

Recollections of Romania (2005) – Part 3

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Morena breakfast

Thursday ... breakfast was Romanian eggs (boiled), toast, honey and that ever-popular single small cup of coffee.

We again drove to the St. George channel to meet Mihail and our watercraft.

Today our excursion will be longer ... perhaps six hours.

We will delve deeper into the Delta, as far as **Lake Roșu**, a mile or so from the Black Sea itself.

We push off, head into the St. George channel and make our way, at varying speeds and directions, to the **Sulina** channel ... the main shipping channel.



Fisherman's catch

Along the way, in one of the small channels, Mihail pulls over to talk to a local fisherman who is separating his morning's catch from the net. We learn that this fisherman gets up at 3AM, goes out into the lake, and sets his nets then returns back to his little camp (tent and nothing else) to sleep. We learn that he catches, on a good day, about 60 kg. (140 pounds) of fish. He sells the fish locally and gets 13,000 leu (40 cents USD) per kg (2.2 pounds). The store sells the same fish for 50,000 leu (\$1.90 per kg). So, for a day's work he may earn an average of \$20 - \$24 USD ... many times less and on bad days with no catch ... "0".

A hard way to earn a living with expenses like netting, boat repair, gasoline, etc. In winter he cannot fish ... no income.



Crisan on the Danube

In 90 minutes or so we enter the Sulina channel and head east toward **Crisan** ... a fishing village on the shore of Sulina. The channel is busy, as it should be. All kinds of boats ply this waterway and before long we see, in the distance, a huge ocean-going vessel approaching us at full speed. The channel is deep and reasonable wide but any encounter with a vessel of that size I want to stay away from.

We manage to reach Crisan and disembark so that we can walk its long frontage road. Mihail will pick us up later downstream. We note that, although it is labeled as a fishing village, very little visible fishing is visible. It looks like any other inland village with stores, pharmacies, beer stalls and schools.

We walk perhaps 30 minutes to meet Mihail stopping only to admire that huge vessel passing by. It is from Turkey and is heading for Tulcea, some 25 miles upstream. We note the activity on board and can actually hear the crew talking ... that's how narrow this channel is. Pretty soon the ship passes, we meet Mihail, get in this little dinghy, make a U-turn and head back to the side channel where we entered Sulina. We elect to make an unscheduled detour to another fishing village not on the planned tour



Mila 23 Village

We head west and turn right onto **Dunărea Veche** (Old Danube) the original course of the middle Danube channel. Interestingly, in the mid-point of this channel between Tulcea and the coastal village of Sulina, at the Mile 23 mark, the Danube makes a wild double swing that resembles the

character “M” ... in fact its called something like the “M swing”. To ease navigation the Sulina was straightened out and bypassed this “M swing”. Our fishing village of Mila 23 is in the “M” zone. We slowly make our way to this village and within 30 minutes tie our boat to a pier, disembark and begin our walk to the heart of the village ... actually the only store on the waterfront. Mihail explains the architecture of the homes of the fishermen for this is still a true fishing village. It is not tourist oriented and is a little out of the way. The architecture is unique with many vivid colors. We walk only a short distance before the village ends and elect to stop for some cool refreshments (beer) at the only store. The locals are in full stride drinking their lunches. Dogs are hovering around ... some of who have twisted or broken or simply mangled legs or paws. No one cares and the dogs appear harmless if not scared of people. Do not hear many of them bark either.



Men at work repairing nets

With a few more hours of exploring we shove off from Mila 23, enter the Sulina channel and almost immediately detour to a side channel for our ride to Lake Rosu and another fishing village. We pass many buildings on the various channels that are derelict, abandoned or simply in major disrepair.

Passed a group of men near a fish storage building who were repairing their 100 foot net. Engaged in a brief conversation to learn about their craft and moved on.

Somewhere in the middle of one of the channels we stop at a resort to use the W/C. Seems this area was used by the former dictator’s son as a private resort. He used military planes to bomb the area before building his estate. Again, people were

not allowed nearby when he was in residence. He died a few years back of cancer. Oh yes ... when W/C was flushed my shoes were automatically washed. What a great idea!



Caraorman apartments - derelict

And on we went to the next fishing village ... **Caraorman**. The great dictator had this grand idea in mid 1970s of building a glass-making factory in the middle of the delta because there was a nearby ready supply of sand and other needed materials. We tie our boat to a nearby pier and walk the short distance to the village. Again, nothing spectacular and it’s even not a true fishing village unless you consider that fishing was some distance away. In this soil nothing grows so it is a wonder that this village survives. The glass-making complex was never finished. The apartment buildings are truly derelict (built in late ‘70s), the production buildings are not even under roof and the entire complex looks like an absolute waste of manpower and money. There is no prospect for this even

remotely becoming useful ... except as a roosting place for seagulls. We did note a new school at the edge of the complex so presumably some resources are flowing into this region. Near Caraorman is the oldest oak forest in the delta ... hopefully preserved and not logged.

