

Recollections of Romania (2005) – Part 4

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Sunday ... after a breakfast of **Omeleta cu sunca si cascaval** (omelet with ham and cheese), **cafea** (coffee), and **pâine prăjită** (fried bread or rolls) with **miere** (honey) we decide to drive the Danube River road to a village deep in the mountains. The day is grey, overcast and it threatens to rain.



Hermanii Testudo (juvenile) – 1.5" long

We drive to **Eșelnița** (Eshel-nitza) where we stop by to see **Vasily**, a colleague of Laurentiu's who is a hydrologist for the Danube region but works with Laurentiu on the EU funded **Hermanii Testudo** (Herman's turtle) project ... a project to protect this endangered species.

In the house that the project owns is a courtyard with over 200 juvenile and newly hatched turtles. These turtles will be kept here until they are roughly 5 years old before being released back into the Danube hillsides.

It is interesting to handle such small creatures and to watch them scurry about their enclosure.

Shortly we are back on the Danube road headed south. This section of the Danube is part of **Porțile de Fier, Parcul National** (Iron Gates, Nature Park) and is renowned for:

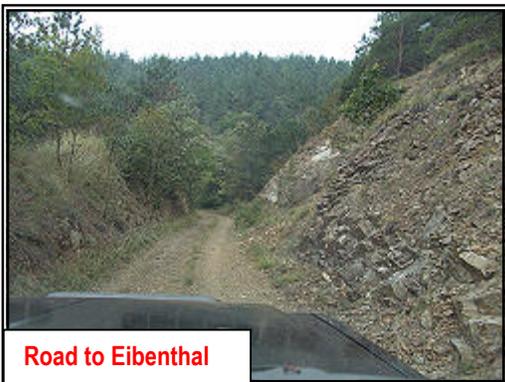
- Danube Gorges – Europe's longest defile (134 km)
- Romania's largest Natural Park (115,655 ha)
- Romania's largest hydropower plant and reservoir (Iron Gates I Hydropwer)
- Richest ethnic diversity in a Romanian protected area
- A true open-air geological museum



Decebal of Dacia

We drive the road with some apprehension ... it is a rough road, virtually unmaintained. It is a dangerous road, cut into the mountainside with the cliffs right at the edge of the right lane and the drop off into the Danube on the left. It is winding and narrow. We encounter many rock falls on the road and dodge them where necessary.

We stop near a bridge to admire the river but Laurentiu tells us to look towards our back. There, in a narrow water-filled side canyon and carved into the granite mountainside is a monstrously large face of a king ...a sort of Romanian Mt. Rushmore of one. It is of **Decebal of Dacia** ...the last King of the Geto-Dacians in the times of Traian (? - 106 AD).



Road to Eibenthal

Renewing our drive, a short distance later we turn off the Danube road onto a gravel road and start heading into the mountains. Our destination is the tiny hamlet of **Eibenthal**.

The road is primitive, narrow, winding, slippery and rock-strewn. It is a high-clearance, 4-wheel road of epic demands for courage and stamina. Not for the faint-hearted or a puny car. We drive the 6 kilometers (3½ miles) into the rarified air of the mountains.

Up and up we go ... taking frequent switchbacks and dizzying edge-grabbing trails farther into the dark forest (and it is dark).

Taking a full 40 minutes to cover the distance we eventually make the top and encounter Eibenthal in the distance.



It is an unpretentious little village nestled in a shallow valley atop the mountain. Czech immigrants who migrated to this region to work the coalmines populated Eibenthal early in the 20th century. The coal industry is virtually dead now but some small mining remains. We enter the village on the only road and drive its entire length.

Nothing spectacular here ... no pensiunes, no restaurants, no shops. The lone church is conducting Sunday service and the worshipers are looking quizzically at the intruders. The village looks as if time stood still and it is frozen in the 1910s or 1920s. Apparent poverty is the catchword for this is an agricultural village. We drive through Eibenthal to **Baia Nouă**, another small community a little down the road.

When we get there, at the end of the road, we have to stop and turn around. Here there is still a working coal mine and we feel as if we were trespassing. We backtrack through both hamlets and leave the way we came (obviously). A little distance out of the village we park and Laurentiu and I saunter up a knoll to get a better view of the valley and the village. A pretty scene that would have been prettier if the day was sunny and clear. But it was overcast and dreary and picture taking was iffy. We scampered down and resumed our drive down this time taking another road, one that was less treacherous and easier to navigate. Took only 20 minutes to get back to the Danube road.

