



BLACK SEA TO NORTH SEA 2024 REDUX

PART I: BUCHAREST TO BUDAPEST



We had taken this voyage before, in 2018, and enjoyed it very much. Due to historically low water on the Danube that year there was a portion of the Danube that we were not able to navigate on. Going upstream from the Black Sea, we had to stop at Kalocsa, Hungary (south and downstream of Budapest). From Kalocsa we were bused around the section too low to navigate by water on, to Regensburg, Germany where we boarded another river-ship and continued on to Amsterdam.

During the first of the COVID-19 years we decided to try this trip again and attempt navigating the entire way on water. There were new stops on the 2024 itinerary that we could explore as well so it wasn't a redux of everything. I researched and planned a lot of short walks from the river-ship stops that explored things we had not seen before as well and would include birding focused walks. The short walks were a good way to judge what Wendy could do after her injuries from our Antarctica trip over a year ago. She had gone through a series of treatments over the past year and soon we were to go on seven-month trip so we were eager to see how she would do. Should it have been difficult for Wendy we had plenty of options to deal with it on the journey.

The walks went well, Wendy had no adventure stopping issues and we were able to judge how much she could do for our future adventures.

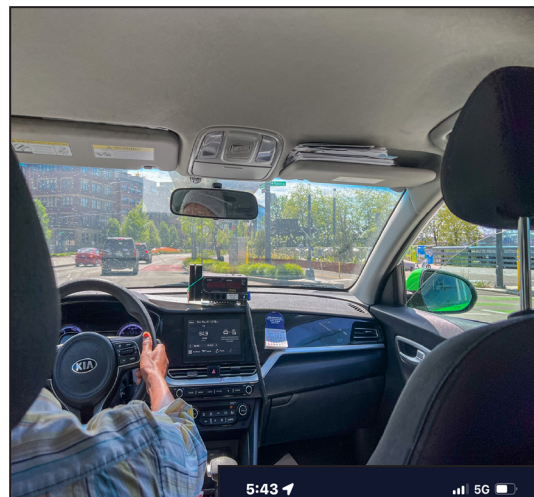


As usual, getting to the airport is a multi-step process.

From our home in Poulsbo we usually arrange a ride to the Bainbridge Island - Seattle ferry on Bainbridge Island and then walk on with our luggage.

When we get to Seattle we take a taxi, Uber or the light rail system to the Sea-Tac Airport.

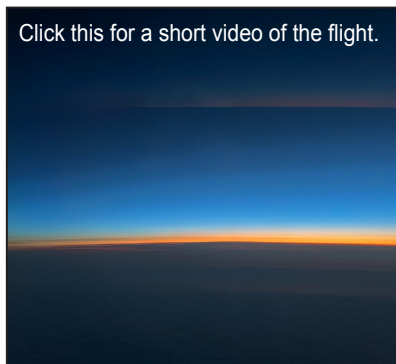
This time we took a taxi as the light rail system has too many incidents of crime, breakdown and other mayhem these days.



Once at the airport, we did all those airport chores required to get on the plane. We found our pods on the airplane and settled in for the long overnight flight to Amsterdam.

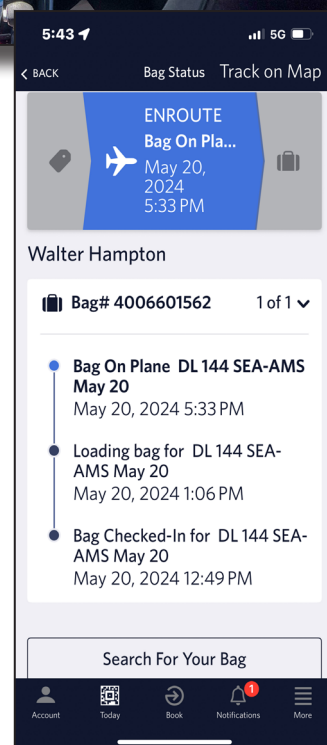


Click this for a short video of the flight.



NOTE: If you are viewing the links in this travelogue, I recommend you download and/or view this (a PDF file) from the Acrobat PDF reader, not from within a browser (Safari, Chrome, Edge, Etc.). Browsers do not always open links in new tabs, making it disruptive in reading and harder to follow the travelogue.

Our Apple Airtags and the airlines on APP provided tenuous hope that our luggage would be traveling with us.





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In Amsterdam we collected our luggage which had a successful and uneventful arrival as well. After dragging our luggage to and checking in at an in-airport hotel I had a beer and we got a good nights sleep.

The next morning we walked back into the airport, did all the Amsterdam airport chores and boarded our flight to Bucharest.

