

TURKEY AND AROUND THE BLACK SEA

Part Two: Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria

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Batumi



First stop after Trabzon in Turkey is north to Batumi in Georgia. We arrive at sunrise to a surprisingly modern clean looking waterfront (see also front page). Batumi is the capital of the republic of Adjara. A “republic” seems to be a more autonomously governed area than what we mean by a province or a state. The sea front of Batumi is splendid with modern new buildings but most are unfinished. But before we can take a good look, we are whisked away for our tour: I’ll come back to those strange unfinished buildings later. Step back one street from the splendid new esplanade and you move into the third world; bumpy dirt roads and a general feel of decay and poverty.

I knew that Stalin was born in Georgia and that Georgian red wine was Stalin’s only drink, which he drank copiously (Georgian men drink an incredible 3 to 5 litres a day, our guide informed us), so I had assumed Georgia is part of Russia. Like most this region it was once, but most Georgians are extremely proud of their independence: they have their own language and an alphabet unlike any other, devised by an earlier king precisely to establish Georgia’s uniqueness. However, Russia gave self-government to S. Ossetia and Abkhazia, which Georgia tried to get back in the early 90s. Russia backed the two breakaways and Georgia lost but was silly enough to attack S. Ossetia in 2008, so Russia whacked them hard again. Russia is still trying to destabilise the Georgian Government, as they did in Crimea, and are trying to do the same in the Eastern Ukraine right now.



Georgia is in area the size of Tasmania with a population of five million and like Tasmania the inland is very mountainous. 84% of the population is ethnic Georgian, a variety of other ethnic groups making up the remainder. The country is Eastern Orthodox Christian, as is reflected in the flag of five crosses, and after Armenia is the oldest Christian country having been visited by Sts. Simon and Matthew in AD 1. The main industry is the oil and gas pipeline from Baku in Azerbaijan on the Caspian to the Black Sea seaports, which yields considerable rental income for Georgia. Other industries are agricultural: wine, fruit, vegetables, nuts.

The Georgian guides devised our itinerary in order to show us all about Georgian culture. We visit



the market, which sold all sorts of spices (shown here with their names written in Georgian alphabet), fruit, meat and vegetables including what we call fruit leathers but in different shapes from the flat Salamanca fruit leathers. There are



many stalls but few customers. I asked our guide about this and she said the wholesalers come early in the morning. “What about ordinary people?” “Oh, like me,” she replies, “they shop in the supermarkets.”



The mystery of the market's viability unsolved, we are taken for a walk through the well cared for Botanical Gardens which has a great view across to the harbour and interesting bed of flowers before the Georgian cross. On these trips onshore, we are always on the lookout for toilets. We pass a group in the Gardens, One of our number is extremely urgent. "But the Ladies is being cleaned," the cleaner tells our guide, "it is not possible." "Then I'll go to the Mens," the poor lady cried. "No, not possible." Finally, after threats bordering on violence the cleaner reluctantly let our colleague in to the partially cleaned Ladies.



After lunch we are taken through the Adjara State ethnographic museum but frankly there is little of general interest: all very local and not photogenic. Next is the Goni Fortress. On this site were the Bronze Age tribes of ancient Colchis. Fortresses were built here from 6th Century BC; the present ruins date from the 1st century AD and were built by the Romans.

All very improving no doubt but it is at lunch that we find the heart of Georgia. The food and red and white wine that Stalin was addicted to, very pleasant if a little on the coarse side, some very interesting vegetable spreads, the food a bit like Turkish only distinctively flavoured with different spices, a cheese pie a Georgian speciality. But the dancing. Here we feel the heart of Georgia whereas before we had seen only the skin. The dancers were hugely energetic, especially the men who when dancing on their own were reminiscent of Cossacks. The women were variously coy and artful in evading then usually succumbing to their testosterone driven pursuers. The human condition from a masculine point of view.



We walk through the main part of town and back to those strange new buildings on the waterfront. The spiral tower is called the alphabet tower, the spiral carrying the unique Georgian alphabet. Here is Medea holding the golden fleece that over 2,500 years ago Jason and his crew of Argonauts sailed to recover from Colchis, which was to the Greeks the end of the earth. The technical university is empty, the bizarre gondolas on the right side are meant to be restaurants, a statue of Poseidon supported by leaking mermaids, an avenue of columns on top of which is a little golden boy, and some rather fine Georgian buildings. Returning to the waterfront, we pass a marriage registry built in the shape of a dolphin and on the wharf we are greeted by a mermaid who is something of a gymnast.