But it was time to shove off ... it was past 3PM and our boat was expected back for another tour. We hurried at top speed back to the St. George channel and made it back to our departure point where the next party was waiting (they

did not look happy, as we were late). We tipped Mihail, hopped into our Nissan and commented that it was a good day with unexpected diversions. However, whatever we expected prior to our eco-touring of the Danube Delta we’re not sure what to make of this 2-day exploration. I suppose it was OK ... we saw a part of Romania even few Romanian see. It is hard to get to ... it is becoming expensive ... and, unless you are a fisherman or a bird-watcher, there is little to do here except relax and drink beer or wine.



Morena fried fish

Back at Morena Dolores and I did our laundry (hand wash) and waited for supper. Supper was fried fish and chicken, salads, wine and, of course ... papanasi. The rest of the evening we spent time on the Internet, in conversation and reading. We

crashed by 9PM because our butts hurt from sitting on the hard board in the boat. Being jarred for 6 hours I'm surprised my fillings did not fall out.



Morena breakfast – tasty & filling

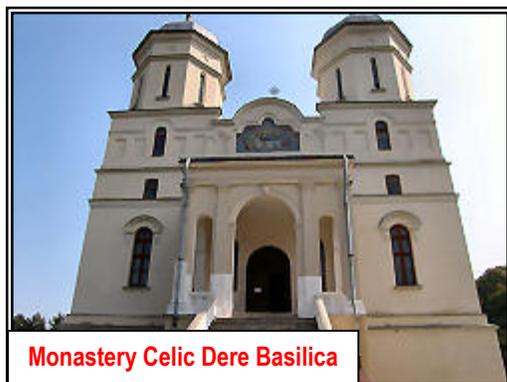
Friday ... time to visit some monasteries and the mountains. We are awakened by a natural wake-up service (roosters). After a breakfast of poached eggs and coffee, we leave for Morena and head for Tulcea.

Day begins in a light fog as we make our way west. The drive through Tulcea was slow but allowed us to observe the beginning of the daily struggle of these people. Sidewalks either swept clean with brooms made up of branches of saplings or hosed down with water. The small stores being opened and their goods displayed outside. Watermelons being unloaded from a run-down pickup and arranged pyramid-like on the bare ground.

We need diesel so we pull in ... fill up (1,070,000 leu (\$38) for 33 liters (8 gallons) for \$4.75 USD per gallon, ask for directions and head south on the E87. Eight miles later we hang a right towards **Frecaței** (Fre-ka-tze) and make our way to the first monastery of the day – **Monastery Celic Dere** (Cie-lik Dare).

The road is narrow and splattered with cow dung. Carts at a slow pace line both sides of the road plodding along to their unknown destination ... many empty, some with hay stacked to the sky, and some with corn stalks hanging every which way from the sides of the wagon. Some carts have rubber tires ... many steel-rimmed wheels that wobble in tune with the sounds of the horse hooves. Time is standing still in the countryside. The landscape is changing ... hills are forming with rounded tops and undulating valleys. Cows contentedly grazing with the sight of church steeples protruding from distant ridges and tree lines. A bucolic scene if ever there was one. The road is draped with a canopy of trees that made it seem we were driving in a green tunnel. Three miles past Frecaței we hang a left and drive down a long graveled path to the monastery. Arriving at this religious complex, hidden in a pretty valley circled by high pastures and deep forests, we park our Nissan and immediately are confronted by ... quietness. Nothing was heard except the "swish – swish" of a sapling broom swung by a nearby nun who was cleaning the roadside. The monastery church was above us on a slight rise. We headed up the long and cobblestone path to the church ... rose bushes lining each side. The higher we rose up the path the distant landscape became sharper. No wonder this site was chosen for spiritual contemplation ... the beauty of nature, the solitude of this valley and the utter tranquility was sinking deeper into our consciousness as we started to relax more and more. Our pace slowed down for in such a place one can commune with one's Lord.

Monastery Celic Dere (the name comes from the place Dere – Valley, Celic – Strawberry) comes to life between 1833-1840. The first church is built in 1846 in the name of the Assumption of the Virgin and it was decided that nuns should populate the monastery. In 1901 construction of the monumental church is started using the basement as a chapel. In 1916 the church is finished but all the architecture and painting continue until 1932. The monastery founded a primary school for adults and a school for teaching church painting.