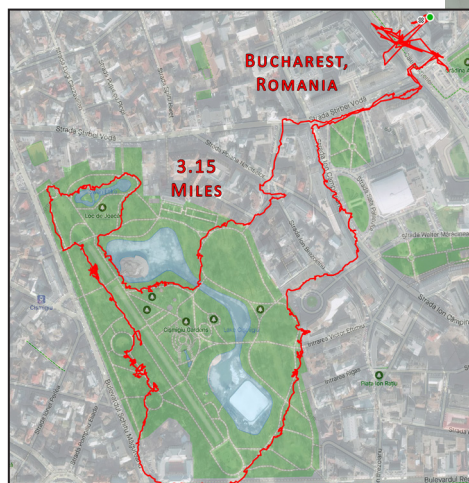
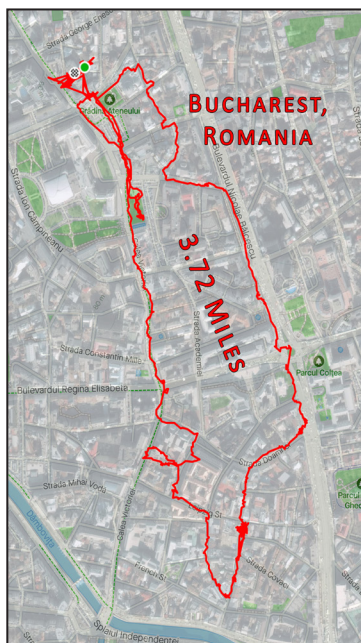


After a second successful flight, *WITH* luggage doing the same, we took a cab to our Bucharest hotel where we were going to spend three nights before hooking up with the rest of the ship passengers and boarding the ship on the Danube a couple hours away.

We could now enjoy a couple of aimless days wandering around Bucharest rather than replenishing lost luggage and contents.

On our first couple of walks in Bucharest, Wendy did well. That.

boded well for the rest of the walks I had planned for the trip. She had pain, but nothing more than what it has been for some months.





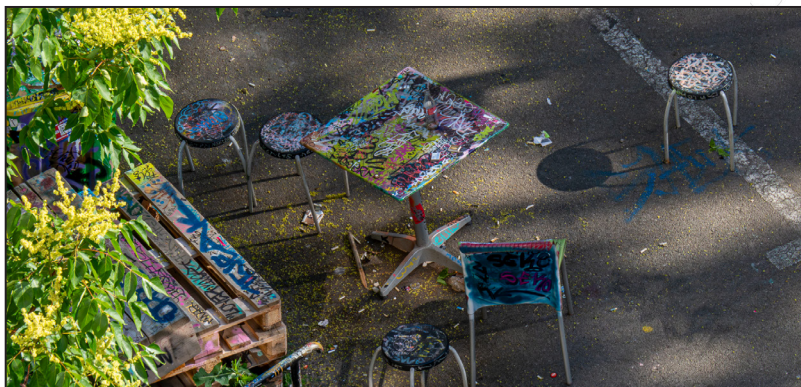
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Our Bucharest hotel room overlooked an art school parking lot with an outdoor gathering place which was appropriately adorned.

More effort was put into decorating the outdoor gathering space than repairing the fallen chimney and roof of the art school.



We located the eclair shop we frequented years ago when we stayed here. To our "dismay", there were now more shops of even more decadence just steps away from the original one (which is still there too). We had a grand two or three days eating our way through them all.





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One of our morning Situation Rooms and Wendy's substitute for the daily latte Wally makes her. Pretty sure Wendy was not all that disappointed and pretty sure Wally will have to up his latte game.

The coffee bean roaster where I had purchased coffee beans for our river trip last time was no longer there. However, just down the street I found a very knowledgeable boutique roaster that had my preferred beans and roasted them lightly as I prefer as well (referred to sometimes as *First Crack* roasted).

We didn't stop at this roaster for any Hippy Coffee, but it was a cool sign.



There was a lot of stuff we couldn't do on our walk in this park. Luckily birding wasn't one of them.



We woke up to a wet view out our hotel room window one morning... but it didn't stop us (we *are* from the PNW after all). Most of Europe was getting more rain than normal this summer. Southern Germany more than others and that was going to affect our trip eventually.



We walked by my place again.

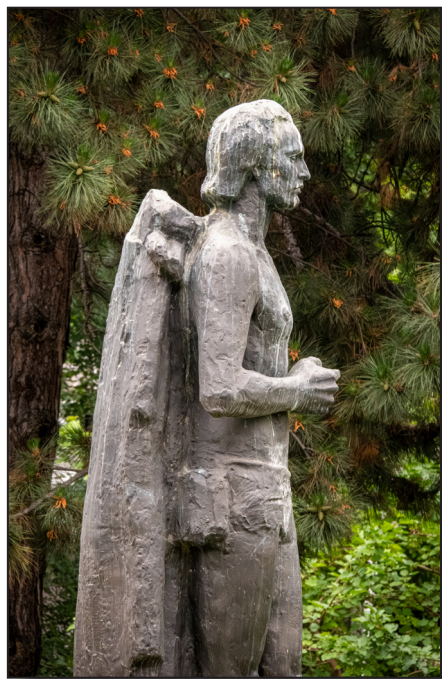




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SOME BUCHARESTI STREET ART AND SCULPTURE





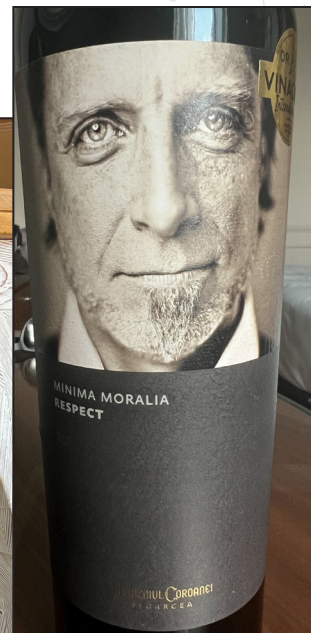
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I wanted a nice Romanian wine to have on the ship so we found a wine shop a few steps from the hotel as well. I thought the fellow on the wine label had character and hoped it would be as well with the wine, as good as many ways to judge a wine without tasting or understanding the language.

