

GEMINI DUO TRIP TO TURKEY, 2008

PART 4 – The River Danube, Vienna to Belgrade

14 - 29 July 2008

The first 1500 km of our journey were in Western Europe where we had managed to communicate in our limited German, spend Euros and not worry about any border controls. After Vienna we entered what was Eastern Europe and which felt very different indeed.

There are now border and customs controls, and each country has a different language, often different script too, and different currency. It made for interesting shopping when we sometimes couldn't understand the labels and often became confused with currency conversions.

A few hours cruising from Vienna we were into Slovakia, and stopped near the capital Bratislava. Here we found great hospitality and kindness. We had phoned to reserve a place in a small marina and when we turned into the backwater, the owner and his wife came out to take our ropes, tied us up and connected us to electricity without us lifting a finger. They gave us welcome drinks, set up an account, organised a taxi to go to the old city, and even lent us 1000 Slovak Koruna (c. £30) as we had no local money yet. We dined on both nights in their floating restaurant, having some of the best food and wine we have had on this trip, and they even made reservations for us in boat havens further down the river. Best of all, they wanted no money until we left. Two nights mooring, dinners and wine came to less than £100! We can highly recommend Dodo's marina in Bratislava.

The taxi ride past the old docks and ugly blocks of flats was not inspiring, but central Bratislava was a very pleasant surprise. It is very cosmopolitan cafe society where the old city centre is pedestrianised with shops and restaurants. The hill top castle is stunning but is currently closed for reconstruction, but there is much else to see and do. We visited several museums, one of which had an extensive dungeon full of medieval torture equipment and graphic pictures of how to use it. We never knew you could be sawn in half long ways from the crutch!

100km further into Slovakia Miro greeted us at his marina in Komarno opposite a ship building yard. It turned out to be a quiet spot within a 10 minute walk of an excellent supermarket where we spent the remainder of our Slovakian Koruna. We were now intent on stocking our larder and freezer at every opportunity as we had no idea what to expect further down river.

Hungary was the next country we visited, apparently with many Tesco superstores, but we never found any within walking distance of our moorings. In the historic town of Esztergom we moored up the old Danube arm which was only 30m wide with a stiff current. As Dodo from Bratislava had made a booking for us we were welcomed and tied up in the only space available. It was a great mooring because it was directly under the hill on which stood the magnificent Esztergom Basilica. We walked up the hill and admired the neo-classical interior of Hungary's largest church, and then climbed up 430 steps to reach the rickety wooden walkway on the outside of the cupula. The views of the Danube and the city are amazing as long as you don't suffer from vertigo.

That evening a rock band started playing at the open air bar opposite. It was extraordinarily loud and not very good and we feared being kept awake until the wee hours but at 9pm a huge thunderstorm brought an abrupt end to the free concert and peace descended.

Next morning the sun was shining again and we had a choice of how to leave our mooring – we could have gone a further 3 km up the narrow stream and rejoin the Danube but were concerned about depth. Instead we reversed round the end of the pontoon and swung on a stern rope secured by the harbour master, our bow narrowly missing the railings of the steps on the opposite bank. It was a manoeuvre we are unlikely to want to repeat again!

Budapest was our next stop in the large and busy Wiking Marina which is situated in an old ship yard about 5km north of the city centre. An English friend who works in Budapest came to lunch and gave us good advice on the best sights to see. It is fair to say that Budapest rivals Vienna for magnificent palaces, castles and cathedrals but has the advantage of actually being on the Danube. Old Buda and modern Pest are linked by 9 bridges, one of which is closed to traffic on summer weekends for craft and food stalls and musicians. While Budapest is exciting and safe, it suffers from a widespread graffiti problem which defaces so many buildings.

Before leaving Budapest we filled up with diesel as we had been told it would be difficult to find fuel further down the Danube. As we had travelled only 276km since our last fill-up in Vienna we knew we would not need a lot but were surprised to only take on 118 litres. This means that on the Danube we were now doing 2.3km per litre so a full 1500 litre tank will allow us to complete the rest of the river to the Black Sea.

We had planned to stop at Paks but the marina was tiny so we had a peaceful night at anchor in a nearby bay. Our final night in Hungary was at a very quiet marina up a long canal at Baja where the harbour master spoke a bit of English and was very helpful indeed. He told us about the weekly farmers market the next morning where we stocked up on fresh fruit and veg but resisted buying any of the tiny puppies or kittens on sale.

We left Hungary the next morning in pouring rain and crossed into Serbia on the left bank and Croatia on the right. We had received conflicting information about whether or not we had to exit customs at the Hungarian border of Mohacs and stop for entry formalities at the Serbian port of Bezdan. We had heard stories of people being delayed at border controls for several hours and were rather concerned about what to expect. In the event, both looked closed, there was no-where sensible to moor and it was still raining, so we proceeded on and anchored for the night on the Croatian side of the river.

It was still raining hard the next day when we motored down to Vukovar in Croatia. The town is very industrial and still has bullet riddled ruins which give it a derelict air and we didn't fancy stopping as the small marina was in the midst of it. We went on for a total of 140 km and were very tired by the time we reached the biggest marina in Serbia, at Novi Sad. A kind boater helped us squeeze between two boats and moor stern-to the pontoon where we picked up a bow rope to hold us tight, the Mediterranean way.