There is a cable car right near the wharf to the foothills where we are told there is a splendid view of the town and Black Sea. Most people wanted to take the cable car but alas we have run out of time. Less culture and more sightseeing I think would have been more appreciated, but the Georgians are very proud people and were anxious that we appreciate their culture. A stream of facts presented in such a short time doesn't really add to our appreciation of



a country with such a complicated history, but food, wine, dancing and seeing the sights in that time span would add rather more, I think, for in such things are the heart of the country. As is this unique language, unrelated to any other in the world as our guide assured us, with its own idiosyncratic alphabet.

But our ship awaits, beside which some fisher folk are photographing each other, so I photograph them, completing the circle before sailing off into the sunset.

Sochi



We sail into Sochi at sunrise: another clean modern looking port but unlike Batumi, the modernity is not a screen for a third world country beyond. On the contrary Sochi is a clean modern city, greatly enhanced of course by the \$55 million spent for the 2014 Winter Olympics. Sochi has been populated by different tribes for thousands of years (the name itself derives from an ancient language), but only in 1890s did it become a city. It was a base for the Russians in the 1828-9 Russo-Turkish wars, this gun the remaining defence against the Turks.



We walk through the city with our Russian guide and admire the many new buildings, extravagant 5 star hotels, thanks to the Olympics, and pleasant middle aged buildings. Trees line the clean streets.

Sochi was a tourist destination from the 19th century because of its mild climate protected by the Caucasus Mountains and its hot mineral springs. The Russians called hotels with mineral spas "sanatoria". Sochi's mineral springs and irrigation treatments evidently did wonders for Stalin's creaking joints and leaky bowels, for he erected his favourite dacha or holiday home here in 1937 (his 87 other dachas are scattered around Russia).



He built this one high in the thickly wooded hills around Sochi, painting it green for camouflage. His short swimming pool, tiny stepped staircase and his stumpy billiard table were purpose built for the legs of the 5 ft 1 inch Stalin.



Stalin at 18 married the beautiful 16 year old Ekaterina. They were madly in love but she died of typhus after only a few years. He was shattered, and as he threw dust on her coffin he said: "I am now dead too and have no feeling left

for any other human being.” His lack of feeling was hideously demonstrated with his gulags and persecution that included his own family. He despised his son Yakov who tried to shoot himself but failed, causing Stalin to mutter: “And he couldn’t even shoot straight.” Yakov eventually succeeded by deliberately running into an electrified fence. His other son, Vasiliy, was a crack pilot and died of alcoholism aged 37. Stalin however idolised his daughter from a second marriage, Svetlana, but when she found out about the atrocities her father had committed, she fled abroad and became a US citizen, dying in 2011. The family of his in-laws he named as enemies of the state and sent to Siberia, along of course with millions of others.



At the Yalta Conference in 1945, Stalin proposed a toast in his favourite Georgian red wine: “To Peace!” To which Churchill mumbled, “Indeed, a piece of Czechoslovakia, a piece of Poland ...”

We visit Matstesta Spa and Health resort, set in pleasant wooded surroundings. Beside, this pleasant building is a mud pool smelling of sulphur, and behind a cave that is now blocked off as people walked in and were overcome by fumes. Sochi is a pleasant town, green all the year round with flowers and gardens and a marvellous hinterland of forests and mountains, but we didn’t have time to see the latter.



Crimea

We were to visit Yalta and Sevastopol in the Crimea but thanks to Putin’s empire building we do not. Not that those ports were in any way dangerous but that the west had imposed economic sanctions, which included tourism.

As we were bypassing the Crimea our guest lecturer, Brig Philip Sanders, gave us an account of the Crimean War, which was a disaster all round, with 300,000 casualties and the fiasco of the charge of the Light Brigade, immortalised (not to say glorified) by Tennyson. The problem seemed to be the result of Lord Cardigan’s orders being misunderstood, complicated by the fact that the officers in charge



Earls Cardigan and Lucan, were brothers-in-law, pigheaded, and loathed each other. Quite a different reason is suggested by novelist George MacDonald Fraser, who wrote a series of novels about the adventures of the bully Flashman, of *Toms Brown’s schooldays* who through cowardice, bad luck and debauchery, found himself at key events in Victoria’s Empire. In *Flashman at the*

Charge, Flashman, now an officer in the British army, had drunk too much champagne on the eve of the Charge. Next morning he had severe and noisy flatulence. While sitting on his horse, waiting with his colleagues in the Light Brigade, he broke wind in a thunderclap. His horse took fright and charged into what Tennyson had described as the valley of death, followed by the rest of the Light Brigade. Flashman himself lived to run away another day.