The wine shop / cafe had some cool stools at one of the counters.



A couple weathered ceramic mosaic game boards inlaid in concrete tables that I found interesting and with character.





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Our last day in Bucharest we were bused to the town Oltenita on the Danube River a couple hours away. There we boarded the ship Avalon Passion.

We found our way to our cabin, opened the floor to ceiling sliding glass doors and I assumed the position I intended to be in for much of the next month.



As we watched the sunset from our room, the ship headed downstream towards the Black Sea where we would get just a short look at it tomorrow and then back track, heading upstream on the Danube all the way to Amsterdam, (or so we thought).





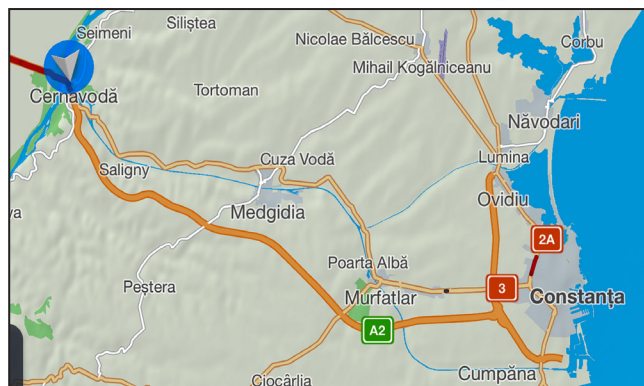
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Click image to read more about Constanta on Wikipedia.

Due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine the closest our ship would take us to the Black Sea was Cernavoda. The Danube is the border to Romania and Ukraine a bit further down stream. We would miss seeing the Danube Delta and all the birding opportunities on this trip. We did get to see the Black Sea though, as we took a short bus ride to a stormy, rainy and wet Constanta on the coast of Romania for short walk though the old town to the sea shore of the Black Sea.



My first day of a ship board Situation Room in Cernavoda seemed familiar and welcoming. Again, as on the 2018 trip, I was typically the first to be on deck and had it pretty much to myself until Wendy came up later to join me.

On our short drive from the ship to Constanta the weather got steadily darker and stormier. By the time we walked a bit and got to see the Black Sea in person it was a pretty dark atmosphere and one could easily think the Black Sea was named for the weather. In fact, popular supposition does believe the "Black Sea" was named for the dark color of the water or climatic conditions. Click the image of the Black Sea below to learn more about the Black Sea on Wikipedia.





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After our short and stormy walk in Constanta we were bused back to the ship in Cernavoda where we re-boarded the ship. Anchorage in Cernavoda was a bit trashier than most other ports. Some White Wagtail birds were making the best of the situation, nesting in the rock wall and feasting on all the bugs that were attracted to the garbage.



Later that afternoon we headed back upstream for the overnight sailing to our next port of call at Ruse, Bulgaria.



The 299 sign means we are 299K from the Black Sea on the Danube.



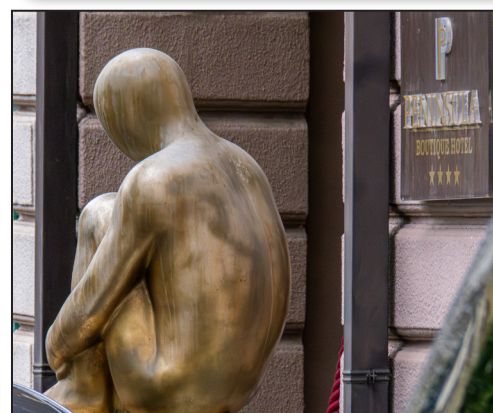
Along the banks of the Danube are signs with numbers painted on them. These are kilometre markers. The Danube technically starts at Kilometre 0, near Sulina, Romania's easternmost city. Moving west, the Danube continues on until Kilometre 2415: Kelheim, Germany, which is just northwest of the town of Regensburg.



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SOME THINGS WE SAW ON OUR WALK IN CONSTANTA, ROMANIA





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Click image to read more about Ruse on Wikipedia.

I remembered from our 2018 trip that Ruse, Bulgaria had a great walking street. On the 2018 trip Wendy had taken an excursion somewhere else and I had chosen to walk through town on my own. This trip, Wendy would now have an experienced tour guide (although one not licensed in Bulgaria).



Our ship being guided into the Ruse port where we will tie up to another ship. This is a common way multiple ships can use the port at the same time. We will walk through the shore side ship(s) to the shore, getting a little peak at the other ships interior as well.





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We had a late afternoon and overnight cruise to our
next port of call in Vidin, Bulgaria.



1,000 kilometers upstream from the Black Sea.





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I was never able find any information on this unusual biplane that circled overhead a few times checking us out (or maybe dumping chemicals on us).

Another great sunset on the Danube from our room, this time highlighting a thunderhead off in the distance.

