

Recollections of Romania (2005) – Part 1

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We return to one of our favorite destinations. We intended to travel to **Romania** in April and include the **Netherlands** as part of our return itinerary. But two things altered our plans ... the airfare was incredibly high and, sadly, our cousin **Romeo Rozyłowicz** (Bucharest) passed away suddenly in March. Not wishing to interfere in the family's time of mourning and grief we chose instead to simply travel to the Netherlands (Holland) for three weeks and visit family later in the year. Another last-minute incident made the latter trip more appealing ... we were invited to attend the wedding of **Marius** and **Mihaela**, two friends of cousin Laurentiu that we met a few years back. The wedding would be in **Constanta** on the **Black Sea** coast of Romania. So, with the spring trip cancelled we opted for a more inclusive late-summer trip that would be three-fold in purpose: re-visit family to offer our condolences, attend a wedding, and do some eco-touring of parts of Romania that are rarely visited by foreign travelers. It may seem strange to plan a trip that is extreme in emotions and intentions but life's happenings are out of our hands and we just go with the flow and make the best of what confronts us. We intended to impart a sense of sympathy, joy and adventure into this trip. Our "Recollections" summarize what we experienced.

Airfare was still high when we started our planning in June. But we had to go. Our long-time travel agent abandoned us for reasons unknown so Dolores and I did all the arranging ourselves. Time consuming it was and at times frustrating, especially on flight schedules, but we managed to secure all necessary arrangements and depart for Romania on September 6th for three weeks.

Our departure from **El Paso** was at 6:45AM ... good grief. We had to wake up at 3:15AM ... go over our packing and documents list one last time, made sure the gifts we are taking are all included and safely packed, secure the house and await the arrival of **Bob Jones**, our friend who offered to drive us to El Paso Airport. Bob and I drive to El Paso fitness clubs twice a week so it was not a stretch for Bob to make this offer. He would just go to the gym a little earlier. Still ... to get up at such an ungodly hour was a most generous offer and much appreciated.

El Paso Airport is a beehive of activity even at 5:30 in the morning, the time we got there. Check-in was swift ... going through security was a breeze (even removing our shoes) ... the concourse was quiet ... and our departure on time. Next stop ... Houston. Arrived at 9:40AM.

We had a 6-hour layover in Houston allowing for time to catch our breath and start to relax. It's making the first leg of a three-leg flight schedule that is always hectic and tense. We opted for a late breakfast and just waited. Although most people would not tolerate such a long layover, we had no choice. Booking flights overseas is tantamount to rolling dice ... you take what is available and what comes up.

Overnight flight to Amsterdam (the Netherlands) was uneventful. Left Houston at 3:40 PM. Thank goodness no screaming kids on board. Sleep was impossible in seats only 17" wide and squeezed in by a shoehorn. The meals were adequate but not nutritious. Coffee was putrid ... the Chilean wine was bitter and literally took the enamel of your teeth. On this particular flight, unlike others in the past, we sat in our seats for the full 9½-hour flight. Did not even go to the WC. Big mistake, more on that later.

Arrived in Amsterdam at 8:00AM the following morning. Weather was overcast. Schipol Airport seemed familiar to us as we were just there in May. We only had a 2½ -hour layover. Did some shopping for Holland cheese and chocolates for Romanian family as well as a bottle of **Grand Marnier** for us.

Departed Amsterdam at 10:40AM for Bucharest. Flight was full ... mainly Romanians returning home. Thankfully, flight was smooth. Meal served tasted like cardboard ... coffee again putrid (must use the same blend as prior flight). But our interest was only in getting to Bucharest and get this tiring flight over with. Arrived in Bucharest at 2:20PM. Passport control was fast and our luggage waited by the carousel ... hallelujah. Walked by customs ... nothing to declare ... and entered the main lobby of the Otopeni Airport where cousin Laurentiu greeted us. OK ... we're here, family is here, let the celebrations and adventures begin.

We stepped outside and were blasted with air so hot and humid that sweat was fast in forming. Unlike Las Cruces, the heat was bearable but the humidity was oppressive. But we did not mind that at all ... we were here and looked forward to all the "inconveniences" we would encounter. Let's face it; visiting a foreign country one must leave one's attitudes and expectations behind. We're experts at this by now and, as you will learn later, the "inconveniences" will be many and unique. Time to boogie in Romania.

We maneuvered our way across the parking lot to our waiting transportation. Laurentiu finally got his driver's license and would do most (I mean ALL) the driving. He is driving a '92 Nissan 4x4 off-the-road diesel SUV with 600,000 kilometers (360,000 miles) on the odometer that, as we will eventually discover, is murderous on the butts and at times

feel like you're sitting on a bucking bull. The car is not a 'pretty face' ... it has seen better days years ago. Paint is peeling and numerous dents and a broken taillight with seats somewhat torn and tattered. The interior is not plush but functional. This car belongs to the carnivore project that Laurentiu manages at the University. It is not meant for comfort or elegance but for managing the backcountry roads and mountains where it is utilitarian. Thank goodness for that, as we will later learn in the Iron Gates Mountains.

Anyway, we load our luggage into the Nissan buckle our seat belts and head out of the parking lot. Like nothing has changed since we were last here, the average Romanian driver believes that the entire road belongs to him alone. Just getting out of the parking lot was a revelation. Stalled cars, frayed nerves, shouting and jockeying for position in the exit line was a clear reminder of what was in store for us in our travels on Romanian roads. With beads of sweat on our foreheads and a shirt that felt like a damp rag we were off.

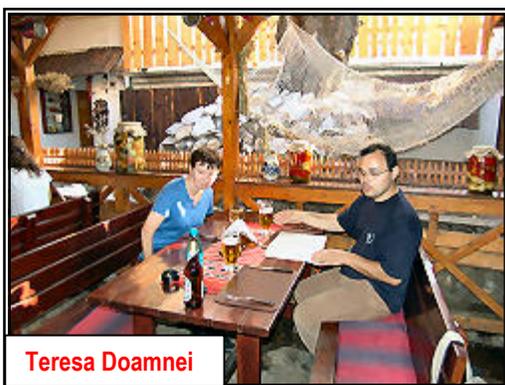
Drive to Bucharest city center was as usual exciting ... not only because of the other drivers on the roads, the road conditions and the many familiar landmarks we recalled but the improvements we saw along the way, especially near the airport with an overpass under constructions. Things are looking up in this new European Union nation.