The Crimea was originally part of the Ottoman Empire, but occupied by the Russians. After Stalin's death, in 1953 Krushchev gave it back to the Ukraine, to the horror of many Russians. This has been a continuing sore point both for Russia and for Russian speaking citizens of the Crimea until the latter voted in 2013 to revert to Russia. Does this leave the Ukraine and Georgia still to go?

Odessa

You enter Odessa from the seafront via the Potemkin staircase. Looking up you see only the 193 steps no landings, looking down you only see the landings no steps. At the head is a statue of the Duke de Richelieu in a Roman toga, who was governor from 1803 and designed a large part of the city.



Catherine the Great founded Odessa in 1789 and appointed the Duke governor in 1804; her statue is in the city square behind his. When we visited, nasty things were certainly happening in Kiev and in Eastern Ukraine, but Odessa itself seemed quiet. Our guide agreed things were quiet now but added cautiously, "You never when there'll be trouble."



Odessa is used to trouble: it was the scene of a riot in 1905 when Russian sailors mutinied on the battleship Potemkin: if you saw the 1925 Eisenstein film *The Battleship Potemkin* you will remember the searing image of the pram tumbling down the steps beside the baby's mother, shot by Tsarist soldiers. Odessa was badly hit in WW2; "Odessa" was also the name of an organisation to help senior Nazis escape mainly to the Americas with as much loot as possible, which was the context for Frederick Forsyth's *The Odessa File*.



Walking the Primorsky Boulevard, with its avenues of trees and lovely 19th century buildings, we come across a man displaying an eagle, a music student with a bandura, a bass lute, and he sings for us a beautiful Ukrainian folk song. We walk past the ubiquitous cannon still aimed at the Turkish navy (they are all round Black Sea ports), the Town Hall, a museum with a copy of the Hellenistic statues of Laocoon and his sons in front. Laocoon was a Trojan who tried to warn his compatriots not to accept the wooden horse saying it was full of soldiers: hence the saying: "beware Greeks bearing gifts." As a punishment the goddess Athena sent a giant sea serpent to strangle him and his sons.





The Opera House was designed by Viennese architects in the 1880s. No two nymphs separating the boxes are the same. The East Entrance has a golden staircase with beautifully worked ceiling and architraves.



We walk past the so called Greek culture centre, some very pleasant gardens, cafes, and the Gallery



shopping centre. We come across two striking contrasts in poverty: in front of the glory of the Cathedral a drunk is sleeping it off under a tree, while another is ransacking a garbage bin. We step inside the Cathedral to a



splendour of sight and sound: wonderful ikons, while a small choir is there to give a taste of the musical glories of the Orthodox Church. Odessa must be one of the most musical cities in Europe.

The Odessa Fine arts museum has some fine Ukrainian art. But by now it is time to go. We pass through a nice autumn-tipped park, retrace our steps down the Primorsky Boulevard and the Potemkin Steps. In front of the port station is the Child Sculpture, a chubby bronze baby busting out of a futuristic metallic egg. The boy looks down philosophically at visitors who grab his toes and pose, as locals have told them that if they do that they will have a successful voyage.



It seemed to work in our case for here I am writing this.

Transylvania, Bucharest



Romania hasn't had a very good press recently. When the communists dropped the royal emblem from the Romanian flag it became indistinguishable from that of Chad, which no doubt caused confusion in various Olympic Games. Far worse, Romania was impoverished and brutalised by the Ceausescu family, of which more later. Then to cap that was the film *Borat*, supposedly about Kazakhstan, but actually shot in a dirt poor Romany village in



Romania. A quick clarification: the name Romania derives from its early connection with the Roman Empire, whereas the name Romany for Gypsies derives from the Romani language which originated on the Indian subcontinent. No connection at all with Romania itself, although there are several Romani villages here, as Sacha Baron Cohen had unkindly let us know.