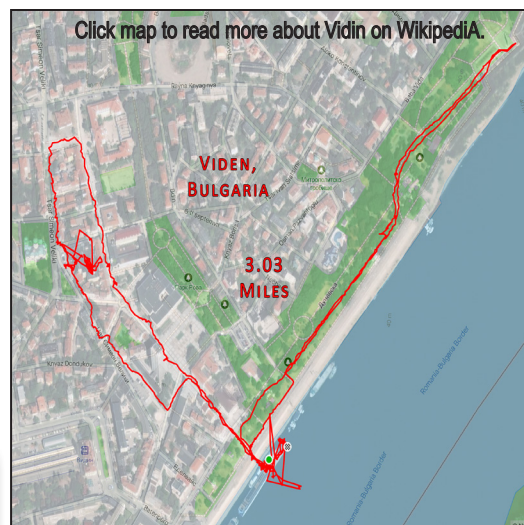


The next morning we were in Vidin, Bulgaria, which we had been to on the last trip as well. We took a walk though town seeing much the same thing as we saw on the last trip and then did some birding along the waterfront park before being chased back to the ship by more stormy weather. All the bird photographs will be later in this travelogue.

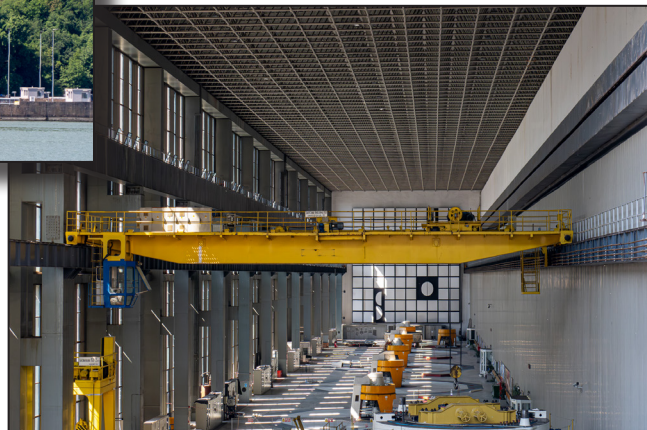
After our morning stop in Vidin we continued on toward the Iron Gate gorge.

We passed through the Iron Gate I Hydroelectric Power Station that Tito was so proud of. It is the largest dam on the Danube river and one of the largest hydro power plants in Europe.

After the Tito locks we continued on Danube through the Iron Gate gorge dividing Romania and Bulgaria.



We got another good look into the turbine room again. Either we are lucky or when we were told it was rare to see the doors open last trip, I misunderstood.





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We made a short afternoon stop at Donji Milanovac, Serbia as we came out of the Iron Gate gorge. We took a short walk around the town, visiting the elephant sculpture and buying a poorly made corkscrew so I could finally try that wine I bought in Bucharest, (more about the corkscrew later). I was having trouble acquiring a corkscrew on the ship, even for temporary purposes.



Click image to read more about Belgrade on Wikipedia.

The next morning from my Situation Room on the top deck I watched the sunrise painting the graffiti in some grain elevators with wonderful warm light as we arrived in Belgrade, Serbia.





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We were glad it was an overnight sail as the last time we docked here in Belgrade the shore across from where we tied up was all noisy nightclubs that kept us awake most of the night. We were staying here overnight tonight but our room this time was on the other side of the ship... which we hoped would save us from the noise across the river. It did for the most part, but they had developed a nightclub row on our side since we were here last as well.





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SOME IMAGES FROM OUR WALK IN BELGRADE



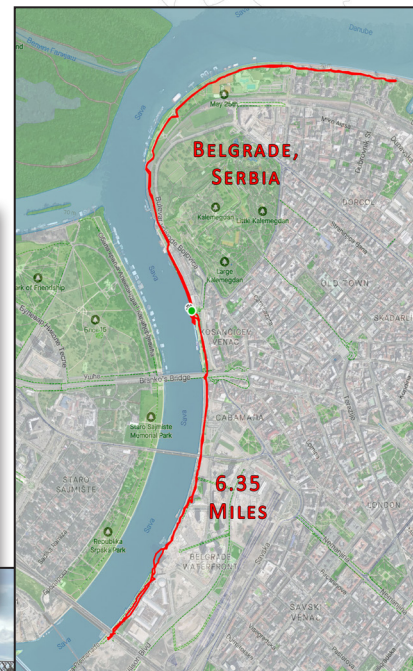


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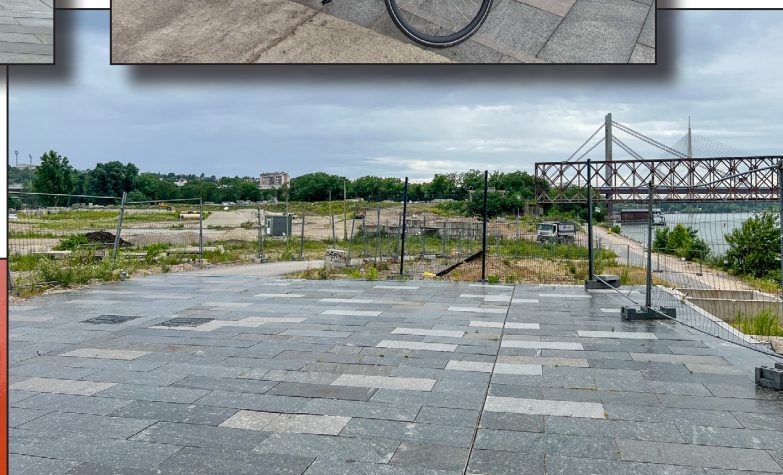
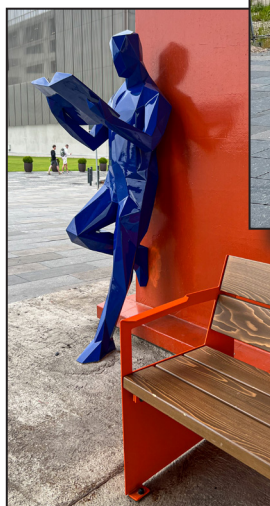


Wendy was a bit too tired to go on a bike ride with me so off on my own I went to explore the Belgrade Waterfront area that has all been developed in the last six years, (and continues to be extended to the south).