We hit rush hour. Called Adrian Accommodations to make sure someone was at the apartment we rented for two days. Apartment is near Unirii Square in the center of Bucharest. Loud, boisterous, still grimy but with that certain draw and charm Unirii Square is the heart of the city. Everything literally projects from this square. When we got there by 5PM parking was impossible to find. But of course parking in Bucharest is an oxymoron ... more like squeeze in – leave where it is standing – block the traffic – sidewalk is OK. Finally met the apartment spokesperson and he directed us to a spot ... in front of a group of stores, on the sidewalk, on the main street through Unirii square. We applied Vaseline® to the sides of the Nissan (figuratively speaking), drove onto the sidewalk, people nonchalantly moved out of the way (actually forced them) and we squeezed our way into a tight spot. Getting out would be interesting.

We unloaded our luggage and walked the 100 yards to our apartment building that faced the main street. Building was ugly as sin ... entrance in the rear through a door that was meant more for a bank vault than an apartment building. Have to use a magnetic key to unlock it. Security is always a problem in this city. Anyway, we enter the dark, dank and musty smelling hallway and make our way to the second floor. Have to use the elevator but that thing is so small that two people and a purse would be a tight fit ... more like a 'dumbwaiter' than an elevator. But we manage to get to the 7th floor on two trips.

Entering the 2-room apartment my heart sank a bit ... not what I expected for 45 euros a night. Clean but sparsely furnished ... sort of tenement look to it with a tiny kitchen barely wide enough for one person. Usually window drapes come in two panels ... this window had one. I guess they needed the second panel for another apartment. Bathroom had that peculiar odor but will do. Tried the hot water tap ... no water. Cold water was OK. Toilet flushed with that melodic sound that was more entertaining than functional. Half a roll of toilet paper lay on the floor. Welcome to your suite. Not at all similar to the apartment we rented in 2003 nearby. A major disappointment ... but as we said earlier – leave your expectations home. Apartment will do.

We paid with CC and were just pleased being able to sleep somewhere that night. Not even unpacking the three of us left the apartment to do some compulsory shopping and re-orientation. Walked to the nearby University area, popped into a bookstore to check on maps and books. But as is so typical of traveling, time and long distance means tiredness and hunger.



We head out to our favorite restaurant for supper – **Teresa Doamnei**. Restaurant is an open-air establishment but mostly under cover. We find a table near the interior duck and goose pond so that we could be entertained with nature sounds while dining (the band did not arrive yet). Ordering some Romanian *Ursus* beer for the boys and a glass of Romanian vino for Dolores we scan the menu and decide to go native immediately. We order ...

- **Sarmale de Porc în Foi de Varzâ** (ground meat in cabbage leaves)
- **Salata Octenească** (white and red cabbage and cucumber in sour cream)
- **Piedt de Pui** (chicken breast)
- **Supa de Gâinâ cu Taițel de Casâ** (chicken with noodles)
- **Papanasi** (dessert – deep fried cheese dumpling)



Sarmale de Porc

We devour (yes, devour) our meal. It is so tasty that we forgot about the many travails just getting here. We discuss the many planned adventures and forays for the next 3 weeks. The band arrives and we are briefly entertained by Romanian music before we depart for the apartment. Initial plan is to meet family at cousin Aurelia's apartment tomorrow evening. We look forward to this gathering for we know that cousin Aurelia will set a table fit for royalty. Besides, we wish to extend our sympathies to Ioana ("I" sounds like "J" – Joana) wife of deceased cousin Romeo, who passed away on March 11, 2005.

Leaving the restaurant we made our way to a local market where we secured breakfast items for the next two days and some sweet edibles for myself. Dolores opted for some Romanian wine. Making our way back to the apartment we bid goodnight to Laurentiu and entered our palatial suite hoping for a good night's rest.

Checked on hot water. Finally came on. I guess they had to work on it and it was shut off temporarily. Thank goodness for that. In the beginning it was muddy as the Mississippi but eventually it cleared up. Hit the bed. Hit is appropriate because the mattress is sagging, the pillow a disgrace and the bed covering thin and ragged. At least the sheets were white and washed. Sleep was impossible. One would think that being on the 7th floor things would be quiet but not so. Windows were one pane thick so noise permeated to the interior from the outside. Street noise could be heard until 3AM. Horns, traffic hum, sirens, car alarms, loud radios, even people arguing could be heard. Dolores slept like a log, even joyfully snoring to the beat of the noise. I had to resort to earplugs that are normally reserved to plane travel. Helped some but ears hurt like the Dickens from shoving them in too deep. At least there were no sounds of dogs barking (Bucharest virtually eliminated them by a "search and destroy" policy). Welcome to the big city. Oh yes ... remember our 9½-hour flight without leaving our seats. Well, for the first time traveling I suffered the indignity of having swollen ankles that looked like muskmelons ... both ankles. That is a lesson that should be learned ... get up and walk about the aircraft on long flights. Swelling looked uglier than it felt but did not hurt. Gave us both a wake-up call.

We both woke up groggy and listless. Body sore from the mattress. Ankle swelling subsided but still there. Turned on the TV ... no English channels. Lots of news about Romanian flooding ... some on hurricane Katrina. They showed clips of New Orleans looting and mayhem. America was shown as being no different than any other country in upheaval. Americans may be smug and cocky but the European view of America is much different. We fixed coffee, sandwiches and juice for breakfast. Taking a shower was an adventure as the water pressure was low and there was no showerhead only a loose shower wand. Did you ever try to take a shower holding a shower wand in one hand and squeezing out some shampoo with the other and trying to apply it at the same time? We both felt like gymnasts or acrobats in the shower. Oh yes ... the towels. Reminds me of Mexico and the "sandpaper towels". Bathroom was no larger than an average bedroom closet.