Monastery Celic Dere Basilica

We finally reach the church and, as we climb up the flight of stone steps to the front door, they swing open and a nun greets us. We are the first visitors of the day. We pay the 160,000 leu (\$4.50 USD) entrance fee, pay an additional 80,000 leu (\$2.25) to photograph the interior and enter. A soft light washes over the interior as we walk about. The traditional Orthodox architecture and wall and ceiling paintings are mesmerizing. The iconostas, the front wall of the church, is covered from floor to ceiling and wall-to-wall with religious icons of all the saints important to this monastery. Gold covered (or painted) with many earth tone colors the icons beg for closer viewing. We inspect ... we photograph ... and we marvel at the richness of the work. The hanging chandelier

droops from a high domed ceiling covered with painted scenes right out of the bible. Every square inch of the interior displays artwork. The floor is wooden and creaks. A carpet runner runs the length of the church and softens our steps ... we try to keep outside noises to a minimum. We circle the church interior many times taking in the splendor that's unfolding. Our camera becomes our second set of eyes for future recalling. Before leaving we purchase the traditional

foot-long, but very thin, brown toned candles to light outdoor at specially built 'little houses'. We light candles not only for our safe journey but for our living and deceased family members and for those we know who are ill or suffering. This will become our standard procedure – lightning candles at every monastery we visit.

Retracing our steps down to the Nissan we observe the many nuns involved in their assigned duties ... watching a grazing herd of cows ... sweeping the pathways free of dead leaves ... hanging washed clothes on balconies ... scurrying to somewhere or nowhere ... and tending to a garden ripe with the fruit and vegetable of the season. We leave more contented than when we arrived.



Monastery Saon

Returning to the main country road we hang a left and make our way to **Monastery Saon**. Six miles later we turn onto a dirt road and navigate past green meadows and corn fields to the monastery. This monastic complex is small ... a church and a cloister house that probably houses a dozen monks. It is a self-sustaining complex from what we can determine ... primarily agricultural. The church is open ... no fee to enter. We discover that the interior of the church is undergoing either renovation. Scaffolding everywhere ... walls bare with stucco or concrete, ready for another coat. The iconostasis is gilded ... the ceiling frescoes complete above an impressive chandelier. No workers are present and the interior is in shambles. We spend 15 minutes here. No candles to light. We return to the main road.

Further west and nine miles before the town of **Isaccea** we hang a left to the **Monastery of Cocos** (Ko-kosh). The road is rough and primitive. Heavy industry and a view of the Danube River in the distance follow us on the right as we make our way.

Just before the road enters the **Macin Mountains** we turn left onto a long driveway that leads to the monastery. Arriving at this complex we park the Nissan and try to ignore the horde of stray dogs that approach us with the faint hopes of getting something to eat. They are friendly but appear scared. Most are nothing but hide and bones. Some small puppies linger in the background ... afraid to approach us. There are a few other visitors here.



Monastery Cocos

We glance at the front edifice of the monastery defense wall and are impressed with the massive wooden front door. Must be at least 18 feet tall and 12 feet wide. Hand carved with panels depicting saints and biblical scenes. The details are striking if not surprising considering that this door is exposed to the elements.

The bell tower and the fresco above the door add to the allure. No ... one does not swing open this massive door for within this door is a standard door that one uses to access the interior. We enter.

The view before us is of a church surrounded by cloister houses that face the church from every side. The courtyard is moderate with many old trees. The church is open ... and again no fee to enter. As in the previous Saon monastery this monastery is undergoing a massive restoration in the interior. No scaffolding is present but all the walls and the domed ceiling are bare concrete or stucco ... grey in color as if ready for a coat of paint. The iconostas is beautiful as are the many stands holding religious objects, books, and icons. The floor is concrete but covered entirely with carpets of many colors, primarily red. The church itself is large and roomy ... could hold roughly 250+ standing people.

We exit the church and walk around the perimeter inspecting the cloister houses. Did not see any of the monks or nuns. We take the compulsory pictures of every corner of this place and make our way out.

Three monasteries in the space of 3 hours are enough to save our collective souls. We backtrack out and make our way to Isaccea.

The road west passes many small villages with large tracks of vineyards and apple orchards. This is wine country. Along the way we still follow the Danube River on the right as we approach the small town of **Luncavița** (Lun-ka-vitz) where we hang a left to make our way into the **Macin Mountains**.



On the way to the Macins

The cornfields along the way soon give way to a dense pine and deciduous forest. The road is no longer paved but gravel and eventually dirt. It is becoming rough, slippery and narrow. This is a main artery between the towns of **Horia** and **Luncavița**, a distance of perhaps 35 miles, but it traverses a national forest that is not friendly to motorized vehicles.