This was the end of the developed portion of the waterfront going south. Danger and mayhem if one went any further south into the Belgrade Waterfront *Other Side*. I called Wendy and asked for permission to enter *The Other Side*, but it was not granted.

I rested a bit on a bench next to a fellow reading a book, waited out a passing rain shower and then headed back as per Wendy's instructions (and better judgement) about continuing on any further south into *The Other Side*.





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On the way back I photographed what seems to be destined Belgrade Waterfront's most iconic building. It has an unusual shape that makes the basic profile change depending upon where one is viewing it from. If you look at certain renderings of the plans and then certain images of it built, one could surmise that the architect and the builders were just not on the same page or used the same plans. The rendering is the center image below, the rest are as-built photographs I made.





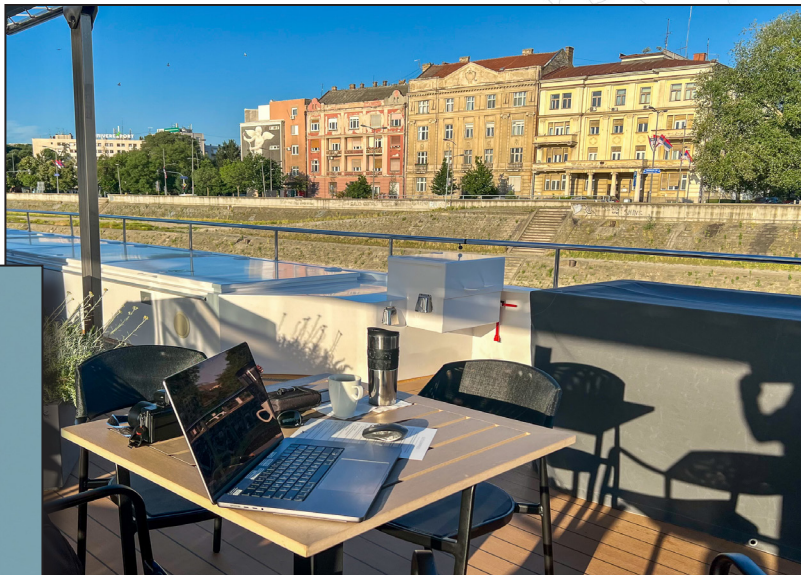
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Our next port of call was sunny and warm Novi Sad, Serbia. We woke up to a really nice view and an empty early morning Situation Room again... perfect!

We took a short bus tour of Novi Sad, then we were dumped off at the far end of pedestrian street where we walked back along and then through a small park I had noted in my pre-trip reconnaissance thinking it might be nice for birding.



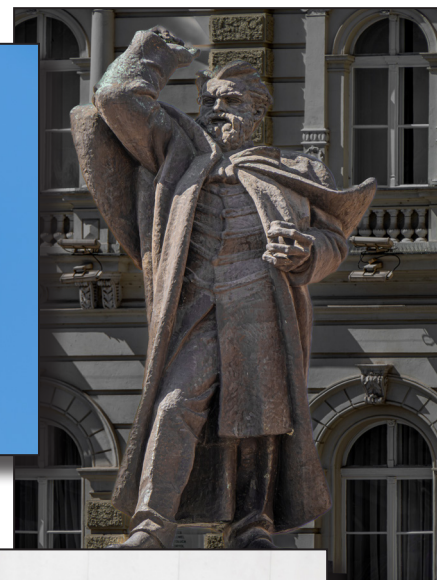


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While not a Rodin sculpture, the bulbus hands reminded me of his work.



It was too hot for another walk that afternoon so I took another bike ride along a waterfront, this time Novi Sad's.



Under cover of dark and the light of a bridge, we left Novi Sad for the overnight sailing to our next port.





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Click image above to read about iLok on Wikipedia.



After our quality time with the storks, we walked back to the ship via a street of urban decay that I enjoyed photographing.

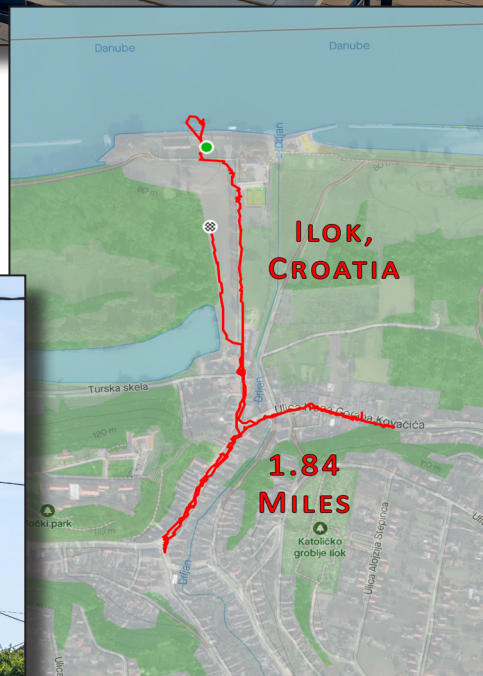


We awoke to another beautiful warm day in Ilok, Croatia. In my pre-trip reconnaissance of Ilok I'd found a Stork's nest on a pole not too far away from where I thought we would dock so that was our walking goal today. I hoped we 'might' even find it occupied, but that I knew that unlikely and a big ask, (even if it was still there).