Unirii Square

After finishing cleaning up and eating our breakfast we meet Laurentiu to do some exploring. Stopped by post office to buy stamps for our postcards; visited bookstore to buy some Romanian CDs and look at books. Visited the Manu Bei museum near the University ... entry fee 1 Leu (33 cents). There was an impressive photography display of the Danube Delta. The museum part was equally impressive on the individual Manu Bei, who I surmised was a wealthy merchant. Stopped for lunch at an outdoor café for chicken and salami sandwiches with some compulsory Romanian beer. The rest of the day remains a blur ... I suppose due to the jet lag. By 4:30PM it was time to hail a taxi and visit the cousins.

Here, it's goofy how one selects a taxi. Taxis in Bucharest are not obligated to take you anywhere. If they do not like your destination they tell you to go look elsewhere. Plus, the way you do finally pick a taxi is by the price they charge. Seems that every taxi has a different rate schedule that is imprinted on the door. You go down the line of waiting taxis, look for a reasonable rate and ask if he will go to your destination. The taxi does not necessarily have to be the first in line. Laurentiu did the asking and the looking. We were refused twice before one finally agreed. Like I said ... goofy.

Taxi rate to travel about 5 miles amounted to 90,000 leu (about \$3.25). Driver negotiated the streets with reckless abandon. Drivers in Romania rely on three things on the road: their horn, good brakes and steely nerves (or lack of common sense.) Surprised more car doors are not ripped off by passing cars because they leave little room when overtaking. Seat belts are optional so hold on for dear life. Shock absorbers are lacking on taxis due to cobblestone streets and the many potholes and tram rail lines. The trip took all of 15 minutes but seemed like a lifetime and when you exited the taxi you counted your blessings if not the many new bumps and bruises.

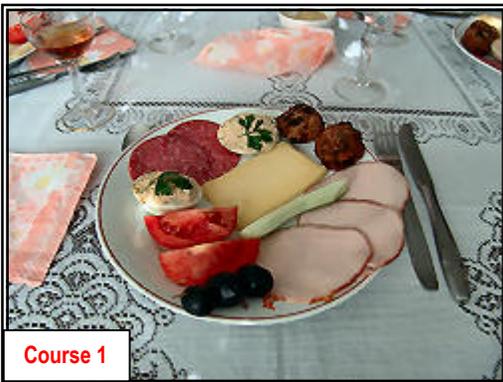


Aurelia, Nicu, Ioana, Dee & Ed

Stopped by a flower stand to purchase fresh flowers for Aurelia and Ioana. We also brought along a bottle of wine for Nicu. That's a custom that I like ... small tokens of friendship. We mentioned that we also bought some Dutch cheese and chocolates for family while in Amsterdam. We walked the short distance to Aurelia's apartment ... climbed the four flights of stairs (had to rest twice due to heat and humidity) ... and were greeted by the smiling faces of family. The apartment I remember well ... stayed here for a few nights back in 2001. Small but neatly furnished ... tiny kitchen by our standards but functional and organized. Ceiling was as I remember ... water stained from a leaking roof (they're on the top floor.) We exchanged greetings and small gifts. Laurentiu did all the translations as our Romanian family knows "0" English and we know "0" Romanian. However, the smiles all around indicated that we were with family who were delighted in our visit. The most telling moment, needless to say, was the emotional hug from

Ioana, cousin Romeo's widow, who broke into tears as we hugged. As I said ... we are family even though we only learned of each other in year 2000 due to my genealogy search. No words were exchanged but the intensity of the hug said more about her loss than words could express. Romeo was 58 years of age when he died of a sudden heart attack last March 11th ... at home, in front of his daughter. Help was late in arriving so there was little that could be done. Daughter still suffers from this emotional shock and only recently had the strength to return to work. Such was the magnitude of the loss.

So, after exchanges of hugs and handshakes and kisses we sat down to a welcoming meal prepared by both Aurelia and Ioana. In Romania time is not wasted when mealtime arrives. This is serious business. Some cognac is poured to toast the visitors. But first I must add that our Romanian family's budget is tight and spent frugally. There is virtually little discretionary income left at the end of the month for trivial, if not unnecessary, items. To host this dinner extra purchases had to be made to extend the best of hospitality. Such is the custom in almost all of Europe, especially the eastern countries like Romania, Poland and Ukraine.



Course 1



Course 2

And what a dinner it was ... four courses with cognac, wine and mineral water. First the appetizer that included pork slices, meatballs, two kinds of cheeses, stuffed eggs, olives, tomato and cucumber. In itself that would be a good meal but we knew from experience that more would be coming. No sooner was this entrée finished that another plate was placed in front of us ... **Sarmale de Porc în Foi de Varză** (ground meat in cabbage leaves) with **mămăligă** (corn mush or polenta) and fresh hot peppers. This dish is truly our favorite. These tiny cabbage rolls are a staple of hosted dinners and are delicious if not marvelous. A forkful of **sarmale** and **polenta** when coupled with a small bite of the steely hot pepper is to be savored. This delicacy was not just eaten ... it was inhaled. I was too embarrassed to lick the plate clean ... it was that good. I neglected to say that fresh rolls (two varieties) were also on the table. Nothing like fresh bread to round out a meal. Again I have to say that in Romania bread is truly the staff of life. It is so common to see a person walk down the street, in the city or any small town or village, with an armful of bread. I recall two situations where this was so striking it caught me off guard. Three young ladies meet on the street and one of them hands to the other two a small loaf of bread (and nothing more) and they proceed to stow the bread away in their backpacks or purses. It was treated as so common none of them gave this

act a second thought. Seems the bread was a lunch of sorts. The second time this caught my attention was when a nattily dressed businesswoman in high heels and in a business outfit was entering a bank, obviously an employee, holding a long loaf of bread under the armpit (her two hands occupied with a briefcase and a box.) I don't know about you but I don't believe I would like to eat bread that's been carried under someone's armpit, even an elegant armpit. But, this is Europe and things are done differently here. But I digress



Anyway, we are fully sated by now but the meal is only half over. Not having any time to digest our latest offering the next plate is placed in front of us. This plate is loaded, edge-to-edge, with two grilled pork chops, two freshly made 6" long pork sausages, french fries and home made dill pickles. The meats were highly seasoned but done to perfection. Shaking our collective heads in disbelief we had only one option – eat. I did my best to stuff down the gullet whatever I could force down my throat. Dolores just moved the food around her plate ... she was that full. And so was I for I could only muster so much. Add cognac, wine and mineral water to the meal and you may possibly imagine just how stuffed we felt. Everything was delicious but the amount was just too much. We smiled and did

justice to the hospitality but felt like little hogs eating at the trough.



