

Anja and Søren's Tour de Europe, July 1999

During the 3 weeks we visited 10 countries, drove 4.500 miles (7.500 km), climbed 7.500 feet (2.500 m) high mountains and heard the Pope's prayer broadcast to the St. Peters Square audience.

We traveled as we like best: Before departure we have visited the library to get some information about the countries, found a few must-see points, but otherwise without any specific plans and no reservations. Especially in Bulgaria and Greece, where the road signs are difficult to identify, we often took our course from the sun.

During the first couple of days we were mainly driving - through Germany (Berlin and Dresden) to Prague. Then through Slovakia to Hungary, where we visited the big market in Budapest, which however has been turned into a tourist event with goose liver and paprika dominating the stalls. In another more provincial town however we did get a bit of the old imperial charm when dining in an old castle with live gypsy music.

I was quite eager to visit for the first time Romania and Bulgaria, as I have become member of a club for experienced travelers. One of the qualifying points is to visit at least 2 new countries every second year, and with around 70 countries on the list it is becoming increasingly difficult. With my well-known fascination of the former communist states I was also curious to see how these little known countries have developed after almost a decade of freedom.

Compared to for instance Latvia, which has gone far towards developing into a modern western society, Romania still seems to suffer from not only 50 years of communist mis-management, but also since 1965 from the special Ceausescu-dictatorship. One of his best known fanatic ideas was to bulldoze the traditional farming villages and collect the peasants in concrete settlements to work in huge unproductive state farms and agro-industries. Another idea, which was actually completely implemented, was to export Romanian produce and at the same time put an almost total ban on imports in order to repay the international debt. The aim was successfully met, but with the result that the Romanian people were seriously deprived of their daily needs and lived in extreme poverty.



Romania: It must be difficult for the adults to change from a generation of fear and suppression, and it must seem hopeless for children to be brought up in such an environment. We drove through half of Romania, and in the huge agricultural areas we mainly saw just half-deserted villages, where the loose cattle, goats, pigs and geese were feeding on the roadside, and small neglected towns.

Literally everywhere - on the fields, roads and ditches - whole families were cutting grass with sickle or scythe (segl eller le) and packing the hay onto carts drawn by horses, mules or buffaloes, which often dominated the sparse traffic. Even with this rather low level of technology a high percentage of the harvesters were sitting on the ground, apparently repairing or sharpening the tools - or taking a nap in the midday heat. Many people were seen walking along the roads in the middle of nowhere or trying to get a lift - possibly to a town to buy or sell something.

Even in the towns we did not find anything similar to a supermarket, in the best case small shops with canned products and some fresh goats cheese and sausages. Shopping was done along the roads, where some fruits and vegetables were available and in small bakeries. The few and hard to find restaurants served mainly pizzas. Apparently the tradition for cooking - an otherwise global favourite occupation - has efficiently been suppressed during the Ceausescu-period.

A distinct exception from the gray life was found in Brasov (330.000 inhabitants), also called Kronstadt, which served as cultural center for the substantial German-speaking group, descending from the 12th century, when the Hungarian king gave the area to a German Order of Knights. In Brasov we

were surprised to find a typical German town center with Rathaus and Marktplatz (Town hall and Square), many well kept or renovated old buildings and restaurants with outdoor serving in the walking street. It was also here that we saw the first Romanian postcards after having visited other towns, which were named in our literature to have interesting sights - but no postcards and apparently no tourists.

Near Brasov is a famous mountain resort, where we had decided to stay for one night. It consisted of a dozen rather big hotels, mainly in the usual no-nonsense communist concrete style, clearly planned in some remote office to contain certain politically correct facilities (lift to the mountaintop, swimming pool, walking paths etc). Despite the TV in our room, Anja would only give the hotel 2 out of 5 possible stars on our daily evaluation scheme (for food, accommodation and events), mainly because the wall-to-wall carpet was one foot too long, so we fell over the folds, and the door, or actually the door frame did not fit very well, so that we could look into the room even when the door was closed. It sounds negative, but for me it was the happy meeting again with a communist-time specialty. It is like with stamp collectors - the variants are much more interesting than the standard issues.