The weather was starting to get muggy and rain was imminent, so we decided to go back to Orsova. Laurentiu was intent on doing some radio tracking of the turtles near Orsova and I asked to join him. We dropped Dee off in town, left some leus with her and headed back to Eşelnița. At Vasily's house we indulged in some fried fish that Vasily caught yesterday and his wife prepared and washed down with some homemade Tzuica. We only spent a short time here picking up the tracking gear (receiver and antenna). We hopped back in the Nissan and drove a short distance into the nearby hillside where we parked the car and started our trek.

My mind registered it ... but it took a while longer before my feet got the message. In a blink of an eye I stepped on it – a snake. I jumped like an acrobat and looked down to see the snake, apparently unharmed, try to scurry away. Laurentiu tried to use his antenna to pick it up but it was too fast and slippery and it got away. I believe it was a long-nosed viper but could not be sure. These snakes are dangerous to some degree when they bite on certain body parts but are elusive and bite only in self-defense. I would consider being stepped on as being aggressive so it was fortunate I stepped on it when it was coiled. An ominous beginning to a trek that was supposed to be fun.



Anyway, we climb a slippery trail to the top of the hillside overlooking this village. It is humid and I'm beginning to sweat profusely. Laurentiu asked me to videotape this tracking so I'm doing the best that I could to tape some meaningful footage. We spend a full 90 minutes walking the hillsides, through tall grasses, listening to that familiar "click-click-click" of the radio receiver. Laurentiu is trying to pinpoint the location of the 'marked' turtles by rotating the antenna and adjusting the receiver. We manage to find 5 out of 8 marked turtles plus an additional 3 that are unmarked (no transmitters). These olive-hued turtles are full-grown and move s-l-o-w-l-y under 2 foot tall grasses. They are difficult to spot even when you're standing on top of them. Laurentiu shows me how to recognize the

gender of a turtle. I find one and he finds the other 4. To say it was fun is true but the inclement, humid weather made it miserable. The views of the Eşelnița village and the nearby Danube were a feast for the eyes ... if only the weather was better. Soon the drizzle started and we headed on down, satisfied that we could achieve what we did in such a short time. We reached the Nissan, no snake in sight, and returned to our hotel as the rain intensified.

Supper time – 7PM. We head on down to the outdoor dining room. The rain is pelting the dining room plastic roof. The noise is deafening but tolerable... like sitting inside a drum or in a metal shed. We order our meals some beer and Dolores is drinking her wedding wine. We are the only customers in this place. Now I must describe this place for you to understand what will transpire soon. The dining room plastic roof is made up of interlocking sheets of opaque plastic, pitched downward on a slight angle, to give the room brightness and diffuse the sunlight. From a number of nozzles water is cascading over these panels to cool them and in turn keep the dining room cool. The run-off water is then

trapped at the edges and channeled to the top of the interior waterfall where, where after it reaches the waterfall pool, it is circulated back to the roof. Clever way to cool a room, conserve the water and have water show at the same time.

Anyway, after we place our order the band comes in but is unable to perform ... noise is getting louder. And so does the rain ... the pelting rain becomes more intense ... it's also hailing. You could not possibly imagine the noise ... like sitting in a metal shed and someone is throwing rocks at the roof. To a degree it was entertaining because we could not hold a conversation.



Dining Room waterfall

Soon the entertainment turned into a concern. The water channeled off the roof and into the waterfall pool caused the pool to start to fill to capacity. The restaurant staff recognized the dilemma and turned off the circulating pump but it was useless. The pool just kept getting higher and higher and pretty soon ... it breached the top. The pool overflow started to flood the dining room floor. Although the floor was tiled it cause quite a mess. The staff retrieved squeegees and tried to push the water out the door. One enterprising waiter grabbed a bucket, filled it with the overflowing water from the pool and proceeded to water all the potted plants in the dining room. This continued for about 30 minutes. The flooding was not severe enough to close the dining room but it did clean the floors.

The rain subsided a little, the noise more acceptable and our meals were delivered. Our supper was:

- **Ciorba de perisoare** (sour soup with minced meatballs)
- **Ciorba de Legume** (sour soup with vegetables)
- **Ciorba Pescareasca** (sour soup with fish)
- **Salad Bulgaresca** (Bulgarian salad)
- **Salau Prajit** (fried perch with potatoes)
- **Varza calita cu Ciolan si Fumat** (Smoked pork knuckle with cabbage)
- **Somn la Gratar** (grilled catfish)
- **Papanasi** (fried cheese dumplings)



Ciorba perisoare



Ciorba de Legume

A delicious meal accompanied by "water music".