Politely we offered our apologies for not eating everything. The remaining food was removed and we thought that that is that – the meal is over. No way Jose ... more is on the way. Strong coffee was offered that played a good companion to the dessert: **papanasi** (cheese donuts: "s" sounds like "sh" – "pa-pa-na-sh" and "i" is silent.) What made this dessert interesting that it was boiled as opposed to the deep fried variety. This is the traditional method and tasted just as good.

Folks, I must say that this meal was exceptional in every way possible. Tasty, nutritious and home made. Of course a meal of this type is not an everyday fare. It is reserved for special occasions and our visit was special to the family.

After this meal the remaining time this evening was spent reminiscing and retelling of old stories and family anecdotes. We spent time discussing the traditional mourning period when death occurs in a family. For the uninitiated, the mourning process in Romania, or the Orthodox faith, revolves around the 1-day, 3 days, 7 days, 40 days, 3 month, 6 month, 1 year, 3 year, 7 year and 10 year timeframe. Our family will follow this mourning calendar. It's been 6 months since Romeo's passing and cousin Ioana is still in black; so is cousin Aurelia. Later in our "Recollections" we will detail the 1-year event and what our family has planned.

Cousin Aurelia's husband Nicu underwent a severe illness (blood poisoning) a few months back and we discussed his treatment and the associated costs. Although medical care is provided at minimal cost to the patient it is in actuality poor and incomplete. The family had to pool their resources to secure proper doctor's care. Nicu was put into temporary paralysis to speed up the recovery. Risky but necessary. Food or nutrition is abysmal in hospitals so the family had to make daily treks to the hospital with food so that Nicu would strengthen over time. If no family member is available to take food the patient usually suffers dehydration if not malnutrition during a hospital stay. So let's not complain about our American system of medical care, even if it's costly. Nicu's weight dropped to 44kg. (almost 100 pounds). He now weighs 55kg (about 125 pounds). Final out of pocket medical cost was 30,000,000 leu's (about \$1,000 USD). He is still gaunt and frail but appears to be recovering and gaining weight. His appetite is good but his diet is restrictive. This is something that impressed us the most: in Romania, as in most of Eastern Europe, families take care of their own. If money is lacking, families pool their resources to help each other out. None of this "that's not my concern". For example, when Romeo died, burial was within a day and money had to be raised to pay for the funeral that amounted to 45,000,000 leu's (roughly \$1,500 USD). This amount is beyond the reach of the average family, including our own. Families had to scrape together whatever cash was on hand plus take out a short loan to cover the costs. Not that easy with limited income and some family members on a pension and high medical costs. But, resilient and innovative as they are, our family managed to do the right thing and the funeral was done according to tradition.

Before we left this gathering Dolores and I extended birthday greetings to all family members with a toast and left a birthday card with a gift inside for the year 2005 for everyone. We would normally mail our gifts with cards but the mail in Romania is uncertain and often is undelivered (pilfered or stolen.)

The evening went by fast and it was time to head back to our apartment. We bid our goodnights, promised to come back for another evening's get-together when we return from our eco-touring in two weeks. Cousin Ioana took the tram back to her apartment while the three of us hailed a taxi back to Unirii Square. Laurentiu then took the bus back home while Dolores and I crashed ... or tried to.

The night was sleepless again ... earplugs did not help. Damn the traffic noise below our windows. The bed was hard and Dolores's melodic wheezing and snoring did not help my sleep. She also frequently talks in her sleep and I still could not figure out her arguing with someone.

Friday September 9th ... time to leave Bucharest for Constanta and the long awaited wedding. We rise early, prepare a modest breakfast, dress hurriedly and pack our bags. We reluctantly (joking, of course) leave our palatial accommodations and walk the few blocks to the University. The city is waking up and the hustle and bustle of people scurrying to their jobs or destinations is mesmerizing. Like little ants their scurry along ... some with loaves of bread or lunch bags in hand. Most walk with heads slung low, looking at the ground instead of ahead. Must be the dog "poo" on the sidewalks or the uneven surfaces of the broken concrete? Few look you in your face ... like robots they plod along, oblivious to others, caught up in their own world. It's always fascinating to watch people and how they interact with strangers.

Within 15 minutes we're at the University. Soon Laurentiu comes along and we walk around the corner of the University to the waiting chariot – the Nissan. We load our bags, secure our butts to the seats, start the engine and head out for our adventure ... it's 9:15AM.

Still early, the traffic in Bucharest is light but a little maddening. We work our way out of the city but first we have to pick up some additional passengers. Laurentiu did not tell us beforehand but three girls are being included in our journey to Constanta. First we stop to pick up 29-year old **Steluța** (second "t" sounds like "tz" – "ste-lu-tza", meaning "little star"); next we pick up **Adriana** and daughter **Ana**. After a brief introduction we're on our way to Town of **Urziceni**, 44 km (27 miles) north of Bucharest to pick up the last passenger. The roads are beginning to fill up with cars and buses and trucks of all manners. Roads are 2-lane but treated as if they were 4-lanes. Parking everywhere is erratic, dangerous, and inconvenient to all.

Weaving in and out, we maneuver around people, carts, dogs and obstacles to make some headway. Its market time this time of day and most people are preoccupied with their own thoughts and are oblivious to the whizzing cars speeding by ... and I mean speeding by. Speed limit is 30 km/hr but these limits are ignored if not intentionally abused. Surprised there are no more accidents or road kill.

Passed by a "flea market" that is, in size, bigger than a battleship. No time for taking pictures ... survival is the byword and besides, things are more interesting looking out the side windows of the Nissan.