Our greatest event in Romania was the visit to Bran, the mountains with the castle of Dracula. We had just read the original book about Dracula and thought that we could recognise the setting. The castle is very well renovated, contains a lot of funny small rooms as well as windows through which Dracula could disappear for his daytime coffin. In Bran we met a group of Danish social workers, who since the terrible TV-news in 1990 about the conditions in Romanian institutions, have been supporting a children's home in the north of the country. They had arranged a tour for the retarded children, now in their teens, who wore T-shirts and caps donated by various well-known Danish companies.

We had also been looking forward to visiting the famous Romanian hot springs, and after some search we found a location with healing water, so famous that in the 1850ies it was brought to the Paris court of Napoleon. And what did we find? Yes, again some monsters of concrete hotels filled with big Romania families, who more than filled the small swimming pool. May be even more than me, Anja dislikes such crowded places (with discos being an important exception), but since it was getting late we stayed at the river on a small primitive campground. The neighbour was a small family restaurant with an outdoor BBQ, where they grilled minced sheep meat, and where some other cheerful customers, who knew how to say 'beer' in English, helped the locals to serve for me some large Tuborg beer (you know, American, very expensive, they said with an important gesture) and an impressive selection of soft drinks for Anja.

Our drive through the mountains in the south was quite different from the plains with all the hay farmers. The villages seemed more alive and prosperous, new individual houses were under construction and one village had

dozens of very un-communist cultural monuments - maybe the lunatic Ceausescu-gang had disturbed them less here.

Reaching the Danube-river bordering Bulgaria, there is only 2 crossing points: an Indiana Jones bridge in Ruse and a ferry. Anja would have liked the bridge, but the ferry was rather closer, and we wanted now a new country.



Danube is here like the Mississippi in Quincy, Ill., but the crossing rather more bureaucratic, as it took us 6 hours until we got through the last custom check, including 15 min. to cross the river. All other co-passengers were either tourist busses from Slovakia (where the drivers had the necessary experience to bring boxes of beer for the officers) or Bulgarians bringing home a second hand Mercedes bought in Germany, which seemed to require lengthy paperwork behind some 'No entrance' doors.

It had started to rain, and I would say not rain like we know it in (North) Europe. We did have some similar experience in Mexico, where the town square in Valladolid got flooded up to the doorsteps of our camper. However by rethinking we might also have such downpours here, but our drainage system might be more efficient. Anyway, when we as the last car had finished the formalities at the Bulgarian border it was rather late and we drove into a dark and wet town. Where the road was low a considerable quantity of water had gathered, which we sailed through, unlike some drowned Ladas. No neon signs showed us the nearest hotel, if any, and suddenly we found ourselves out of the town. We had got a map from 1985 from the Bulgarian tourist agency in

Copenhagen, with the few town names written in our alphabet, which is quite unlike the local spelling. We knew also that in those times the fanatics could place a non-existing town on a map (or not show some existing ones) to confuse the capitalist spies, and although we were supposed to drive on an E-Highway (part of the European road system) we did not see any road signs.

We felt kind of lost but as always in such situations, we seem to be protected by a lucky star, and in the complete darkness we suddenly saw a gas station. It turned out to be a night stop for the many truck- and bus drivers before or after the exhausting border crossing, permanently supervised by police, and with a fine restaurant. A good meal with a bottle of very tasty Bulgarian wine took away the strain and gave a good night's sleep. In the morning we started to queue up with a busload of toilet-hunting tourists, but for only 1DM extra we could have a private room and a nice warm shower.

After this fine start we continued our exploration of Bulgaria in high spirits. In the mountain passes they sold goat yogurt, a tradition introduced by the many shepherds. We bought a big jar, and for possible sweetening a similar jar of delicious honey. The shepherd asked me to taste all his varieties, of course using the same spoon as everybody else. In a small shop the young daughter had understood the new times, listened in the school and spoke fine English, she will definitely become a good buwinezwoman, and she sold us also some blueberry jam (it is good for the eyes, she said).

