

GEMINI DUO TRIP TO TURKEY, 2008

PART 5 – The Lower Danube - Romania and Bulgaria

29 July to 7 August 2008

After the lengthy and costly Serbian border control bureaucracy it was with great trepidation that we entered Romania at the border post of Moldova Veche.

We moored up at a very fine pontoon alongside the police premises, and were greeted by an English speaking border police lady with magenta hair, dressed in a tight uniform with mini skirt and sporting stiletto sandals and a small automatic pistol - a "Cheeky Girl" lookalike! She escorted us to her office where our passports and ship's papers were examined and forms filled in. From there we were escorted to the River Authority and then the Customs department. Every official treated us with great courtesy and efficiency and the whole exercise took less than an hour and cost us nothing, not even to moor at the smart pontoon. The lady officer and two of her colleagues escorted us back to our boat, apparently to make an inspection but in fact they wanted to look round and see the inside of our fancy new boat. They all seemed quite overcome by Gemini Duo and the lady officer even asked if she could join us for the rest of our trip down the Danube. Roger seemed keen but Diane thought it would be a bit crowded! However, we were very impressed with the Romanian warm welcome.

The scenery along the Danube now became very dramatic with steep narrow gorges with up to 63 metres of water below us! Carved into the rock face on the Romanian side is a 40m high face of King Decebalus, an early ruler of the country. On a more modern note we were struck with the number of big houses, many still in construction, around a huge bay just after the gorges, possibly with new EU money.

One of the downsides of the lower Danube is there are very few places to moor up as marinas are virtually non-existent. As a result we spent more than a week anchored each night in quiet bays or behind islands off the main navigation channel. It is easy to find somewhere remote as this part of the Danube is very rural with densely wooded banks and only the odd small fishing community. It was good after a hot day's cruising to chuck ourselves into the river, but first ensuring we had hold of the secured rope and fender trailing behind the boat. With a 3 knot current you'd be swept away from the boat in seconds!

On three occasions while at anchor we were inspected by Frontier Police in their speed boats, once in the middle of the night when they beamed their powerful searchlight on us giving us a bit of a fright, but we were in their computers so they drove off. What did wake us on several occasions was the tremendous wash from the huge cruise ships that travel at great speed through the night causing us to nearly fall out of our bed. We learnt quickly to put anything breakable away in its place before retiring.

On 30th July we faced the first of the two "Iron Gates". These are the final two and most massive locks – 310m long by 34m wide - on the Danube which has created the enormous width of the river and the hydro-electric station which provides one third of Romanian and Serbian power. Each country has a lock which they operate in turn on a weekly basis. You need to know which side of the river to be on at least 4km away

from the locks, as they are 1.3km apart, and you must also fly the right country's courtesy flag. After four attempts on two different VHF channels we received a reply in broken English from the Serbian side which was operational that week – another dose of Serbian authority!

We had read that delays of up to 4 hours were the norm, but as it happened we went into the lock straight away behind the most enormous vessel we had seen to date – a tug pushing 9 x 1700 ton barges, all full of aggregate. In addition there were two other normal 1000 ton barges which looked quite small by comparison. We were at the back (we know our place) and tied up to a floating bollard and down we went by 15 metres. We knew the lock was 30 metres deep so were surprised when the gates opened and the push-tug moved out followed by the two other barges. We didn't hurry as the huge barges take forever to get going, but were puzzled when they all came to a halt ahead. We thought there was a problem, but then we realised they had moved forward into the next chamber for the second stage of the drop. We rushed in and tied up on the last available floating bollard, only to be shouted at by the push-tug captain. It transpired that the floating bollard we were fixed to didn't work and our boat would be left hanging in mid air unless we moved quickly. We manoeuvred sideways and tied up to the corner of one of his nine aggregate barges and had a comfortable descent for the remaining 15m. The whole locking procedure took 3 hours.

80km down river is the second Iron Gate which we tackled the following day. We had seen no other boat traffic on the river that morning so we thought we would have a long wait at the lock. 5km from the lock we radioed in English and received a reply in German. No problem as we now understand German lock talk. It was the Serbian side again and we thought we had misunderstood when he told us to enter straight into the lock. But no, the green light was on, we motored into an empty lock (same massive size as the other one), the gates closed and down we went. This only took three-quarters of an hour! Mustn't slag off Serbian lock-keepers!

Serbia was now behind us, but we gained Bulgaria on the right bank and still had Romania on the left. We had been told that the protocol is not to fly any courtesy flag until mooring up on one side or the other. We approached the first port in Bulgaria, Vidin, and tried to find a place to moor so we could register. All six pontoons were full of large commercial barges and huge passenger liners. However, the Frontier Police came out in a launch to direct us to tie up alongside a barge where a very smart English speaking policeman met and escorted us to his office. He took our passport details, directed us to the River Authority and we were done and out in the town doing our shopping within half an hour. Like Romania, the Bulgarian officials were all very pleasant and helpful and did not charge us anything.