Dolores and Steluța

Soon we are out of Bucharest and passing through non-descript small towns before we finally meet the open road out in the country. Here every driver fends for himself and speed is a friend. Passing is pervasive and in the most outrageous places and situations. Now memories come back to my driving experiences here in 2001. But, have no fear and be confident, otherwise you will also become road kill.

Soon enough we are in Urziceni and stop by a roadside gas station and a line of small eateries. We wait for Nadia to arrive by bus from **Focșani** ("c" sounds like "k" and "s" sounds like "sh" – "Fok-shan", "i" is silent).

While we wait her arrival, the ladies opt for some cool drinks and we have the Nissan washed: 60,000 leu (\$2 USD) for the exterior and 60,000 leu for the engine. Nothing like a clean car to make it go faster – less wind resistance (a joke). Next we fill up with diesel fuel: 1,950,000 leu (\$69 USD) for 58 liters (14½ gallons) which equals to \$4.75 USD per gallon. Gas prices are high but not as high as in rest of Europe ... it was almost \$8 a gallon in Holland in May.



Laurentiu with Nadia

Finally we get a cell call that Nadia arrived but was at the other end of town. We hop in and peel rubber to make our way to her. A brief "hello" is all we get from Nadia and the four ladies and young girl get in the back (packed like sardines in a tin can) and we're off again ... this time heading due East on country roads to the Black Sea coast.

The 6-hour drive was uneventful but still significant in one respect ... the conversation was limited between the three Romanian ladies while Dolores sat silently. I, of course, was watching the road like a hawk.

For clarification ... the three ladies and Laurentiu are University colleagues that go back some 6 years. Being friends they all

knew each other well and were simply catching up on news. **Steluța** is a Ph.D. student at the University; **Adriana** had an M.S. and **Nadia** also had an M.S. Laurentiu will get his Ph.D. in January 2006. I, brilliant as I am with multiple degrees, filled out the brain pool. With so much brainpower in the car it was surprising that we could all fit in. Poor Dolores! However, she balanced the equation by being the prettiest girl in the car! (I said I was brilliant.)

So, for the next few hours we maneuvered our way through villages and small towns. Roads were poor and unmaintained. Potholes everywhere; construction every so often to repair flooding damage. At the town of **Slobozia** we turned south to meet highway 3A for a direct shot to the coast. Normally we would have taken the A2 Motorway, and its unlimited speed, but it was under construction. Truck traffic was hideous and slow. Passing at every opportunity was the norm and done without deliberation or second thoughts ... we must make time. Blue exhaust fumes from trucks was our frequent companion and inhaling it gave us headaches. Finally at **Fitești** ("Fi-tesht") we converge with A2 and picked up our pace. We cross the Danube River at **Cerna-Voda**. The landscape is changing ... the coast must be near. It is late afternoon by now as we approach the **Constanta** area. Laurentiu is familiar with the area and makes a beeline for the **Mamaia** Resort area – the site of the wedding. Some background on this Romanian region:

Black Sea Coast: This is the main tourist area, considering the large number of Romanian and foreign tourists. The Romanian "**Riviera**", which is 30+ miles long, is made up of a continuous belt of 16 seaside resorts (some of the being also spas), out of which six are in high demand: **Mamaia**, **Eforie Nord**, **Costinesti** (the resort of the youth), **Neptun** (the favorite holiday place of former dictator Ceausescu), **Olimp**, **Venus**, **2 Mai**, all of them built after 1960. In this region tourists can visit also the vestiges of the three colonies that were founded there by ancient Greeks in the 7th – 6th centuries BC: **Histria** to the north, **Tomis** in the centre (the present-day **Constanta**, which is the main Romanian sea port, boasting an imposing archaeological museum) and **Callatis** (the present-day **Mangalia**). Besides the ordinary cure factors, there are natural lakes here with therapeutic mud.

Constanta: Located on the Black Sea coast in Romania. In ancient times it was called "**Tomis**", and Greek merchants settled the city in the 6th century BC as a seaport. It was later developed by Romans and renamed after the emperor **Constantin**. It was here that emperor Octavian Augustus in 8 A.D. exiled the poet Ovid until his death in 17 A.D. The city was attacked and destroyed by **Avars** in the 7th century AD and was not redeveloped until the 19th century, when **King Carol I** decided to turn it into an active seaport and seaside resort. **Constanta** is now a cultural and economic center in Romania, with a population of 350,000. Its historical monuments, ancient ruins, grand Casino, museums and shops, make it the focal point of Black Sea coast tourism.



Mamaia Resort

Mamaia: The largest Romanian resort on the Black Sea coast. It is located about 3 mi north of **Constanta City** on a stretch of land that separates **Lake Suițghiol** from the Black Sea. The climate is mild and the annual average temperature is about 51°F. In July, the temperature rises to about 73°F and in January to 32°F. The resort was officially opened in 1906. Currently, it can accommodate about 20 000 visitors in more than 64 hotels. **Mamaia** has a 5-mile long by about 100-yards wide beach with most of the hotels located in close proximity or directly on the beach. The resort has tennis courts, mini golf, an outdoor theatre, and aquatic park.

I believe it was past 5PM when we arrived at the Hotel Victoria.

We checked in and I requested an upgrade to our room since most rooms were of the "standard" category. Because our hosts Marius and Mihaela would be paying for our stay, I agreed to pay for the difference in room rates. Hotel is

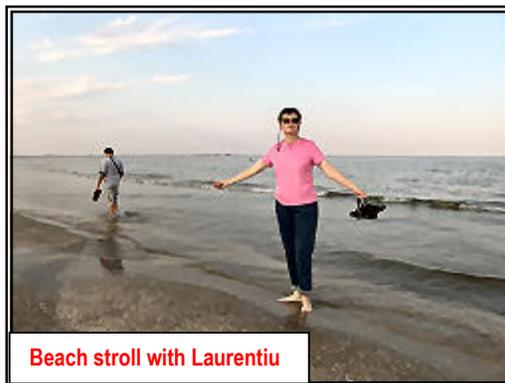
somewhat modern (but 2 **) with an imposing reception area and lounge. Colors are a wild orange throughout. Hotel is a mere 25 yards from the beach. Our room did not face the beach but we could glance to the left and see some of it and to the right the lake beyond. Day was still humid and quite warm so we turned on the air conditioning. Right ... unit fan blew the air but the compressor did not work. No air conditioning. No surprise here. We unpacked, as we would be staying here for 3 nights. Everything else seemed to be OK. Our Romanian wedding adventure is off to a good start (except for the A/C).