We grind our way up and through a dark and dense canopy of trees. Along the way we see harvesting of trees by the locals, primarily for firewood. Dead branches and wood chippings dot the sides of the road.

We approach the **Pasul Tellor** (Tellor Pass) at 187 meters (550 feet) high. May not seem like high to you but in these

mountains it is high enough to warrant caution. The road worsens due to lack of maintenance and the effect of weathering. It is deeply rutted requiring attention to conditions ahead. Some ruts are deep enough to swallow small cars. Eventually we find an alternate route back in the direction of Monastery Cocoș.

The road leads down some pretty scary grades. Logging activity here picks up with heavy truck traffic encountered every so often. The road is slippery due to recent rains and the Nissan had to be put into 4-wheel drive. Laurentiu did a yeoman's job in staying on the road because the sheer drop-offs were scary enough. It was a rough ride to the bottom but when we saw the 'onion dome' of the monastery we knew we made it safely down. It was an exciting road trip but not good for the nerves.

The day trip was ending and we headed back to Morena by means of E87, through **Somova** and then Tulcea. The Danube River was on our left. We wound our way through Tulcea and were just 25 miles from our destination. The skies were getting darker not because of the approach of dusk but because rain clouds were coming in. It started with sprinkles that just wetted the windshield.



Deluge in Beștepe

Near the village of **Victoria** the skies opened up and a full-blown rain descended. The road was hard to see but still manageable.

By the time we got to **Beștepe** (Besh-te-pe) we were in a thunderstorm so intense the windshield wipers could not keep time with the downpour and the visibility was near "0". We slowed to a crawl as the traffic ahead of us came to a virtual halt. In the center of Beștepe all traffic stopped.

The downpour was so intense that mud and loose gravel was pouring onto the road from the hillsides. Water was at least 6 inches deep on the road with a flow so fast rocks just tumbled along as if they were marbles. The accumulation of rocks,

small boulders and brown mud made progress for the cars ahead nearly impossible.

We watched as the locals used shovels and sheer muscle to clear the road and create some channels by the roadside to clear the road and detour the water. No one seemed anxious to pass to get ahead and all just stood their ground.

Not Laurentiu ... he gunned the engine, maneuvered the Nissan to the left side of the road and with pure muscle and determination made his way across the debris and flowing water to the top of the rise and ahead of all other cars. The downpour was still coming down in sheets of water as we slowly and deliberately drove on to Murighol. Near Mahmudia the rain eases a little but the driving was still treacherous. Only 5 miles to Morena.

The sky was becoming an ugly black in color and the horizon offered no reprieve ... this is a gully-washer of a storm. If this is a sample of what Romania experienced during the earlier 2005 floods than it is easily understandable why this "wrath of God" did so much damage. With a sigh of relief we made it safely to Morena and thanked our luck. The rain ceased momentarily as we found safe haven in our accommodations.

When we got to our room, a surprise waited for us. The rain was so fierce it blew horizontally and found its way through every crack in the windows and door, for the floor was covered with water. So much for quality construction. The rain did not let up for the next few hours.



Last supper at Morena

Our 'last supper' at Morena was ... **Saramură de Pește** (boiled fish) and **Pește Prăjit** (fried fish) plus **Niculitel**, a type of pork or ham. For dessert – **Plăcintă de Mere** (apple strudel). Ample wine was available.

Then it came time to pay our bill for the 5 night – 4½ day stay at Morena. Here is where we were surprised. When we booked this stay we were told that the rate was 55 euros per night. Well ... they neglected to say it was a per person rate. Surprise #1 – our mistake.

he second surprise was that we assumed that the suppers we had would be nominal in cost. Well – nominal in this case was 70 leu's per meal per person, or roughly \$25 USD per meal.

The boat trips were 40 euros per person per day that we knew ahead of time. What we anticipated was a total bill to run somewhere in the \$800 - \$900 range for the three of us. The final tally was \$1,450 ... a sum we neither budgeted for nor expected.

Having no choice and learning from this experience, we thanked our stars that Morena accepted credit cards. We charged and were glad we elected to leave a day early. Needless to say Laurentiu will use care in recommending this place to others. It may be fancy by Romanian standards but it is out of line for those that expect quality for their money. My opinion is that this place was not worth the money spent, even though we enjoyed our stay here.