We were concerned about the language barrier as we had phoned the day before to book a space and could not communicate in any of the four languages we know. We had no Serbian dinars and as we didn't know where an ATM was we didn't know how we'd pay for our mooring if asked. However, we ate on board that night and slept very well.

The following morning we set off with some trepidation and were greeted at the marina gate by a man who spoke excellent English and who introduced us to the owner of the marina and restaurant. 1000 dinar (£10) a night is all he wanted for our berth including electricity and water. We wondered what the annual rate might be!

We were told that we needed to register with the local police who were 10 minutes down the road alongside the Danube. After 3 km we were in the city centre but had not found the police station. So we got some local currency from an ATM in the old town and later crossed the river on the bridge that was rebuilt following the Nato forces bombing in 1999. Our aim was to visit the Petrovaradin Fortress perched high on an enormous rocky ridge overlooking the river. It's been a fortification since pre Roman times but the present colossal stone structure was completed in the 18th century and is the best preserved baroque fortress in Europe covering 280 acres. Whilst walking up the steep and winding path, the heavens opened again and our one small umbrella did nothing to prevent us being soaked from head to foot. We even had to empty our shoes when we reached the castle, but it was well worth the effort.

What did take a lot of effort was the Serbian border procedures which we faced when we left Novi Sad the next day. We moored up on the Police pontoon and were greeted by five officers who studied our passports and ship's papers. They kept our passports and told us in very limited English that we would have to wait on our boat for the "Kapitane" who would arrive in two hours. A plain clothed man who spoke no English finally managed to explain to us that we would have to pay €30 for every hour we parked at the pontoon! We were not happy.

In the marina the previous day we had met an English-educated Serbian boater who had luckily given us his number to call in the event of any problem. After more than two hours had elapsed and we were still waiting, we phoned him and he came down to the Police pontoon and talked to the various officials. By the time he arrived the Kapitane's assistant had also turned up and taken us across the road to the cigarette smoke filled River Authority office where a Robbie Coltrane lookalike charged us €80 for a permit to travel on the Serbian part of the Danube. None of the other nine countries through which the Danube flows make a charge. Finally after much form filling and rubber stamping we emerged from the office with two pieces of paper and returned to collect our passports from the police. This had all taken four hours and thankfully our Serbian friend had negotiated the pontoon parking charge down to just €30. What a money grabbing scam!

We had booked a mooring in Belgrade for that evening but it was now 2pm and we had 90km to travel. We were so cheesed off that we were determined to reach the nice floating restaurant mooring that had been recommended to us by Dodo back in Bratislava. We finally reached the Vedonica Restaurant mooring in Belgrade at 7.30pm and were warmly welcomed by George, the owner's son, who spoke excellent English. Our stressful and frustrating day finished with a delicious fish dinner in the Vedonica with fine local wine. The meal was so good we ate in the

Vedonica again the next evening, this time dining on succulent local rump steak. George's dad treated us to a bottle of Serbian red from his village which was excellent.

The next morning George took us in his car to the fruit and veg market, the butcher, the baker and the supermarket so we could stock up. George, his father Neja and all their staff were delightful, as was everyone else we met in Belgrade and Novi Sad, but the officials are a total nightmare.

The Vedonica floating restaurant is in the Sava River where it joins the Danube and is situated directly below the Petrovaradin Fortress and within an easy stroll of the main city centre. While the outskirts of Belgrade are ugly and industrial, the city centre has many fine buildings and all the shops and conveniences you could want.

We left Belgrade refreshed and stocked with food and water, but had the further difficult prospect of the Serbian exit procedures to face. At Veliki Gradiste some 100km down river we moored up at the Police pontoon and were directed to the police station across the road where we took all our papers. Again our passports were held while we had to visit the River Kapitane in another building. He kept all our ships papers and gave us a piece of paper for the police and the customs officer to sign. Back we went to be told by the police to wait on the boat for inspection. When we returned to the boat a man appeared who demanded €50 for parking! Roger blew his top and we moved to the next mooring for commercial boats. We had only been there 10 minutes when another man appeared who wanted €25. When we refused to pay this amount he became willing to accept €10 if we didn't want a receipt. More Serbian money-grabbing scams. Twice we had to trudge back to the police station before they came to inspect the boat which they just looked at from the pontoon and then hang around for another half an hour in the police station trying to get our passports and ships papers back. Only two hours this time!

By now the Danube is a very major river indeed averaging 1 km wide with 20m of depth and travelling 2 knots and more of current. However, we have now encountered three new hazards – duck weed that clogs the engine water filter, all sorts of floating domestic rubbish, literally thousands of plastic and glass bottles, but the most serious danger to boating is fishermen's nets. Because the river is not very busy in this stretch, fishermen take the liberty of stretching their nets out well into the navigation channel. To avoid a net round your propeller, you need keen eyes and a good pair of binoculars to spot their buoys which consist of 3 plastic bottles tied together.

It was with great relief that we checked out of Serbia, but what about border controls in Romania and Bulgaria – more to follow...

Diane and Roger