Passing the ring road in Sofia, the capital, we had a puncture - my first in ages. Fortunately I had checked the car before departure to find out where the spare wheel was hidden, which was in a stupid inaccessible place underneath. After having consulted the instruction manual I found out how to release the wheel, and Anja found the jack and other tools well hidden under a seat in the cabin. A perfect never-used set of tools, as only the Japanese can do it. I started by breaking the weak key when loosening the bolts, and dirty up to my neck I got the bad wheel off and the jack lifted to its maximum. However this was an inch short of putting on the new wheel. We had been lucky enough to puncture at a bus stop, and it was in the middle of the day, so we had quite some audience, including one whom Anja just prevented from entering the car while I was busy on the ground.

Being an unpractical person I am quite proud of myself that suddenly I remembered all the cars I had seen in exotic countries, choked up on a pillar of bricks or stone while they were presumably waiting for the replacement. After some search I found several stones, and we could now lift the car sufficiently to fit the new wheel. Fortunately we found shortly after a mechanic to repair the damage and change the wheel back to the original one, and who blamingly told me that the bolts on the temporary wheel had been turned inside out.

So we did not get to see Sofia, but instead took a byway into the mountains. This resulted in may be the greatest event of the whole trip, because we ended up in a monastery, the 1000 years old (but rebuilt after a fire) Rila Monastery.



Rila Monastery seen from our balcony in the evening

From the parking lot we could just see a small gate entrance, but when inside we kind of lost our breath: Four stock high half-timbered buildings with beautifully carved wooden balconies surrounding a large five or six edged yard, in which the original stone and marble church occupied a corner. The church is rather special, having been built in a time of illiteracy, and is completely covered on all inside walls with cartoon-like colour illustrations of the bible as well as many other daily instructions for a decent life.

The place was great to see, but what made it a very special and memorable experience was the fact that we actually spent a night there. The monks were ready to earn some \$ by renting out rooms in a wing - and after the well-manicured hands (as Anja noticed) had taken our \$30, the monk treasurer gave us the key to our room. The sunset as well as the sunrise next morning, watched from the balcony overlooking the yard, the fantastic buildings, the monks walking to the church and with the mountains in the background, an almost unreal atmosphere, are still very clear in our minds.

Encouraged by this little excursion, we found another byway, as we had heard of some hot springs in the area. The road hardly looked like leading to a major attraction, and after some time we decided to stop in a small village and ask for guidance. However before we got out of the car, a Lada owner who impatiently had followed us for some time, came to ask if he could help us - at least I think he asked about that because he could only communicate in Bulgarian and Russian, which are both languages far beyond my conversational ability. However we understood that we should just follow him, and we then

took an even smaller and much worse side road. In most of the fields were grown tobacco, and in many of them the harvest had begun:



Women picked the leaves, which were packed on the back of the donkeys, and then lot by lot taken up to their houses for drying under a plastic covered shed along the road. Eventually we reached the village, and our guide was respectfully greeted by everyone - I imagine that he is the former party boss, now turned buzinizman with a kind of supermarket, bakery and bar in his big house in the middle of the village.

He also proudly showed the construction of another big building across the square - you could hardly speak of streets as the houses were just scattered around.

However in one of the houses they actually had a hot bath, which this morning was reserved for women only, so Anja followed a girl into the house. In the meantime our host invited me for coffee and drinks in his bar on 3rd floor, where we tried to keep the conversation going. Anja came back, clean and still steaming from the very hot water, which had to be mixed with cold water before use. As farewell present we got some freshly baked rolls from the bakery as well as some souvenir packets of local cigarettes.

On the way back on a different route we found another place, which next to the bathhouse also had a big outdoor swimming pool, where I could enjoy the nice and hot water.

Our last stop was in Melnik, which was the name of the tasty wine I had the first night on the truck station. Melnik is a small village with may be 100 houses - but what a setting: Along a small river in a narrow valley were houses on both sides, almost built into the sides of the mountain. It would surely have been a major attraction in most other countries, but here we were probably the only tourists that day, at least we were the only guests in the local fine hotel. They even told us that a few miles further up they had a similar

monastery, like in Rila where we stayed the previous night. Bulgaria might have a lot of tourists along the Black Sea coast, but you can surely explore the wonderful countryside in peace.