Saturday ... breakfast at 6:30 AM and by 7AM we were on the road to places west. The day dawned foggy and cold and we had hundreds of miles to go. Iron Gates was our destination ... on the Danube River, bordering Serbia. We drive to Tulcea, head south and take the back roads back to Bucharest. Saturday is market day and virtually the entire drive through the eastern part of Romania was spent dodging horse drawn carts and pedestrians. The landscape between Tulcea and **Hârsova** was pretty as a postcard, hilly and green. The fog burned off and the sky was cloudless. Auto traffic was extremely light and the roads in very good shape.



Near Tulcea



Babadag Mountains

We crossed the Danube River at **Giurgeni** after paying a \$2 toll. Armed guards along its entire span, for reasons still a mystery, patrolled the bridge. Certainly not for any other reason than terrorist attacks or sabotage. The road traffic increased as we approached Slobozia. We turned left and headed south to meet the Romanian motorway A2. At A2 we headed west and Laurentiu was in his comfort zone – doing 125 km/hour (75 mph) all the way to Bucharest. The A2 was equal to our interstate system in the US.

By 11:30AM we were on the outskirts of Bucharest and elected to take the ring road skirting the city. The ring road 100A was sheer torture because, even for a Saturday, it was clogged with truck traffic and construction zones. Even horse drawn carts shared this road so one can imagine the frenzy. Eventually we reached Highway #1 leading to Otopeni Airport north and we knew the worse was over. We continued on 100A until we met Highway #7 where we made a right turn for **Pitești** (Pi-tesht).

As I said before Romanian drivers are in a class all to themselves. They rely heavily on their horns, brakes and the rear view mirror. The rules of the road in Romania are – “there are no rules”. Whatever you can get away with is acceptable. To me accidents are not a matter of “if” but “when”. What surprised me even more is the amount of garbage strewn by the roadsides. Stopped to take a “bladder break” near a park and the park was literally a garbage dump. This disappointed me for it reminded me of Mexico. Pretty landscape but littered with plastic bottles and garbage bags. Many villages we passed were spotless and tidy; others dirty and full of litter.

We passed through many mid-sized towns heavy with industry. Coal burning power plants here and there but used primarily as backup for peak demands. Air pollution we did not encounter. The landscape is principally cornfields and vineyards. We pass **Scornicești**, **Craiova** and **Drobeta-Turnu-Severin**. Some of the sights along the way:



Potatoes for sale



Wealthy home



Gypsy caravan



Rich Gypsy's Home

At Craiova we take a coffee break and fill up with diesel (\$4.80 per gallon. Credit card charge was denied, computer glitch). And on we drove to our final destination ... **Orsova** on the Danube River. Total driving time today was 11½ hours ... distance covered, approximately 700 kilometers (420 miles).

We arrive in Orsova at 6:30PM and drive straight through to a pensiune on the Danube that Laurentiu checked on. When we got there the place was booked (it's a weekend) so we headed back to Orsova and checked into the **Meridian Hotel**. The hotel rate was reasonable (55 euros double; 48 euros single) and included breakfast. Place looked OK and we were satisfied.

We check-in, unpack in our rooms and head down for a quick supper. **Fasole Boade cu Ciolan** (pork knuckle with white haricot beans), **Salata Bulgaresca** (Bulgarian salad), **Frigărui de pui cu fasole dulce** (skewered chicken with haricot beans) and **Salău Prajit** (fried perch) was our fare. Of course, Ed had **papanasi** (fried cheese donut with cream) as usual. We tasted the local beers but Dolores had to bring her own wine that we got from Marius at the wedding. Wine by the glass is rare in Romania; one has to buy a full bottle. The dining room was an open-air affair but under a canopy. A giant waterfall, which we will find out later will cause some amusement, graced one wall.



Skewered chicken



Pork knuckle



On Orsova Bay

With the onset of darkness, and to walk off the tasty meal, we take a walk to the waterfront. Orsova is situated on a bay on the Danube and looks and acts like a port. Many small ships were anchored at the far side of the bay. We walk to a park by the water and catch the light show in the distance. We encounter many people walking the park, as it is a cool and mosquito-free evening. Shortly we realize that the late hour and the jarring long day's ride made us tired we headed back to the hotel.

Along the way we encountered a wedding in progress – no street dancing but plenty of merriment emanating from the reception hall. By 9PM we are in our room; hoping for a decent night's sleep. No dice ... our room was situated right above the dining room (remember, it is outdoors) and the band was in full volume performance. Had to wait until midnight before sleep came. During the night, on my way to the bathroom, I forgot about the low-beamed ceiling on my side of the bed and got creamed. Returning to bed with a headache and a bump on the forehead, I swore to change rooms tomorrow.

In Part 4 we begin our **Iron Gates** adventure, including hunting turtles by radio