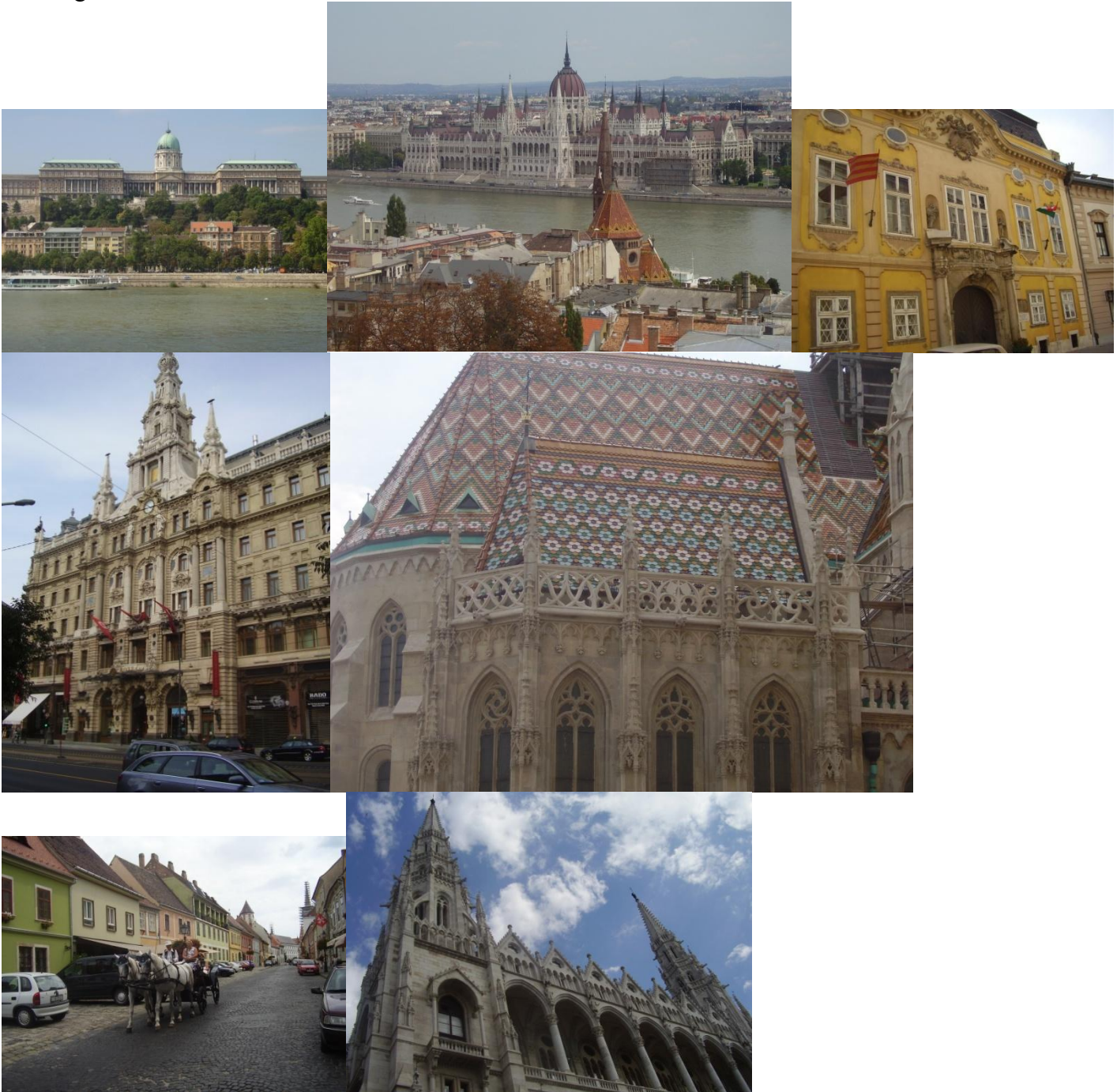


Dispatch August 09

My trip to Eastern Europe and Greece was fun and interesting. No major mishaps like jumping off moving trains in the middle of nowhere or losing my ATM card! I did miss one subway stop because when we arrived in the station I stood in front of the door like an idiot waiting for it to open not realizing I had to push the button to open the door! I am sure I amused all those watching.