We berth at Constanta, our destination Dracula's castle in the Transylvanian mountains, then Bucharest the following day. Constanta, the 4th largest port in Europe, was where the poet Ovid was exiled in 8 AD and today is full of museums of various kinds. But we saw Constanta only through a



bus window as we sped north into a thick fog. At a happy stop there was an atmospheric moment as a horse and cart emerged from the mist in a way that did seem to confirm



Borat's portrayal. But when the fog lifted we had a glimpse of the sort of countryside we had been missing. Rural, pretty and very fertile: not the squalid picture Borat had painted.



Five hours brings us to the Carpathian Mountains, the highest point crowned with a cross, exactly as we had seen in the Tatra Mts in Poland. We lunch at the 20th century castle built by an ex-PM of Romania, obviously having done well from his term in office.



At Sinaia, further north, is Peles Castle, built at the end of the 19th century for the Royal Family of Romania, King Carol I, and considered one of the most beautiful castles in the world. A lovely village is at the start of the path leading to the castle. We browse



through the rooms, several recalling days of yore and their numerous ways of killing people. We leave as one of those ubiquitous newlyweds come for their photo-op, hopefully not in the killing rooms.



We drive on, through villages in the mountains beautifully adorned with early autumn trees along a narrow winding road, which unfortunately is not good for photographs from the bus window, until we come to the small village of Bran in the Brasov district to visit the so-called Dracula's castle. It is actually Bran Castle, which was built at the intersection of the borders between Transylvania and Wallacia, and has witnessed a long history of violence. Vlad III lived in the 15th century and his family name was indeed Draculea, and he did like to impale his enemies on stakes stuck in the ground. But he was also something of a hero because that sort of thing kept the Ottoman Turks at bay. No doubt he was the inspiration for Bram Stoker's Dracula, but Vlad Drac lived in Wallacia, not Transylvania, and had only a passing connection, if any, with this particular castle. Bram Stoker himself had never been here.

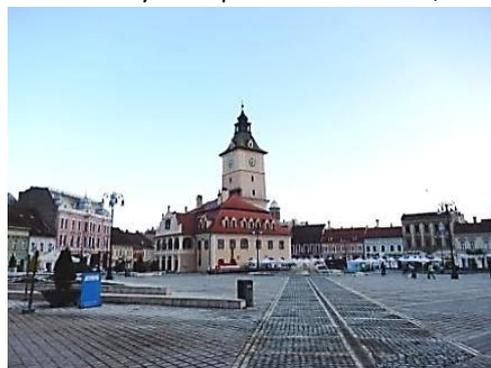
The castle in recent times was the residence of Carol I's son, King Ferdinand I of Romania, who married Princess Marie of Saxe Coburg, granddaughter of Queen Victoria. The present owner of the castle is Archduke Dominic their grandson, who has put it on the market. All that myth busting did

not however prevent the Archduke Dominic from claiming in his selling promotion that the castle was the inspiration for Bram Stoker's story.



Romania's mountain country has many forts perched on mountain tops overlooking the nearest village. We have dinner in an old fort overlooking Brasov arriving in the dark and being challenged by guard clad in armour. We are entertained by a top class orchestra, and middle class singers, one soprano being excellent.

We return to Brasov to spend the night in an extraordinary hi tech hotel that has been designed by a geek who seems never to have spent a night in any hotel. All was appearance, computer driven bedroom lights that hang low and look great but we couldn't find out how to switch the damned things off. The floor in the foyer is split level in to different coloured timbers: looks striking, but the two levels sent one of our number flat on her face, with a black eye, her glasses broken in the fall.



Up early to view Brasov at dawn: a lovely old town. We visit an orthodox church during service time, and the Black Church, the largest Gothic building between Istanbul and Vienna. The large city square is deserted at this hour on a Sunday morning but at least one industry is working. The sign says: "Activate your body"; the writing on the car door says how: "Herra Masaj Erotic".

In Bucharest, we drive past some fine buildings to Revolution Square, which was the scene of the downfall of dictator Nicolai Ceausescu. In the previous block is the University founded by King Carol I with him sitting on his horse in front. Next block we come to Revolution Square where Ceausescu had his come upppance. Here is the Communist Party's central committee building from the balcony of which he made his final speech. The column on the right represents a dagger piercing the heart of Romania, a patch of red can just be seen underneath the hearts.

