful city I visited – and I hadn't even planned to spend time there.



6-Eva & festival in Timișoara square.mp

Of course Athens with the Parthenon on the Acropolis provides competition (see video 7).



7-Athens 360 degrees.mp4

We walked through town to the Cathedral.



There were kayakers on the river.



We had dinner at her favorite restaurant, Little Hanoi. Then she left for home and I circled back to the Oktoberfest-like festival going on in the central square, which made it even clearer why Timișoara has been designated the European Capital of Culture for 2021.



Besides music there were so many kinds of interesting foods, including multiple piglets roasting on a multi-rotisserie, and multiple breads-on-a stick baking machines (wish I'd taken video!). I was only looking for dessert, so finally settled on a Romanian doughnut, *papanashi*, with sour cream and berry jam and the doughnut hole on top!



I would have ten hours on the night-train to Bucharest, and wouldn't arrive until almost 8:30 a.m., so I bought poppy seed strudel and walnut strudel for breakfast on the train, along with kefir that I found at a MiniMarket on the way to the station.

### Company at table in Bucharest

Near the Bucharest train station was a huge military museum where I was amazed by this strange artillery piece. At one point – near the end of the route through the museum's several floors – I needed to use the restroom and had to exit the exhibition area to find one. Then – since I'd come out through the exit from the exhibitions – the attendant didn't want to let me back in! I insisted that I'd just come out that way, and she reluctantly relented.



I hopped a bus to get a sense of the city, then a tram, and ended up having lunch of cheese and cream polenta – with an egg not mentioned on the menu – at La Mama restaurant on the edge of the Historic Quarter.





To the annoyance of my waitress – because other tables were available – a middle-aged woman insisted on joining me at mine, apparently because she wanted to sit near the front window. She explained that a young female theater critic who worked across the street had been pursuing her actor husband, and she intended to confront the young woman.



I wished her luck and left for the Historical Museum, where there was a fascinating video on the mechanics of building Trajan's Column in Rome (of which there's a copy in Bucharest, because the monument memorializes Rome's victory over the Dacians in present-day Romania). There was also a spectacular collection of gold bracelets, a silver crown, and lots of diamond and emerald jewelry (see video 8), as well as spectacular folk artwork.



8-Diamond & emerald jewelry in B



I headed back to La Mama through a big square with an Orthodox Church in the distance.



Cherry jam seems to be a thing. I had semolina pudding with cherry jam for dinner, followed by espresso with sour cream and cherry jam!



Taking Metro to the station, I noticed an advertisement for Swedish **IKEA**.

I bought kefir and sana (another cultured milk drink) for breakfast, then boarded my night-train to Moldova, sharing the compartment with a pleasant young German-Swiss fellow. I was trying to remember to charge up my phone when having meals at restaurants, but didn't always remember, and my phone was dead. Power in the corridor of the sleeping car didn't work, but the conductor offered to plug in my phone in his compartment. Later the Swiss fellow got him to plug in his phone as well, and finally (when one of the phones was charged) I got my GPS plugged in. (I had two spare GPS batteries, but I like to keep them charged in case of emergency.) The conductor was starting to get annoyed, so – although I don't like tipping in general – I made sure to tip him in the morning, which he appreciated.

**Changing gauge on the way to Chişinău**

Although Moldova's trains are old, the compartments gave a luxurious impression, though quite narrow between the seat-beds.



Like the rest of the USSR – of which Moldova was a part – train tracks are broad gauge in Moldova, not standard gauge as in western and central Europe. This was apparently done intentionally, to prevent invading armies from being able to easily move troops by rail. Early in the morning we stopped for an hour or longer at the border while the wheels on the railcars were changed.

On the way to Moldova I was asleep when this happened but, coming back, the train left Chişinău late in the afternoon, so I was still awake at the border. I happened to have the compartment at the end of the car – over the wheels – and a workman flipped up the throw-rug, removed a covering plate, and pulled out a huge pin which must serve to position or lock in the wheels.

After the wheels had been changed, he came back and reinstalled the pin. Passengers weren't allowed off the train to see what was going on, so I took these pictures out the window.