When we got there we found three nests AND ALL were occupied AND ALL had young in them being attended to by the parents. We enjoyed watching them and getting a few photographs even though it wasn't with my high quality birding cameras and lenses.



From the docked ship I admired a Ilok local's Situation Room overlooking the Danube. I'd definitely keep Ilok and this Situation Room in mind should it become necessary to readjust domiciles.





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ILOK, CROATIA STREET OF URBAN DECAY





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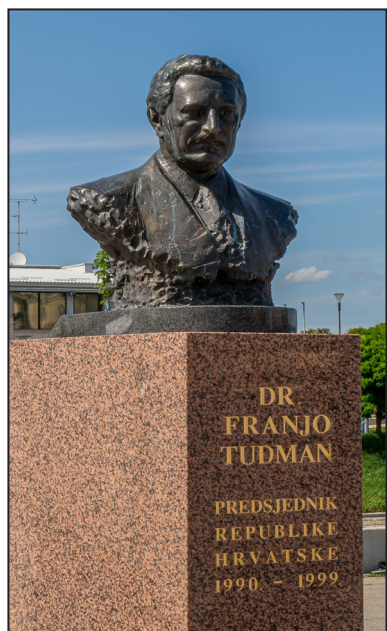


From Ilok we headed upstream to Vukovar, Croatia, our second stop of the day.



Click image above to read about Vukovar on Wikipedia.

Vukovar has a long history, going back to the 13th century, but is most recently remembered for its role in the Croatian War of Independence. In particular, the Battle of Vukovar in 1991 where 1,800 self-organized lightly armed defenders and civilian volunteers defended the city for 87 days against approximately 36,000 troops of the Serb-dominated JNA (Yugoslav People's Army) equipped with heavy armor and artillery. The city suffered heavy damage and was eventually overrun. It is estimated that 1,800 defenders of Vukovar and civilians were killed, 800 went missing and 22,000 civilians were forced into exile. Several war crimes were committed by Serb forces after the battle, including the Vukovar massacre of up to 264 wounded patients and medical staff taken from the Vukovar hospital.





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On our walk around Vukovar we saw lots of evidence of the Battle of Vukovar. The bridge below is depicting the bridge in a ruined condition after the war was very interesting. It is named after Jean-Michel Nicolier, a French volunteer and Croatian soldier in the Croatian War of Independence who was killed in the Vukovar massacre. There is a bust sculpture of him and commemorating placque next to the bridge.



Jean-Michel Nicolier was born in Vesoul, France on 1 July 1966. He came to Vukovar believing he could help stop injustice in the world and joined the Croatian Defence Forces as a volunteer.

He fought against Greater Serbian aggression in Sajmište, where he was wounded on 9 November 1991, forcing him to stay in hospital. He was taken from the hospital to Ovcara, where he was executed on the night of 20 to 21 November 1991. His remains have still not been found. He was awarded numerous honours for love, loyalty and outstanding bravery and heroism shown in the defence of Vukovar. He had a book titled *Jean ili miris smrti (Jean or the Smell of Death)* and a documentary titled *Sve je bio dobar san (It Was All Just a Good Dream)* made about him. The main pedestrian bridge in Vukovar was named after him and his bust, made by Lovro Jakšić, an academy-trained sculptor, was placed at the bridge in 2015.

At only 25 years of age in 1991, his life was only just beginning. In an interview for French television, he said: *"I knew it would be hard, but I did not think it would be this terrible, especially for the civilians. I came to Vukovar as a volunteer. It is my choice, for better or worse."*

As one of the most prominent symbols of Vukovar, Jean-Michel Nicolier holds a special place in the hearts of the people of Vukovar.



Click image to read more about Jean-Michel Nicolier on Wikipedia.



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We saw both preserved and un-repaired evidence of the war on our walk. Sometimes it was hard to tell the difference.

The water tower below was built in the late 1960s. Until the war, the top of the tower was home to a restaurant with a view over Vukovar, Danube and surrounding vineyards.

During the Battle of Vukovar, the water tower was one of the most frequent targets of artillery. It was hit more than 600 times during the siege.

Today, it has been converted into a museum with a restaurant. Traces of the war are still evident.



Click image to read more about the Vukovar water tower on Wikipedia.





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This is what is left of Hotel Dunav. They have re-built or added on a cafe just to the left and on the water overlooking where we had docked. We stopped there for a coffee before we got back on the ship. From information I researched later, many Vukovar residents sheltered in the basement of Hotel Dunav during the war, (as well journalists).

This is a quote for one journalist's story:

"In Vukovar, while we spent much of the time sheltering alongside the town's inhabitants in the basement of the Hotel Dunav, we met a Croatian cameraman who showed us a video he had shot of a tractor trailer full of dead bodies. They all appeared to be civilians."

If you want to read the journalist's story I quoted from above, click on any of the hotel images.