Black Sea Coast

Within an hour (it's still daylight outside) we meet Laurentiu and take the obligatory stroll to the beach and the adjacent promenade. Not having eaten anything since breakfast we opt to eat at a local 'fast food' place on the beach ... sort of a dinette. Dolores and I had a schnitzel with smashed potatoes plus a fresh tomato and cucumber salad. I forgot what Laurentiu ordered. Beer rounded out the fare. Food was ordinary but filling. Beer was excellent. Fifteen minutes later we're on the water's edge surveying the coastal landscape.

My God ... look what's ahead !!!! To my amazement, and to Dolores' amusement and Laurentiu's indifference, the beach was littered with ... yes ... topless women. This beach is a perennial nudist colony. Actually, half nudist as bottoms is required. It was rather difficult to look straight ahead and keep the camera from snapping away. The temptation was there but anyone with a camera on this beach is closely watched. At least I thought so. Actually, no one cared or gave a hoot. But within a few moments, and after collecting my wits, the notion of topless became moot and virtually ignored. Seen one, you've seen a pair ... who cares. (Wipe your drool, Ed)



Beach stroll with Laurentiu

We walked up and down the beach to take in the salt air and feel the water under our bare toes. Beach was littered with algae and the smell was pungent. Swimmers came out of the water covered with little green dots (the algae) and all looked like Martians. Water was cool and there was a mild breeze. It was starting to get dark so we elected to walk the promenade north. We took in all the sights and sounds especially the large numbers of multi-story hotels. Many had few customers, as this time of year the resort is 'out-of-season'. Place virtually closes end of September; only a handful of hotels doing any business. We casually stroll ... look into shops ... read the many posted menus ... people watch (a favorite hobby) ... and tried to look like a native on a holiday. Popped into a souvenir

gallery and purchased some hand-made Romanian table runners as gifts for family and friends. Prices were dropping fast as the tourists were disappearing. Perhaps on Sunday, our free day, we can better explore the other end of the Promenade.



Marius and Mihaela

Got wind that the bride and groom arrived and were asking for us. We headed back to the hotel ... parked our butts in the lobby ... ordered some Ciuc ("Chiuk") beer ... and waited for our hosts. They arrived shortly with guests they picked up in Bucharest. For this wedding there will be 10 foreign guests: 2 from the USA (us) - 4 from Great Britain - 2 from Greece - and 2 from Austria. All foreign guests, except us, the groom Marius had some University research association or relationship ... not sure. Marius and Mihaela greeted us with hugs and kisses (tradition) and welcomed us to their wedding. I must add that their greeting and delight in seeing us was real. We only met Mihaela 2 years ago, and only briefly, but we could sense that she was pleased to have us here. Both spoke beautiful English.

Marius is a Ph.D. candidate at the University while Mihaela graduated and works as a chemist (I believe). A beautiful couple in so many ways.

We were introduced to the UK guests and exchanged pleasantries and some personal anecdotes. The two couples were friendly, open and filled with great humor. It will be a pleasure to chat with them more as the wedding evolves. We excuse ourselves so that they may check in. We visit the wedding hall just a few yards away. What a spread ... this is not your typical Romanian wedding. Over 300 guests are invited and the hall is wonderfully decorated with white tablecloths, orange table accessories and orange chair covers (seat and back). My impression is that the cost of this reception is WAY above the average Romanian's ability.

By now the feet are aching and the eyes are asking for a rest. We say goodnight to all and head to our room. The room is musty (remember A/C is dead) so we open the veranda door. The option is to sleep in a hot and humid room or listen to the racket outside (it's 9PM). We closed the door and hoped for some relief. None came. Sleep was OK.



Mamaia Beach at 9AM

Morning came fast ... day was clear and sunny. Opened the veranda door only to be greeted by screaming seagulls. Beach was deserted but people were slowly migrating that way. Took a shower ... yes, hot water and a showerhead. Went downstairs to meet Laurentiu and have breakfast. The agenda for the day was that Laurentiu and the three girls would take to the beach for sun tanning while Dolores and I and the other foreign guests would be given the pleasure of spending the day, starting at noon, with the wedding party. Until noon, we again walk the beach, down the promenade and just try to not get too tired because the next 24 hours will be one continuous party.

By noon, we get dressed informally (slacks & casual shirt for me – slacks and blouse for Dolores) and wait in the lobby. By 12:30PM the other foreign guests wander in and we are all escorted outside to a waiting mini-bus. This mini-bus will be our transportation throughout the day. The other members of the wedding party, including the groom, use their own cars to form this caravan or convoy. By 1PM we're all off – heading for Constanta City to the bride's house.

The drive through Constanta gave us no opportunity to see what this city is all about ... just that it's a port city. Pretty soon we wound up at the bride's house (an apartment building) and, would you believe, all of us in the mini-bus PLUS the dozens of other people in their own cars were invited in ... seemed like 40-60 people in all. The apartment was on a top floor and consisted of 4 rooms (I believe). Some of the women were escorted to the bride's room to help her with

something traditional (don't know what as men were 'verboten'). The men were left to stand in the hallway or the living room drinking and partaking of many edibles (I like this custom already.) Both parents of the bride and groom were there and we were introduced but in the mad shuffle of the event things are a blur as to what actually happened. Pretty soon a woman comes out of the bride's room with a "sweet bread cake" that somehow is used in a tradition ... maybe used as a blessing or as a reminder for her to be a good cook. We were not given any explanation. We all smiled, nodded our collective heads and continued to drink and nibble. The bride eventually came out to meet the groom and things kind of spun out of control because everyone wanted to take a picture,



Street dancing

touch the couple or get out of the way. Two dudes with huge, maybe 3 foot long, elaborately decorated candles, came out of the kitchen. Jostling and mild shoving continued (in a friendly way I must add) before everyone was asked to head for the outdoors. Outside things got a little hectic, or maybe it's another tradition thing, but the wedding party started to form a circle and dance on the sidewalk, the lawn and partly in the street (which was full of fast moving traffic.) I saw the same wedding party street-dancing a few more times the same day. Smiles abounded and everyone was picture taking. After 10 minutes of this giddy celebration we were all herded back into the mini-van and off we went ... to somewhere.