### **Best Western and amber in Chişinău**

I was looking for the exit to the city from the train station (not that it was such a large station!), but heading “out on the town” sounded more fun.



The guidebooks I had consulted for the Balkans had only a single page of info about Moldova, so I didn't know much about the country or the city, nor did my Swiss compartment-mate. Besides, we arrived an hour late, so I wouldn't have much time there. I got cash at an ATM so I could leave my bag at the station, then spotted a Best Western Hotel and went in for tea (served with VERY creamy milk) and picked up a map showing museums etc. Of course I also had my hiking GPS and – fortunately, since I had no data coverage here – I had remembered to download the map on my phone as well.

I stopped to look at amber jewelry being sold by street-sellers, remembering a spectacular necklace I'd bought cheaply in Poland with Ellinor in 1984. I'd given the necklace to daughter Linnéa a few years ago, but it was in a box in storage when she was out traveling. Her storage got broken into, and the necklace stolen. I SMSed to ask if she'd like a replacement, and she replied that she'd like amber earrings, so I came back later and chose a pair I hoped she'd like. It turned out that the fittings (findings?) were not comfortable, however, so she plans to re-set the amber on new ones.

In front of Government House was a huge gathering of motorcycles and motorcyclists (see video 9). Later I saw them coming by as an almost endless parade. Every Sunday afternoon? Or just this day of the year?



9-Motorcycle gathering in Chișinău

I'm an Iowa boy so I explored uses of cornmeal throughout this region. Lunch was polenta, sheep cheese, sour cream, and fried egg.

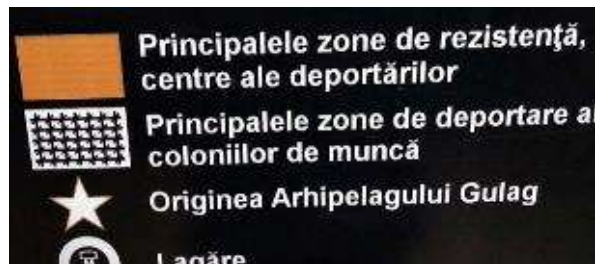


At the National History Museum there were some odd weapons including a "blunderbuss" with a short barrel and huge muzzle, and a handgun with four barrels.





After WWII, in one month in 1949, 11,000 families (34,000 people) were deported from Moldova to Siberia. A map showed the “zone de rezistență” to the USSR and the location of gulag camps.



Outside I spotted a street named for the date in 1989 when – in response to a mass demonstration, two years before eventual independence from the USSR – the Moldovan language, essentially identical to Romanian and written (once again) in Latin script, was recognized as the national language.



Heading back for the station, I got on the wrong bus and ended up turning away and going further and further away. Other passengers told me where to get off to get another bus that would take me to the station.

There were no numbers on the train cars, but I showed my ticket to the conductor and he motioned me onboard. Mine

seemed to be a 4-berth compartment, which should have been a clue because I'd booked a 2-berther, but I had forgotten. Shortly a family of four showed up to claim the compartment. It turned out that I was on car number 1 – whereas I should have been on car number 6 – but I still had time to hop off and run down the platform. I had the compartment to myself at first, though someone took the other berth during the night.

I was feeling quite grubby since I hadn't had a shower since Belgrade – this was my third night-train in a row, and there would be two more – so I would have liked to get a sponge bath, but now we were at the border changing wheels, and the toilets were locked up. I couldn't get to bed either, because I was waiting for bedding: Why couldn't they distribute bedding before people board, since they know which berths have been booked? I had this complaint earlier in Romania too, in fact I had slept without bedding from Timișoara to Bucharest, when they delayed too long and I wanted to get to sleep.

### Sponge bathing in Bucharest

Back in Bucharest I spotted a shop in the train station specializing in French fries!



It was Monday morning but there was a mass of people – a long line – crowding the sidewalk leading (I believe) to a church. Perhaps it was a special saint's day?



Nearby I was struck by a sign advertising “Long Life Learning”, and then a passageway through a building between major streets.



The Palace of the Romanian Parliament – the largest building in the world – was begun by Ceaușescu in 1984. According to Wikipedia, it costs as much to heat and light it as for a small city, and – despite several museums and occasional international conferences – remains 70% unused.