At the Greek border post they took pains to show that we were now entering the EU, with cleaners removing empty cigarette packets from the ground and water sprayers keeping the grass and flowers green and crisp. Driving into Greece we passed may be a thousand trucks lined up waiting to cross into Bulgaria - it seems the conflict in Kosovo has stopped the usual Southeastern trail through Yugoslavia, and the large amounts of goods from Turkey, Greece and Balkan to and from Western Europe have now to be trucked through the utterly unsuitable small roads and mountains in Greece, Bulgaria and Romania.

I dare not think of the situation prior to Greece's membership of the EU, where they have ruthlessly exploited any situation to pull out funds of the Union's coffins: At just about all roads were placed blue signboards 'Co-financed by the EU with 60% of the costs'. At a major highway project through a remote valley they had apparently found some ruins from the Antique times, and on several locations they were digging, or rather having siesta in the immense heat, in the shade of the large blue EU-signboards.

We drove through the northern province of Macedonia, visited the beautiful beaches at the Aegean Sea, spent a day in the capital Thessalonica, went to a mountain resort with waterfalls and open water canals all through the town, and eventually crossed to the Adriatic Sea. Our only complaint was that in spite of several tries we never found a restaurant serving our favourite dish Mousaka. However with fruit sellers along the roads our diet was by then very healthy, with several daily bags of especially peaches and melons.

We were again reminded of the disadvantage by living so northerly, where we most of the year usually have only fruit and vegetables, which were picked green and which have no taste. In comparison the local sun ripe fruits directly from the fields are like sweets.

From Igoumenitsa we took a night ferry to the Italian port of Bari, located in the very south of the country. It is not only Anja who is crazy about sunsets, because at the best viewing point on the deck a queue suddenly formed to get a picture of the quiet, Dracula-red sea.

The following morning was the first of 9 wonderful days in Italy. To visit just our major goals we had to be more direct and change our habit from driving around leisurely and see what popped up. We therefore crossed immediately to the Sorrento peninsular. Italy is indeed blessed with a magnificent landscape, a great culture, very friendly and charming people and not to forget a delicious kitchen.

Within hours we saw - and tasted - examples of all that, and believe me, since our return we have every day been feeding on memories from especially this part of the trip.



In the Italian monasteries the view outside is even better than the inside.

To drive along the sea around Sorrento is narrow, winding roads, often just hanging onto the mountainside and where the roadside deep, deep down is a dream-like beach with emerald water. It is also fishing villages and monasteries with a billion lire view - and it is swarms of scooters with young couples weaving through the traffic up to their favourite beach.

With all our stops to eat, film and just admire the scenery, the short distance took a long time, so we had to find a campground in Sorrento City. In the evening we took a bus to the harbour, not knowing that the town center so close by was located on the 10th floor - a truly vertical mountainside separated us, so we had to take the stairs. This was our first and only place with charter tourist. The drive around the peninsular was comparatively quiet apart from the local scooters, but Sorrento, all walking streets, shops and restaurants, was just crowded with tourists from everywhere (except Italy, I suppose). After our dinner Anja went to a disco and I went back to our campground.

The next day we took the train to Pompeii and saw the ancient town which in the year 79 AC was choked in ash from the Vesuvius volcano. A well preserved picture of time, showing not only how the people had been caught and embalmed, but a surprisingly high culture with parliament, temples, theaters, Beverly-hills style villas, public baths with hot, temperate and cold water, laundries, sewers etc. All this was a 1000 years before our own savages the Vikings had their prime time, which is not exactly known for its delicate culture. I imagine that we were then living in earth huts and our pastime was fighting anyone who came near. Ironically enough it was a descendant from the Vikings who during almost 200 years got the south of Italy organized after

decades of exploitation and war, during the ruthless regimes of the Romans, the Byzantine and later the Arab domination.

The afternoon was rather different but no less interesting. We continued with the train to Naples, a city famous for having not one single tourist attraction. It may be so, but it is in itself very eventful. It is a city of pure chaos, the people are anarchists, charmingly, that is - and it is a wonderful place. Oh yes, and not to forget that the boys are just great, most of them looking admiringly after Anja in her summer dress.



Street in central Naples - no wonder Mercedes was not invented in Italy

This place reeks of atmosphere, with its narrow alleys with laundry hanging across the balconies, shops with religious ornaments built in cork, ice cream sellers inviting you on a lemon liqueur, and everybody returning your smile.