As we walked back to the ship we saw these markers stacked long the waterfront. They reminded us of grave markers, but we were not sure. We looked at them to find clues, but could not see anything that lessened the mystery.



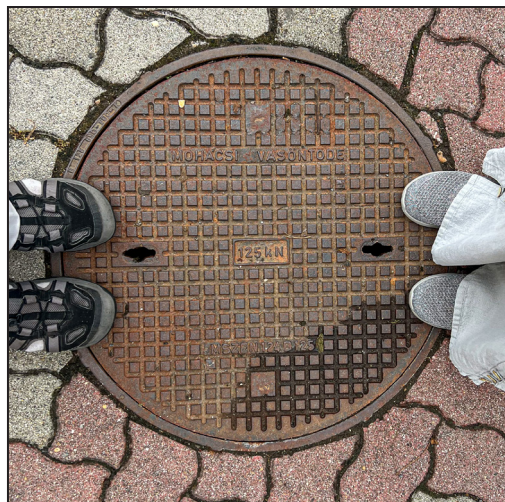


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At our next stop in Mohacs, Hungary we got the inside berth when tying up to the ship Rinda that we had been playing leap frog with the past few days.



Click image above to read
about Mohacs on Wikipedia.

It was a nice cool day for one of our
longer walks.

Bikes on the light colored bricks,
pedestrians on the dark colored bricks.
You would think I would have figured
it out, but a friendly local biker had to
stop and kindly explain the road rules
to me. *Tourist!!*





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The hat is worth a second look here...



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The inscription translated to "*In memory of the families taken to forced labor camps in Hortobagy and to the settlements along the border*". The names on the pieces below are the names of towns families were sent.



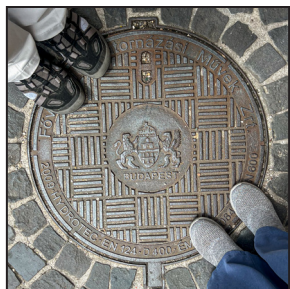
We left Mohacs and headed further up the Danube towards Budapest, our next stop and where we planned to switch ships and continue on up the Danube, Main-Danube Canal, Main and Rhine rivers to Amsterdam. That was the *plan* anyway. Mother Nature had other plans.





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On our way to Budapest we went by the port of Kaloska where we had to stop the Danube upriver portion of the 2018 Black Sea to North Sea adventure due to *low* water. This time there was too much water and the entire upper Danube from Budapest on was closed due to *high* water.



The farthest we would be able to travel upriver on the Danube would be to Budapest. The entire upper Danube was now shut down due to flooding from heavy rains in Southern Germany.

The Danube at Budapest was chock-full of river ships that were stalled in the same way as us. To complicate things even further for river ships was that those Danube flood waters to the north were headed downstream to where we were and on south where we had come from, shutting down portions of the river to the south as well, trapping both north and south bound ships.





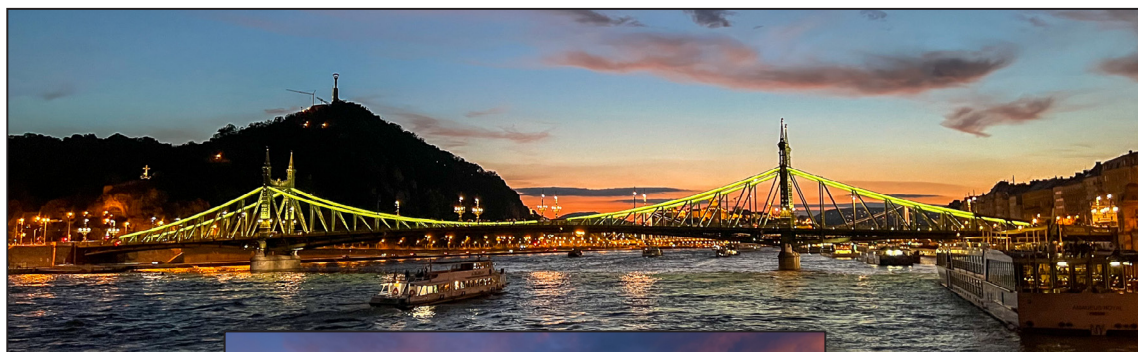
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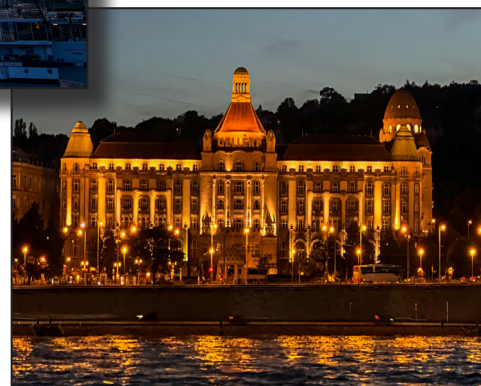


We had to disembark the *Avalon Passion* and board the *Avalon Artistry II* which was tied up along side us. While neither ship was going anywhere soon, the ship we were on was going to get a whole new group of stranded passengers. The ship we were supposed to move to was the *Avalon Imagery* but it was stranded on upper Danube in the flood waters.

We were docked in a very convenient place, right in central Budapest next to the Budapest Central Market and very close to the apartment we had rented on a cross Europe rail adventure in 2015.



We got some nice sunsets and night views during our days on the *Avalon Artistry II* river hotel.