Street dancing



"Garage" lunch

Horn blaring and laughter in every car (including ours) we finally arrive at some type of an auto inspection garage near the outskirts of the city ... a quasi residential-industrial area on a side street. We were then escorted into this "garage" which was carpeted by now and where two long tables were arranged for some type of a meal. A traditional Romanian band was playing inside.

WOW ... is the wedding being held in a "garage"? Not really ... it's customary to feed the wedding party before the actual church wedding that will occur at 6:30 that evening. OK ... that makes sense. After all this street dancing and driving around town we're all really starved. We find a place near the other foreign guests and the festivities begin.



Marius - the groom

First we're introduced to the national drink of Romania – **Tzuica** (Tz-wi-ka), a plum or apple brandy typically 45+ proof. It does not have a kick at the start because it is rather mild in taste without bitterness. But over time, drunk without some food intake, it can lay you on your butt with a headache the next day that would seem like Mt. St. Helens erupted in your head. (BTW - **Tzuica** or **Cuica** is spelled many different ways so don't be misled – it's the same.) A toast to the couple is raised and the gorging (I mean eating) begins. Remember the 4-course meal we had at cousin Aurelia's house a few days ago? Well ... this is a repeat ... appetizer, sarmale, chicken, pork, fries, salad, and sweets. There was Scotch, Brandy, Cognac and Whiskey on the table (mineral water or "**apa**" for non-drinkers). Get ready for a belt stretching and gut-busting ordeal. Eat until you cannot eat any more and drink until the horizon starts to lean sideways. This is a wedding and there are no excuses. The dining started at 3PM and lasted until 5:30PM ... with accompanying music to pass the time. Being a "garage" the acoustics were terrible and the volume ear deafening. The only solution ... drink and converse loudly. The couple mixed among the guests freely and quite frankly Dolores and I enjoyed ourselves immensely (the **Tzuica** helped.) We counted nearly 100 people at this "mini-reception". Heard that 5 ladies worked all week to make the 1,500+ **sarmale** (mini cabbage rolls) just for this meal and the following full reception. Sadly there was no **papanasi** (papa-nash) at this reception. Oh yes, the bride's father is head of the Romanian National Auto Inspection Department (of sorts)



Mihaela - the bride

so it only makes sense why this "garage" was used. Nicely decorated.

By 5:30PM we were escorted back into the mini-bus for the drive to the church for the wedding. Here something must be explained. Marius and Mihaela were actually married two weeks ago in a civil ceremony. Saw the pictures and the event was somber and very professional (if that's the right word.) What transpired in the intervening two weeks as far as the couple was concerned I was too embarrassed to ask. Civil vs. church I suppose is a personal decision but the civil is mandatory just like our taking out a marriage license here in the States. Truth is I was married so long ago myself I'm not sure what I did when I got married. Anyway, I digress.

We form another convoy heading out to the church. Arrive at a Romanian Orthodox Church that is situated on the shore of a small lake. Another wedding was just completed and the wedding party was just leaving the parking lot. However ... another wedding was taking place at this time inside the church while our wedding party was lining up outside. And yes, after our wedding another wedding is due. Seems like an assembly line here with wedding parties coming and going. Hope people match up their departures with the correct convoy.

After mingling around for 15 minutes the wedding inside is finished and our party forms a line to enter the church. It's 6:30PM. Unless you are of the Orthodox faith you must realize that in an Orthodox church there are no aisles or pews or anything familiar as in a "Western Christian" church. It is typically a large square or rectangular open area with an

altar either in the center (as it was here) or at the front at the iconostasis. People simply stand and follow the service. Being shoulder-to-shoulder with fellow worshippers is new to us so we just migrated to the front of the church, stood aside and took as many pictures (flash allowed) as we could.



The ceremony

There were four Orthodox priests conducting this service with one older priest hell-bent on telling some attendees to "shut up". This Catholic boy did not understand the service but the solemnity of the service was lovely. The part where the bride and groom circle the altar, kiss the holy book and accept the "crowns" was magical but mysterious to me. What can be said, stand back and enjoy this union and celebration.

20 minutes and it's all over ... everyone is ushered out of the church because another wedding is trying to get in. What followed is the standard picture taking by a professional photographer with all in attendance having the opportunity to have their picture taken with the lovely couple. We were included ... thank you.



At the reception hotel

Well ... the shouting and hollering is over and the entire convoy heads back to the Mamaia hotel to recover, rest for an hour and get ready for the all-nighter.

Back by 8PM we rest in our rooms for a short time, dress formally (jacket and tie for me, something more elegant for Dolores + a touch of makeup) and head downstairs.

We deposit our gifts with the groom and enter the large hallway under escort to locate our assigned table. Incidentally, even though we were not expected to bring any gifts along and for that matter contribute anything in an envelope, we did so because we liked the couple.

Our gifts from the States included a personalized "throw" embroidered with the couple's names, a bottle of New Mexico champagne hand painted with a personal 'congratulations' message and (my favorite), to Marius, a New Mexico hat and a 'margarita' T-shirt. Of course we also included an 'envelope' with a contribution and a personal message. Perhaps a little too much but Dolores and I are generous to a fault.

The hall started to fill by 9PM and by 10PM everything was in full swing. At our table sat Dolores and I, Laurentiu, Steluța, Adriana, Nadia and another two couples who are Laurentiu's associates at the University. The other foreign guests were seated at the adjacent table. Delightfully, our tables were directly in front of the head table. Good location for a nightlong celebration.