Monday ... after breakfast of **Ochui** cu cascaval (eggs and cheese) and **Omlete cu sansa** (ham omelet) with **paine prăjită** (fried bread), and that famous single cup of coffee, we're off to drive a longer stretch of the Danube River and visit another Czech village in the mountains. Again, I must say, the road is treacherous and unmaintained. Potholes, rock falls, mudslides are encountered the entire way. It is drizzling a little, the road traffic sparse and the Danube River brown. The scenery is impressive ... the defile is truly immense. Driving to the village of **Moldova Veche** on the Danube (120 km, 75 miles) we continuously look at the Serbian side of the Danube. The Serbs have a matching river road on their side but it is high on the cliff sides and undulates up and down. The Serbs had to cut a large number of tunnels to accommodate the road because their side of the Danube is steeper and solid granite. The Serb riverside villages and small hamlets are picturesque ... if only the sun was shining to capture their look.



Romanian fort



Austro-Hungarian Fort in Serbia

We pass a medieval Romanian fort with two towers still standing but the third tower submerged due to the Iron Gate hydro plant. A short distance later we encounter a rocky outcrop in the middle of the river ... it is the remains of a church that was submerged with the top portion above water. A navigation hazard but well marked

As we drive we note that guardrails are few and far between and the river is only a few yards off the road. Not exactly a comfort zone. We pass another medieval castle on the Serbian side that once held a massive chain across the Danube – an early tollbooth.

We pass river villages like **Cozia**, **Berzasca**, **Liubcova** and **Coronini** before we reach **Moldova Veche**. All are still inhabited but no longer useful in the coal mining industry. We fill up in Moldova Veche (my credit card no good here) and head back. This town still has a copper mining operation and the complex, high on a ridge, is shabby looking. Near Cozia we turn off the river road and head into the mountains again ... this time to **Bigar**, another Czech village.



Bigar shrouded in clouds

The drive up is not as treacherous as the one to Eibenthal but does follow a primitive road. It is 17 kilometers (11 miles) to Bigar ... we encounter some logging trucks ... stop to admire a deep canyon carved by a river and in time make our way to the village.

Nothing out of the ordinary here ... building painted in bright hues of many colors ... the locals glancing our way with curiosity and the local animals crowd the lone street.

This is an agricultural village and from the top of a nearby rise ... pretty as a postcard. The valley is lush green and shrouded in a low cloud. We make our way to the end of the village but find no place to turn around.

We head straight on hoping to find a place to u-turn but find ourselves on a mud road surrounded by cows ... but still no place to turn around. A mile later we finally find a flat spot and surprise a cow-herder eating his lunch. We turn around, place the Nissan in 4-wheel drive and floor the gas. The mud road is like quicksand and the cow we encounter does not give way. It was tricky getting past this beast without sinking to our windows.

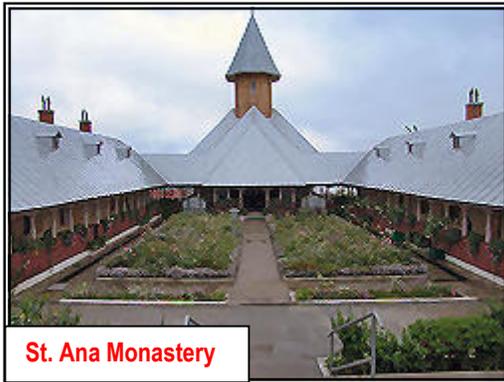
Having seen enough of Bigar we reverse course and head on down. No shops, restaurants, pensions or, for that matter, anything for tourists in this place. On the way down we encounter a fully loaded logging truck and had to eat exhaust fumes for a few miles before the truck found a place to pull over and allow us to pass. Reaching the main river road we boogie back to Orsova. It's raining when we reach town and still plenty of daylight left. Laurentiu suggests that we visit the nearby **St. Ana Monastery** situated high on "**Mosului Hill**" above the town.

Journalist Pamfil Secicaru who fought here in WWI founded St. Ana Monastery. He expressed his gratitude to God for remaining alive after being buried alive on this very place after a bomb explosion. The monastery was built in the style of wooden churches, between 1936-1939.