I arrived in Budapest around noon and took a shuttle bus to my hotel downtown. I am proud that during the entire trip, I only took 2 taxi rides. The rest of the time I negotiated the busses, ferries, donkey carts, trains and subways of Budapest, Bucharest and Athens. Budapest was majestic. The Royal Palace and Parliament buildings are iconic structures along the Danube (which by the way is not blue) and the architecture is truly amazing.



Both Hungary and Romania are still struggling for identity and economic and social respect since breaking from the Soviet block merely two decades ago. From the outside they seem as any other Western European city, but when you peek beyond the veneer, you'll find train tickets still written out by hand, local currencies instead of Euro and sense that they are still both very insular and unintegrated with the rest of the continent and cultures. The Hungarian language...forget about it! It's one of the hardest on the planet...it took me an hour to finally get "thank you" right. Every word seems to have 24 syllables of sound for which your tongue must do some serious gymnastics to produce!

After 2 days in Budapest, I boarded the train for a 10 hour journey through Transylvania to a town called Sighisoara, which was by far my favorite spot. The countryside outside the windows was beautiful especially at the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. I often saw donkey pulled plows in the field and dozens of abandoned old factory buildings I am sure were once communist state run enterprises.



Sighisoara is beautiful. It is a hilltop medieval town frozen in time and if you close your eyes you can sense the maidens, princes and wenches that once roamed the cobblestone streets. The clock tower is famous in Europe is amazing shape after all these centuries. Here also is the house that Vlad Teppes was born in (now a restaurant). Vlad Teppes was a Romanian Prince who used to punish his enemies by driving a wooden stick through the backbone without hitting any vital nerves so that they would remain conscious for at least 48 hours before succumbing to death. Because of this practice he became known as the "Impaler." Because he was descended from an order of Knights of the Dragon (Dracul in Romanian) he was the inspiration for the character Dracula. Although the Vampire part is completely fictional, it's easy to see the inspiration from the all the dark alleys and dungenous castles.





The next day I hopped on the train headed toward Brasov and it was a tough day due to a bum back! I finally had to reluctantly retire my old backpack. I was very sentimental about that pack as I have probably schlepped it on adventures through at least 35 countries. I still have the torn, chewn strap dangling from it where a hyena ran off with it in Botswana. However, my melancholy was somewhat mitigated by my new Kelty “Red Cloud” backpack with 6650 cubic inch capacity, double the size of my old pack!. Bigger pack, more stuff...great...except for the fact I kind of forgot that means heavier pack as well! While ungracefully engaged in somewhat of a squat while visiting the bathroom on the train, my back gave out and I found that I could not stand back up upright! This was a serious problem. I wasn’t even sure how I could make it out of bathroom let alone off the train with a 35pound pack. I was starting to panic, thinking, I don’t care how much pain I am in, but God, let me just be able to function...it’s not really like you can say to someone (who doesn’t speak any English) would you mind carrying my big back pack off the train and 2 miles down the road to my hotel! Luckily, slowly, I was able to straighten up and then able to work my pack back on to my body and make it to the hotel. It wasn’t easy or painless, but I was able to find a certain angle and position that was relatively painless, albeit a little ridiculous looking and make it to the hotel. The next few days just took very careful

maneuvering but eventually the back got better....I am not 20 anymore and perhaps this is the reason I didn't see any other backpack travelers that appeared to be within a decade of my age!

I arrived in Brasov early evening. It is a cool, hip town, kind of like the Aspen of Romania. The Carpathian mountains apparently provide some of Europe's best value skiing. Brasov is tucked away about 3 hours from Bucharest and is known for its hip bars and shops. The majority of town is actually one big pedestrian mall with lounges and cafes all set up in the middle. It's a great place to people watch and felt the most cosmopolitan of any other place in Hungary or Romania. It has a typical town square or plaza which fills up at night with artists, music and vendors. Most tourists here are young Romanians looking for a fun time.