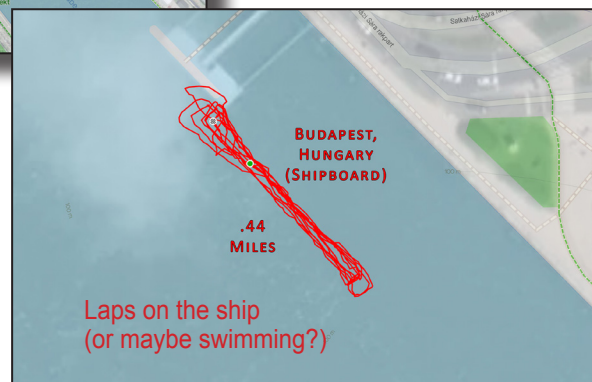
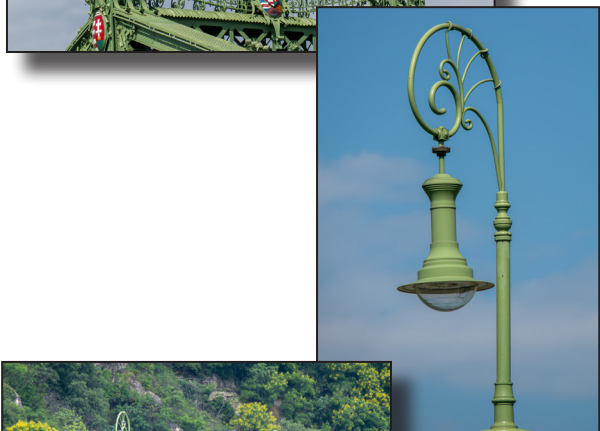
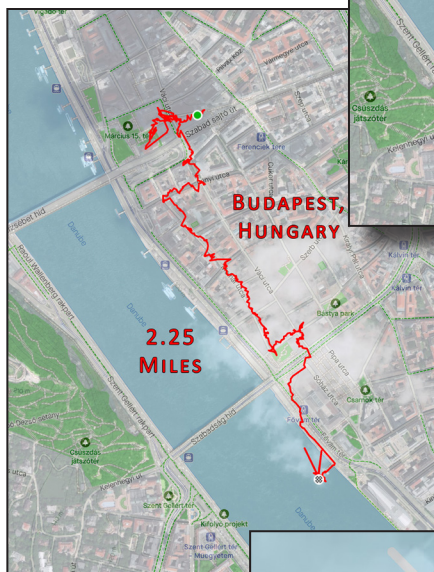


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We got in a few walks over our extended stay in Budapest and eventually there was a new travel game plan for the second leg of our trip to Amsterdam and the Black Sea. The next *Flying Pig Adventures* will be about that.



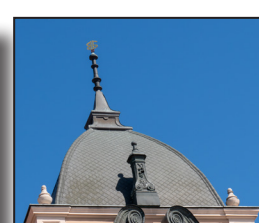
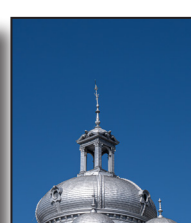
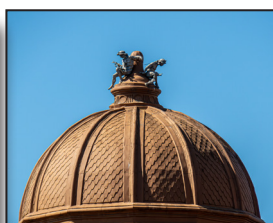
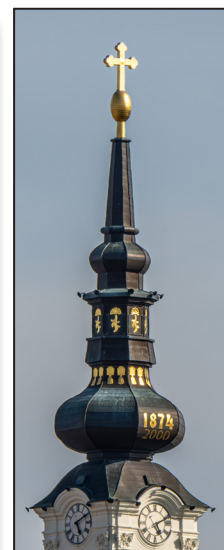
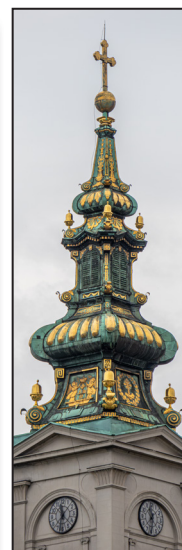


BLACK SEA TO NORTH SEA 2024 REDUX

PART I: BUCHAREST TO BUDAPEST



SPIRES, STEEPLES AND DOMES WE SAW



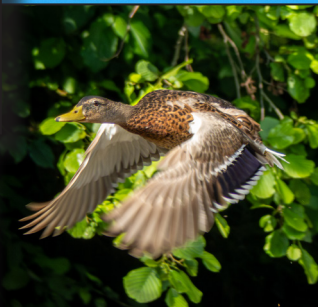
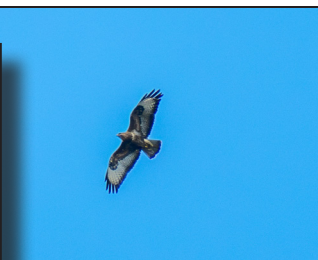
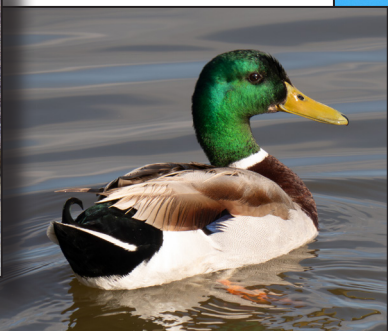


BLACK SEA TO NORTH SEA 2024 REDUX

PART I: BUCHAREST TO BUDAPEST



BIRDS WE SAW



.END