First toast

About the reception ... the best that I can recall is based on the short notes I kept at the table. Music was essentially non-stop. A traditional Romanian band with a male singer was the featured band; a female singer led some segments with an accompanist; a duo with a male lead singer entertained us with modern and contemporary selections; a radio or movie personality did a segment where everyone was smiling and laughing but Dolores and I had not a clue; and on and on this went from 10PM until closing at 5:30 in the morning.

Dancing was either the traditional "**Hora**" (round dance) where the dancers form a circle, arms on shoulders, and step in then step out in 4-steps while the circle moves ... in a circle. Sometimes there is a circle within a circle. Never seen by this

boy before but I did participate in a few and it is a dance easily learned by any individual (that's why people dance with arms on shoulders, to prevent others from keeling over.)

There was even a wild circular dance where the circle made wild swings around the dance floor as if in a frenzy. You have to see our DVD travelogue to appreciate this dance. My favorite ... slow dances where counting the steps is not necessary but we even managed to do "disco". Yes ... Dolores and I danced often enough to say we "danced at a Romanian wedding".

About the food at this wedding! Surprise ... what we were eating at cousin Aurelia's house and this past afternoon would be served during the reception. Here was the "feeding schedule" as I remember:

11:00 PM ... Appetizer plate: cheeses, pork, meatballs, stuffed ham, stuffed eggs, cucumber, tomatoes, olives;

12:30 AM ... Pan Fried Fish with boiled potatoes;

1:00 AM Sarmale with polenta and hot peppers;

2:40 AM Tomato & cucumber salad; Fried Pork Chop, Grilled Chicken, French Fries and Vegetable Medley;

4:00 AM Wedding cake wheeled in, celebratory cutting and individually served;

5:15 AM Call for stomach pumps



They have another tradition at these Romanian weddings where the bride is "kidnapped" and the groom has to ransom her. There was a plan by the wedding party to kidnap Mihaela around 1AM.

Well ... the UK guests beat them to the punch and kidnapped Mihaela at 11PM. I caught wind of this and joined the "criminals" on the boardwalk where negotiations were initiated with the groom by means of a mobile phone. Everyone took this in stride and good-natured kidding went all around. The dreaded thought was what if the groom did not want to pay the ransom.

Anyway, after 15 minutes the terms of ransom were agreed upon – a bottle of Scotch, a bottle of Vodka and a bottle of

Romanian wine. The UK perpetrators released the victim to her beloved (but now poorer) love and all ended well. I have pictures to prove this entire sordid crime.

The celebrations resumed and we all danced until the rooster crowed. By 5:30 AM we both felt like rag dolls and simply bid our 'good-mornings' to all and crashed.

We both slept like we were drugged until about 10:30 AM, Sunday morning. Getting up and doing our hygiene was a struggle – not from the long night but from all the food and drink we consumed. Could hardly bend over to tie my shoelaces. Forget about breakfast – where is the stomach pump.

We were scheduled to attend a post-wedding reception at 1PM so we carefully made ready and headed downstairs. Another informal event but traditional.

Precisely at 1PM the mini-bus arrived and all of us foreign guests (except the Greek couple) made our way ... to where?



A Tzuica toast

The “garage” of course ... for another 4-course meal, more Tzuica and more Romanian entertainment. Good grief, don't these people realize that a stomach can only stretch so much?

Too late ... we sat down and started the marathon binging all over again. By now the hand-to-mouth was more mechanical and habit than enjoyable. We managed to do justice to the offerings and the Tzuica made us forget the stomach pain and it's newly formed bulge.

Can a person explode from eating too much? By 4PM the “garage” festivities ended, Marius gave us two 1-liter bottles of leftover wine. We were driven back to the hotel. Elected to go to the beach where we would look like beached whales.



Dolores: the non-swimmer

We changed to swim suits and headed to the beach. I wanted to survey the “topless” crowd close-up. Sure enough there were enough of them to satisfy any ‘voyeur’. But my mind was on the water.

Swam in the **Sea of Cortez** in June mind as well swim in the **Black Sea** in September. Found algae free water line and proceeded in. Ho Ho Ho ... was the water cold. And with a brisk breeze, the body underwent cold shock before deeper water was reached. Once I submerged and got wet all over the situation was acceptable and I swam like a bloated beach ball. Stayed in the water a good 45 minutes, which was enough.

The algae looked and smelled terrible and getting out was prone to getting “green all over” ... which I did. Found our three ladies on the beach sun bathing. Laurentiu was keeping guard. Dolores and I went for a long walk along the shore hoping that I could take a few “exotic” pictures of the topless lovelies. Guess what ... my camera battery went dead. The gods are conspiring. Bummer! Dolores declined to go in the water.

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Laurentiu – genial host

By 7:30PM I took a shower to scrape the algae off the ‘ol body, spruced up a little and we met Laurentiu to explore the south end of the promenade. It was dark by now so we proceeded to walk to an area that is a sort of an amusement park just on the fringe of Mamaia beach. The evening crowds were building up and the park was getting crowded. For us there was little of interest there. Souvenirs shops were poor quality, rides were of no interest, eateries were lacking the ambiance, and the entire atmosphere was saying, “go back to the hotel.”

We did a quick turn-around and made our way past our hotel and located a pizza joint whose tantalizing aroma drew us in. Dolores and I split a large pizza while Laurentiu had a tuna plate. Wine and **Bergenbier** rounded out the meal. We had the

chance to say goodbye to one of the UK couples that evening. The other foreign guests we never saw again ... too bad. Soon thereafter ... it was crash time as tomorrow our eco-touring begins and we need all the energy we can muster. Goodnight and goodbye Mamaia.

It was a good time in **Mamaia** ... got to see a side of Romania that only people with discretionary income can enjoy. Wedding was more than expected ... food and drink beyond expectation ... met nice people ... truly enjoyed ourselves. Only down side to this time here – did not get the opportunity to spend time meeting and chatting with Nadia, Laurentiu's lady friend. Don't know why she avoided us or was simply shy about meeting us. Either way, to us it was a major disappointment. Sadly, I don't believe I will have another opportunity to meet her under such ideal conditions.

In Part 2 ... we leave **Mamaia** and travel to the **Danube Delta** region for some eco-touring ... join us!