I was curious about another massive building in the distance and asked a security guard at another government building. “Oh, that’s the Department of Defense.” Oops, they’ll probably think I’m a spy.



Several buildings were open at the top – unfinished? Or planned that way? Why?



This strange sculpture was in front of a restaurant.



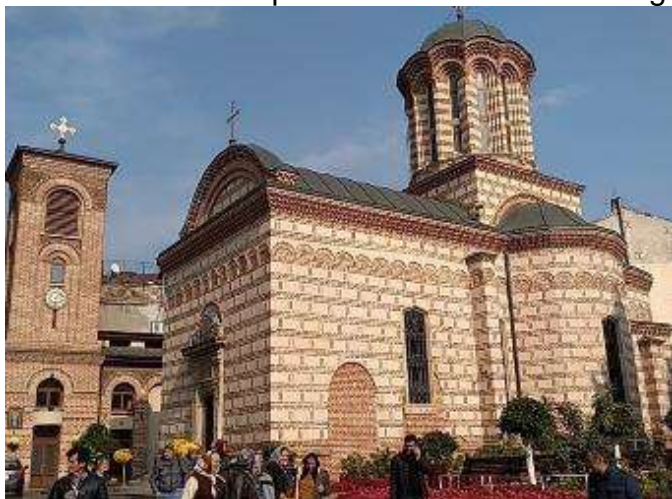
The “Cross over Crescent” on this Orthodox church apparently signifies the victory of Christianity over Islam! It’s quite different from the typical Orthodox cross such as I’m used to from Alaska.



For lunch I had tea and eggs Benedict on a croissant at La Mama. Tea service was good, and the croissant instead of English muffin was okay, but there was almost no hollandaise sauce, buried inside – and my mouth remains dry because of the radiation treatments, so I need the sauce. I showed them an online picture and told them their menu was deceptive advertising. They said defensively, “They’re OUR Eggs Benedict.”



Nearby was Biserica Sfântul Anton – Annunciation Church of Saint Anthony – built as part of Curtea Veche (the Old Princely Court). A nearby building seemed quite odd, until I realized that it was sheathed in a protective cover while being renovated.



I bought pumpkin strudel for the train, and was tempted to have a “Rulou cu vanilie” to eat on the street, but figured I’d end up with whipped cream all over my face, so chose a vanilla cream instead.



Later I found four kinds of cultured milk drinks to have with the strudel: kefir, goat yoghurt, sana, and buttermilk.





On YouTube I had watched Ceaușescu's last speech – in 1989, when people started booing, and he looked shell-shocked – so I visited the old Central Committee of the Communist Party building where it took place. A triangular memorial to the martyrs of the revolution points at the balcony where he stood.



Unfortunately, the nearby Rebirth Monument is not well kept-up.



A long bus-ride north got me to the huge, wonderful, very educational Natural History Museum. There's a fair amount of English signage, but it often wasn't necessary. In the minerals hall I sent a picture of brucite –  $Mg(OH)_2$  – to my sister for her husband Bruce, who likes minerals even when they're not named for him.



Metro south got me to a restaurant (Caru' cu Bere) – highly recommended by Lonely Planet – where I spent the rest of my Romanian money on Moldavian stew (with beef, pork, chicken, and sausage) served with polenta (naturally) and a glass of wine (well-watered-down for my radiation-sensitive mouth), leaving my last change



as a tip. It was still warm enough to eat outside so I sat next to these wonderful pumpkins.



The restrooms at the station were clearly marked for men (though

apparently with a notch above the hip) and for women (though apparently with a notch about knee-level).



Not having thought to save cash for the purpose, I paid for the restroom with a card, then took a sponge bath at a sink. A cleaner (age ~25-30?) greeted me merrily, “English?”, and tried to kiss my hand, while asking for money, then demanding it. I was disgusted and told him scornfully (and truthfully) that I had no (Romanian) money. He told me angrily to get out. I told HIM to get out. “Me get out?” he said incredulously, and went to get help. I heard a loud discussion at the payment counter out front, and finally he came back with a security guard. I nodded pleasantly and continued shaving and brushing my teeth. The guard looked around and left without comment.