One of the main attractions of Brasov is also the town of Bran about a half an hour away and a very famous old castle, which of course, loving castles, I had to visit:



After Brasov I was back on the train to Bucharest. What a disappointment! I couldn't really figure the place out. It is truly schizophrenic I think. It has some amazing architecture and some of the most beautiful buildings I've seen, although they are right next door to some former commie cement apartment building eyesore. There are very few sites to see and it's hard to negotiate the city...cars park everywhere, including the sidewalks forcing you on to busy roads which have no signs and not one map in the subway stations of where the subway goes! One of my favorite places however was the Romanian peasant Museum that had some wonderful exhibits especially of the old traditional Romanian dresses and costumes which were really interesting.



The FOOD and DRINK

Paprika and Pork were the dominate themes in Hungary and Romania. It seems every dish is floating in paprika sauce. I tried most traditional dishes like stuffed cabbages and pork stew with mushy polenta kind of stuff and an egg on top. One of my favorite was crepes stuffed with minced chicken meat...they were like light little crescent pillows stuffed with very flavorful chicken, again in a paprika sauce and dollop of sour cream on the top. I also had some egg gnocchi that were amazing as well...



My cheapest meal in Romania was about \$7.00 where I had spicy grilled boneless chicken legs, a salad, bottle of water and a decent glass of Riesling. Food is super cheap in Romania and I think my most expensive meal was about \$12. The most unpleasant thing however was the extreme smoke in all the restaurants. Apparently neither Eastern Europe nor Greece has gotten the memo that smoking is bad for your health. There are no no smoking designated areas and EVERYONE smokes....cigarette in one hand and for in the other! It really was quite overwhelming.

The food in Greece was great, Greek salads almost every day, yummy eggplant and grilled souvlakis. I was looking forward to eating some great grilled fish, especially being on an island, but there were very few fresh fish options and they were extremely expensive at about \$35 a serving, so I ate a lot of squid instead! Someone told me that the seas have been over fished so it's very slim pickins and expensive.

I got reacquainted with Riesling. I never had much interest in them before. I think it goes back to my senior prom, double dating with another couple at Steak n Ale and having a bottle of Blue Nun wine! In any event, I tried a few by the glass and was pleasantly surprised, so I am now going to start exploring some more with that variety. The Greek wine was cheap and decent. Neither eastern Europeans or Greeks seem to be big on cocktails and while most might have vodka on the bar menu, it's clear its not drunk much. And of course, like everywhere in Europe they are super stingy on the ice! I've heard it's really an American thing that we like so much ice. First of all you always have to ask for it, and secondly, when you do finally get it, its only one or two cubes!

GREECE

I flew to Athens from Bucharest which was a quick 1.5 hour flight. My friend Nella had decided to join me and was waiting in the airport. She had never been to Greece before so we did a quick jaunt to the acropolis before heading to the ferry for Milos. It was HOT. Ugh...The ferries aren't like they were 20 years ago where

everyone just threw their matt on the deck floor and had a big party. Now, they are very sophisticated and set up with airplane type chairs and assigned seating.

The island markets itself with bumper stickers that read “Milos is for Lovers” and I would say that the majority of tourists were young Greek couples. Milos is beautiful. The island is embroidered with the seductive breezes, beautiful beaches and calm waters. At the end of the day the sun dips behind the mountains like an actor steps behind the curtain, taking a final bow as all applaud its latest performance. By the way, this is the island where the famous Venus de Milo statute was discovered and we hiked to the area where it was found.

The people are friendly and happy and because there are mostly Greeks here, there aren't a lot of tack shops or people trying to scam you. Our week was spent relaxing, hanging out on the beaches and hiking to mountaintop churches. Milos has some amazing geological formations, which unfortunately many of the sites are inaccessible by car and you must take a boat. When we were there the winds were blowing however and many of the boats were not going out because of the rough seas.





Good trip overall. I was able to stick to my budget of around \$1500 which was great (I used miles for the airfare there and back) I thought for 2 weeks in Europe especially with the Euro being 1.5 to the dollar.. Hungary and Romania made my 45th and 46th country. I really want to check out Prague and St. Petersburg next and am still dreaming of putting together a group to climb Kilimanjaro...! Until next time!

Susan