Here the Danube varies tremendously in width from 100m wide up to 3km because the river keeps splitting around islands. Without both our paper maps and electronic chart plotter it would have been impossible to know where the navigation channels lay. Buoys are often missing or dragged out of position by strong currents and there are many hazards including giant sandbanks, shipwrecks, rocks and floating tree trunks. Birds often give clues – if they are standing in the water you know it is shallow!

Birdlife is abundant, although during this latter part of the river there are few ducks, geese or swans, but thousands of sea birds – gulls, terns, cormorants and even a colony of white European pelicans.

After a week of nightly anchorage, our fresh water tank was getting low. We stopped at places that had a big tap sign, but found that these were huge outlets with large locking valves designed for barges. No nice little tap for our garden hose! We were therefore very grateful to find a tiny, scruffy marina in a commercial harbour at Ruse, the largest Bulgarian town on the Danube. The marina owner made us very welcome, spoke good English, and showed us his visitors' book with the entry of the authors of the German Danube river guide we are using. Ruse sports numerous factory chimneys which belch smoke of various colours, including white, orange through to black, and our boat was covered in sooty smuts next morning. We didn't mind too much as we had filled up with water, done a load of washing in our machine, and had replenished our food supplies in the local market.

In Ruse we "checked out" of Bulgaria, which was a speedy and painless exercise, although with signage in Cyrillic script it took a while to find the border police office, stumbling instead into the optician's clinic where they appear to use Roman lettering on their eye test charts. We were charged just 10 Leva (€5) departure tax by a girl who was a spitting image of Janet Street-Porter and were sent on our way with a friendly bon voyage.

Now we had Romania on both banks and after another 200km+ and two more nights at anchor we reached Cernavoda at the junction of the Danube-Black Sea Canal. Construction of the canal started in 1949 and was completed in 1984. It has been estimated that up to two hundred thousand workers died during construction when more soil and rock was excavated than either the Suez or Panama canals. We had the option of continuing the remaining 300km down to the Danube Delta and entering the Black Sea at Sulina or taking the 65km shortcut along the canal to Constanta 100km further south on the Black Sea coast. Although the canal charge for a boat of our size is 420 Romanian Lei (€120), we reckoned we would save that amount on fuel costs and 4 or 5 days more travelling. Having been on rivers for over two months, we were now yearning for the sea.

Not having any information about how to book and pay for our boat passage on the canal, we were welcomed to tie up to the Harbourmaster's tugboat where the captain spoke to us in German. He radioed the lockkeeper and arranged for us to join the next morning's 6am convoy, and then drove us in his car to the town centre to find an ATM. He allowed us to stay alongside his tug for the night. Having had our dinner and a few glasses of wine, we were about to turn in when the tug captain roused us to say he had been called out on a job and we would have to go. However, he had fixed for us to move to an cruise liner pontoon half a kilometre upstream. It was very dark, and Roger had never driven the boat at night and didn't know how to turn on the back lighting on his instruments. We managed to tie up without mishap and were greeted by the resident pontoon manager and his wife who gave us some of their dinner – two river fish fried in garlic with "mamaliga", a sort of polenta. Romanians do seem to be very kind and hospitable people.

After a disturbed night we were up very early and radioed the lockkeeper at 6am to be told to report straightaway to the lock entrance where we were to travel behind two Romanian navy frigates and a huge cruise ship. We were very unimpressed with

the awful standard of steerage of the navy ships which took forever to get in and tie up even with 20 men on deck. What they need is one good woman!

Once into the canal the 12kmph speed limit was ignored and we had to race to keep up with the others. What should be a 5 ½ hour journey took just 3 ½ . When we arrived at Agigea lock at Constanta we were instructed to tie up and wait alongside the wall where the harbour master arrived in his car to collect the fee and check our details were in the computer.

By 12.30 we were out of the lock and into Constanta harbour. This is a huge port with the naval base and container and freight shipping of every description. We motored slowly round and finally found our way to the buoyed entrance and at last were out into the Black Sea.

After 3200km of rivers and canals our European inland waterway voyage is over, and we have the Black Sea to navigate to Turkey. More to follow

The logo for Gemini Duo London features the word "GEMINI" in a large, bold, blue serif font. Two gold stars are positioned above the letters "I" and "N". Below "GEMINI" is the word "DUO" in a similar bold, blue serif font. At the bottom, the word "LONDON" is written in a smaller, bold, blue sans-serif font.

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