#### **Hungarian border police (instant karma)**

My train from Bucharest back to Timișoara arrived an hour late, so I missed the train to Budapest. This was Tuesday morning, and I wanted to be home by Wednesday night (before Ellinor's Halloween birthday the next day). I was desperate to find a bus to Budapest so I could catch the next train and get back on schedule.

The ticket lady at the train station told me dismissively that there was a bus station 200 meters “that way”. I started that direction but saw no sign of a bus station and panicked. In retrospect, if I’d checked the GPS for the bus station – actually about 1.2 km the other direction – I could have walked there and gotten a bus, probably via Budapest Airport and then a shuttle into town.

But a taxi driver said there were minibuses in Arad and – showing me 4 fingers – he would take me there for 4 Euros. It turned out that Arad is another town, an hour away, and he must have meant 40 Euros. When we got there he demanded 60 Euros, and to get rid of him I gave him €50 (I didn’t have two €20s). But there were no buses until much later in the day.

The taxi driver offered to drive me to Budapest for another €150, but I’d had enough of him. I walked past a couple traffic circles, then started hitching and caught a ride to the Hungarian border. On the way I saw a sign indicating Budapest that way – off to the side – and wondered if I should have gone that way. (I should have.)

I walked through the border posts, then traffic dried up.

It started raining, and I hadn’t had anything to eat besides strudel on the train, so to keep up my energy I ate four exotic kinds of baklava I’d bought at a special baklava shop in Bucharest, washed down with the remainder of my cultured milk drinks.

What traffic there was – mostly big trucks – seemed to be heading north on a side road, and I eventually realized that there was a new motorway (freeway) about 6 km away that didn't show up on my old GPS map. (That's what the sign earlier had pointed to.)



I started walking that way – in the rain – and got over halfway when two young border policemen stopped to check my documents. “Where are you going?” “Sweden.” “Walking???”

I asked if they could drop me up at the motorway, but they either didn't understand or didn't want to and – after talking on the radio for a long time with their supervisor – instead dropped me at a "bus station", really just a rural bus stop. In retrospect I should have

declined the ride and continued walking, but I didn't realize how close I was to the motorway.

I couldn't understand the schedule posted at the bus stop, and no buses came by for at least two hours, while I was getting increasingly chilled and fantasizing death by the side of the road. I had plenty of time as well to consider whether this was instant karma for my scornful treatment of the beggar at the train station in Bucharest. I found myself humming lyrics – “That's me in the corner” – to a song I didn't really know but later looked up online: REM's “Losing My Religion”.



Finally a bus came headed the other direction, so I stopped it and asked the driver about buses going my direction. Since I didn't understand what he said, I got him to write down the time, and sure enough, a bus to the next small town (Makó) showed up about 15 minutes later.

Now I was thinking, I'll spring for a taxi. A young man asked if he could take the seat opposite me.

Of course! I started talking with him. How long would it take to drive to Budapest? He called a taxi for me, and waited with me at least 20 minutes until it arrived. It cost €165!

Despite the driver going very fast, I realized I would still miss the train, so online I booked a Flixbus (for €9) and told the taxi driver to take me to the bus station instead of the train station. There I was happy that I didn't need “an official procedure”.



The bus got me to Vienna in time to get the next train, where I shampooed my hair in the little washroom and felt much better. They even provided tea and buns on the train in the morning!

That train arrived in Hamburg 15 minutes late, leaving me only 15 minutes to find my train to Copenhagen, but the change went smoothly.

And all went well getting home after that. Heading south a month earlier,

I'd grabbed some “street food” at Copenhagen station, then regretted that I hadn't waited for the

€25 buffet on the Puttgarden ferry. This time I hit the buffet for lunch, including these cute little sweet chilies.



After Copenhagen, as we approached the bridge to Sweden, I briefly considered taking a side-trip into space. But I decided I'd rather get home to Ellinor, and she met me at the train station in Göteborg.



Here's a schematic of where I went (after the Zen event in southern Germany).  
Black is planned trains, red is planned buses.