The church is located in the middle of the monastery and the cells of the nuns are on the sides. The inner paintings were covered during the year of communism. In the years of the dictatorship, the monastery was in turn a sanatorium for tuberculosis then a vacation camp for children and a tourist basis, whereas the church itself was a bar for a couple of years then a motel reception. The monastery was beatified in 1990 and restored between 1993-1997.

We arrive at the monastery in a slight drizzle and begin our exploration. We cannot enter the church itself because the nuns are holding service. Seems the nuns are conducting service nearly all day long so an interior visitation is chancy.

We walk around the perimeter of the church (the cells are off limit) and admire the majestic views of Orsova and the valley below. We purchase and light candles for the living, the dead and the ill.



St. Ana Monastery



Lighting remembrance candles

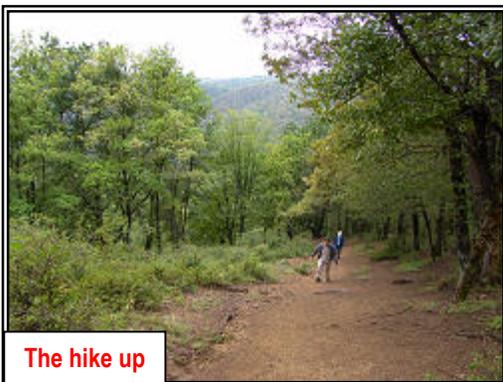
Other visitors arrive and it's getting crowded. After 30 minutes we leave and return to Orsova and our hotel.

Ahhh ... supper. The Meridian Hotel, although only a 3***, offers some excellent entrées. Tonight we will have:

- **Musciulet de Porc Impanat la Gratar** (fillet mignon of pork with garlic and rice pilaf)
- **Ciorba de Fasole Boabe si Costita** (sour soup with haricut beans and bacon)
- **Lasagne al Forno** (lasagna with ham, mushrooms, cheese and white sauce)
- **Salata Orientala cu Sansa** (oriental salad – potato, ham, olives, onion)
- **Salau Prajit** (fried perch with potatoes)
- **Clatite cu Noci si Miere** (crepes with pecans and honey)

Dolores ordered the porc but that cut of meat was closer to shoe leather than edible. She could not even cut it ... we saved it as a dog treat. Instead ... she shared my lasagna that was delicious and ample. Beer and wine rounded out our fare and tonight ... there was no flooding. We crashed early because tomorrow we are going hiking.

Tuesday ... breakfast of boiled eggs, omelets with ham and cheese, rolls with honey, orange juice and the obligatory small cup of coffee. Coffee refills cost 35,000 leu (\$1.25). Our included breakfast has a 100,000 leu limit ... we go over that amount and have to pay the extra 20,000 leu (\$0.80). The day is promising but still overcast and gloomy. Rain is predicted for later that afternoon so we make our way out of **Orsova** and to **Dobrova** village situated high over the Danube River. We arrive at the village and park near the village center. Two buses are also parked there ... tourist on a bus tour. We are about to hike a mile towards the **Danube Gorge** to overlooks that give breathtaking views of the **Cazanele Mici** and **Cazanele Mari**.



The hike up

Cazanale Mici, according to Laurentiu, means “**small boiler**”. This is a name applied to the narrowing of the Danube defile to about 200 meters (600 feet) where the current and the river flow “boils”, or churns. I suppose the other narrowing, only hundreds of meters above the “mici” means something but who knows that? Anyway, we start our hike up the hillside towards the river.

It is a humid morning and we started to sweat. It is also a struggle because the recent rains made the path slippery ... and it is simply a footpath with heavy erosion and gullies. Footing had to be precise or one would wind up ‘brown’ and battered. I was videotaping and Laurentiu was taking stills.

We encountered some tourists returning from their foray and most sounded Hungarian ... nearly all seniors with walking sticks. They laughed at us (reasons unknown) so we laughed back (take that you Hungarians). A school group was also encountered on their way down and Laurentiu engaged them in some conversation.

The uphill trek was slow but our pace steady. Cows grazed contentedly along the way and Laurentiu offered some lessons on topology and flora and fauna. In 30 minutes we made our way to the tabletop of the hill and walked on level

ground the rest of the way to the overlooks. There are no obvious trails leading to the many spots considered overlooks here so we made our way through dew-covered grass, tree falls and rock outcroppings until we reached the edge. The distant views (less than ½ mile) of the Cazanale Mici and Cazanale Mari defile were awe-inspiring.