We passed a huge church and incidentally a wedding was just about to start, so we did witness Pietro and Juliana getting married - a happy ceremony very much unlike our more solemn protestant church weddings.

The following day was reserved for a trip to Capri and the blue grotto, but the easy rain from the previous day had intensified, so we choose to go on to Roma.

The experience of the day was when we took a wrong exit from the motorway and ended up in down town Naples - but even the chaos seems to have its own rules, so miraculously we escaped without scratches.

Our visit in Rome started on a peaceful Sunday morning, and we just walked through the city. When in St. Peters Square, the loudspeakers suddenly announced that the prayer from His Holiness the Pope's service inside a special area would be broadcast live to the Square. To our surprise the response to his holy words was like that of a teen-age crowd cheering their favourite star, but we did hear him sending his wishes to especially the troubled people in Ireland.

Italy is like a buffet table with more delicious dishes than you can possibly eat. It is a pleasure just to drive through the landscape, highlighted by the many charming villages and in all directions are cultural and historic places, each of them deserving your attention and admiration.

Next stop Perugia, the former Etruscan capital, and like most of the historic towns in the area built on the very top of the mountain. Somehow we again got it wrong and suddenly the car was in one of these narrow alleys, and a steep one, where we could barely pass through. With Anja's help and guidance we crawled out through a gate, where two donkeys could just pass each other, and found a parking place. And we could have saved all the troubles, because here two long escalators within minutes took us up into the old city.

Words are getting scarce to describe all the places, and no place more than in Siena. We had by now learned to park downhill and take the bus, and we had an exciting ride up through the winding streets of this town in the province of beautiful Tuscany. We then continued by foot through the old city gate, all very impressing, but suddenly I just stood frozen, the heart stopped beating and I could scarcely say WOW. In front of us appeared suddenly the enormous town square, which is actually more like a number of large triangular pieces of cake, sloping to the narrow end, and with hundreds of people hypnotized into sitting, lying, or just walking around on the square. Every building in the area seem authentic, although it is as complete down to every detail as a Hollywood scene - and for once that is meant as a compliment.

How can anything beat such an experience? It was therefore more to do our duty that we made a stop in Pisa to see the leaning tower. We came, we saw -

and we left again rather quickly, it was simply too hot, and we hurried to move the car and get some air circulation. I just noted that we had got a parking ticket, which could be expected because I did not have enough Lire coins to pay for the meter. An hour later Anja would take some fruit from our 'kitchen' box behind the front seat, but could not find what she was looking for. When stopping to refill gas we took a closer look - and no wonder she could not find the peaches, because the box, as well as both our luggage bags (including toilet bags) were gone. After a close look we could see that they had used a screwdriver in the lock of the rear door, very discrete, and had searched the car, probably to find some cash. They had also taken a plastic bags with several bottles of mineral water, but 1 carton of cigarettes, my expensive short wave radio, our leather hiking boots and other more valuable things, were still there. I think I will mail the amount of the small fine to the police in Pisa and ask if this is a new way of self-service, if the culprits do not pay for their parking?

A few years back the girls and I went to the Italian Alps to do some hiking. From that trip we especially remember all the waterfalls, mountain lakes and clear streams. We decided to return that way and spent 3 wonderful days exploring the area. The trails were quite a challenge to us with rather steep rises up to 2.500 m (7.500 feet), although nothing compared to the tales by Hank the Yank (Henrik fra San Francisco) from his American Adventures. The last night we slept in the car near the mountain pass border to Switzerland, where the cattle is still roaming freely with their neck bells, just called in for milking in the pen on the mountain meadow. They were kind enough to wake us up with a big MUUUH through our open door the following morning.

We had promised Benthe to bring back souvenirs to her (a bottle of wine and a beer from each country), and our stock had fortunately not been of interest to our friends in Pisa. Now we saw the advantages of the coming Euro currency, because on that day we passed 4 countries with as many different currencies. Anja did not seem to mind however, as she used the change each time on the local sweets.

The driving went quite well so eventually we just continued to Bjerringbro, Denmark, knocking the door at 11.30 PM after approx. 1.500 km (880 miles) of driving that day.