The son of poor peasants, Ceausescu was semiliterate. He joined the communist party in the 1930s and spent much time in prison for his communist activities. This only endeared him to the party when Soviet Russia grabbed Romania after WW2. He rose fast to become President of the State Council, and elected head of state in 1974, after which he became increasingly repressive, brutal and corrupt. He loved to give long speeches glorifying Romania's elusive success. We saw a documentary of his final speech in which instead of applauding, the 8,000



strong crowd, for the first time ever, started jeering then pushed forward to invade the building. The Ceausescu retreated to the roof and a helicopter whisked them away to their retreat on the border. However, they didn't get away fast enough, they were captured, tried in a kangaroo court that was condemned internationally, and they were shot on Christmas day 1989. His last request was to die holding hands with his wife Elena. We saw a documentary of these events that gave the impression of sheer chaos, an indication of what the government was like for some time after Ceausescu had gone.

Ceausescu built the Palace of the Parliament, the second largest building in the world after the



Pentagon, comprising 1,000 rooms. 700 engineers and architects were needed and 20,000 workers worked day and night for 3 years to complete it. The architects had double job in that they had to build models at every stage, because Ceausescu insisted in approving each stage but he couldn't read the plans. The site he wanted was already occupied by an orthodox church and a surrounding suburb on top of a hill, so he ordered the removal of the church and for the hill to be flattened, displacing 40,000 people.

Everything in the building had to be Romanian except for the odd diplomatic gift. One wall is devoted to the Ceausescu's favourite paintings. Here is the only known painted portrait



of Elena. She insisted on being painted nude as she had just won a beauty competition, albeit she was the only competitor. The artist reflected public opinion by painting her from the back. Elena



"wrote" a PhD on polymer chemistry becoming known as a renowned scientist, winning the highest scientific awards and being appointed director of the Bucharest Central Institute of Chemical research in 1965. These were all remarkably fine

achievements given that she had left school at age 14. We go through the room after magnificent room, gaping at the sheer opulent waste. The east end of the building is relatively plain but the west overlooks what is meant to be a replica of the Champs Elysees:

Romanians today are in two totally different minds about the Palace of the Parliament: tear it down as an extravagance by their hated dictator, or be proud of its magnificence. A nice dilemma.



Romania was a pleasant surprise, given its previous bad press, both for right reasons (Ceausescu) and for wrong ones (Sasha Baron Cohen). The Transylvanian hinterland was stunning, especially in early autumn; Bucharest today is architecturally lovely and a sophisticated city, the people now evidently happy and spending up as we saw where we had lunch in a top level restaurant. Romanian cuisine is a mixture of Turkish, German and Hungarian with local variations with some interesting soups and red and white wine and various fruit brandies. However we only had two lunches and one dinner so we didn't gain a clear impression of the cuisine.

Nessebur



We had just a morning in Bulgaria. Nessebur is a pretty town of about 12,000 people with a long and rich history, first settled by the Greeks in 600 BC. Today it is a foremost resort, called the Dubrovnik of Bulgaria.



Nessebur has so many well preserved ancient buildings, many built of the highly ornate layers of red



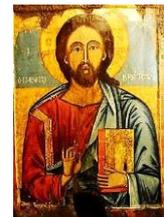
and cream brick. The whole town is designated a UNESCO World heritage site. Small as it is, there are 40 churches or remains in around the town, the largest number per capita of anywhere in the world, 12 being particularly significant sites. The



town is built on a peninsula 800 m long and 350 m wide. On the left is the northern end facing out to sea, on the right is the isthmus connecting to the mainland.



We walked around the town, and visited a museum that was situated on the Nessebur end of the isthmus. Here we found artefacts from ancient occupation by the ancient Greeks exhibits, and a stunning collection of medieval Orthodox ikons.



We walk back along the sea front to our ship where a fisherman is selling his catch, his boat beached. That is our ship, *Island Sky*, in the background.



Conclusion

This was an extremely interesting trip, and thanks to Captain's Choice for doing the considerable



paperwork for so many countries, including the last minute changes in itinerary, and their guides and doctor who were with us for the whole trip. We would never had negotiated all this on our own. The guides were friendly, humorous and wonderfully efficient, Dr. Mike Beloff being particularly solicitous about our health and wellbeing, and spontaneously following up



individuals with any medical issue. In Turkey we were divided into two buses under Turkish guides, Yamen and Tanna, who were founts of local knowledge and anecdote. We had Tanna for most of the time, and here he is.