Canazale Mici (downstream)

Although the day was overcast we saw enough to make us appreciate the climb. We lingered here, took many photos and taped the action and proceeded to walk farther west along the edge to another overlook point. Overlook here is a misnomer – it is the very edge of the cliff with sheer drops to the river road, or the river itself, below. One has to use caution ... the rocks and grasses are wet and slippery and the edge is deceptively abrupt.

We linger and shoot and admire the views in all directions. We observe the river traffic and the fishermen below us. The Serbian side appears so close we could make out their road traffic and even their buildings.



Canazale Mari (upstream)

Deriving satisfaction that we could at least see the gorge we started our way down. The trek back was equally precarious as the slippery slopes made footing uncertain. But we made it back to the Nissan in good time ... the buses were gone. We headed back to Orsova.

By now the river road and sights along the way were becoming very common for we traversed this road a number of times in the past few days. When we got back to town, Laurentiu zipped on through and back to the main E70 highway for a look at the Iron Gates hydropower dam only 10 miles away on the Danube.

It was drizzling by now and our look at the dam was limited from a nearby hotel's patio. The dam's museum was no longer open

to the public and the number of armed guards patrolling the dam's perimeter made me nervous. I had no notion of crossing into Serbia and a hike up a nearby mountain for a better look at the dam was cancelled (rain). We headed back to Orsova but detoured briefly at **Monastety Vodita** just off the E70.

The monastery is only a mile off the road (and may be seen from E70). Along the access road we encounter an Orthodox funeral procession with its roadside service (the cemetery was uphill of that spot). The monastery was built between 1370-1372 and only its ruins remain. It is the oldest documented foundation and the first monastic establishment in the country. It declined after the Austrian-Turkish war (1718).

In 1990 the rebuilding of this monastery was initiated and between 1991-1995 the cells, the abbey and the refectory were completed. It was consecrated in 2001. We make our way to the monastery but have to stop a hundred meters from the actual complex.

The bridge is washed out (floods of 2005) and a precarious hand-made wooden bridge does not look promising. We make our way across some boulders placed strategically across the stream and walk to the church.



Monastery Vodita



Church iconostasis



Lighting remembrance candles

An Orthodox priest greets us and allows photo taking of the church interior. The church layout and paintings appear ordinary (to us) so we purchase some candles for the obligatory lighting for the deceased, the living and the ill.

We linger here only 15 minutes and take the precarious bridge back to the Nissan. The visit was short but interesting. Some daylight was left so Laurentiu and I decide to do some more radio tracking of turtles.

We drop Dolores off at the hotel and make our way to Eşelnița. We park at the base of the hill that is our search zone ... the snake does not reappear ... and make our way to the top.

The “click-click-click” of the radio receiver is brought to life and our search begins. Because we knew the general locations of the turtles from the previous tracking of two days ago we concentrated there. In short order we found 6 of the 8 marked turtles. All wonderfully concealed in tall grass. They generally move very short distances ... anywhere from 3 feet to 30 feet in 24 hours. They mainly feed on grass so if the forage is good they do not move very far. At most they move 300 meters (1000 feet) in 1-2 months. Laurentiu allows me to try the tracing technique and it works out well ... the turtle was parked at my feet while I was trying to locate it (only hidden under the grass). It moved only a few feet from 2 days ago. So it was a good search ... Laurentiu located and actually found 3 turtles and I found the other 3 (not counting the one at my feet). Only one turtle escaped our search.



Amateur tracker



The find

We returned to the Nissan satisfied of a job well done and stopped by Vasily to return the radio tracking equipment. Laurentiu brought out a present for me from Vasily ... a 20-ounce Coke bottle filled with home made Tzuica. Yes ... glad I came along. That evening our last meal in Orsova was:

- **Ciorba de Perisoara** (sour soup with meat balls)
- **Ciorba din Ciolan Afumat cu Tarhan** (tarragon sour soup with smoked knuckle)
- **Mamaliguta cu Branza si Smitana** (polenta with cheese and cream)
- **Salata Bulgareasa** (Bulgarian salad)
- **File de Somn la Gratar** (grilled catfish)
- **Prajitura Tiramisu** (Tiramisu dessert)



Mamaliguta



Somn la Gratar

Part 5 of our odyssey concludes with the Town of **Timișoara** and **Baile Herculane**, a Roman Spa.