

*Esther Goes to the Balkans*  
*A Few Emails from Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Oberammergau!*

August 28, 2010

Hi: Its been a great summer and I've enjoyed working on the house, having three garage sales, and doing art trips to Philadelphia and San Francisco. Now its time for some serious traveling!

I leave Wednesday for Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and even Germany and Italy. No, its not a if-this-is -Tuesday-it-must-be.... trip. You know me better than that! The first section (23 days) is mostly Slovenia and Croatia and a day in Trieste, Italy while moving from one country to another. Lots of sightseeing, hiking and meeting locals. The second section is Oberammergau, Germany for the Passion Play, then a return to Croatia with side trips to Montenegro and Bosnia (11 days). This is more of a 44-people-in-a-bus trip, but the only way to get a ticket and accommodations for the play and see even more sites in the Balkans.

There will probably be four to five emails enroute keeping you up to date on what I'm seeing and doing- so if you are traveling, or busy and don't want to receive them, just let me know. It won't hurt my feelings as I know all about stuffed email boxes.

Please send good thoughts for me; and I will do the same for you!

All the best

Esther

September 13, 2010

Hi from Esther in Starigrad (Croatia)

first .. these are strange keyboards, so there may be a Y instead of a Z -- be forewarned!

I've taken the morning as a vacation from my vacation. These Eldertreks itineraries are jam-packed! Two of us opted out of the -strenuous- hike this morning to a deep and very steep gorge. The pool and private beach seemed to call our names!

I loved Ljubljana! This capital city of Slovenia took me by surprise. It has 200,000 people and is filled with Baroque architecture designed mostly by one man after a horrible earthquake in the late 1800s. Its pedestrian areas are filled with cafes, bookstores, art shops and.....and stands selling a type of whipped ice cream that is to die for!

There are 12 of us in the Eldertreks group and we would make perfect characters for an Agatha Christie story: the old professor, a ballroom dancer, the scientist, the doctor (with a young at heart wife), a mysterious man who doesn't say much and of course, me -- Miss Perfect!

Regrettably we didn't spend much time in Ljubljana and after a day we set out for Lake Bled and Lake Bohinj visiting forts built nestled in caves and castles on top of hills (we hike to them). Our first long hiking experience was around Lake Bled, about a 3 hours to do the complete circuit. We were warned about bears (don't make eye contact) and luckily didn't run in to any.

Our guide, Lajos, is from Hungary and owns Green Eye Travel. His specialty is butterflies and he also guides Eldertreks trips in Egypt, Romania and Libya. He is a good person to know! We travel in two vans -- one comfortable and one not. Our other driver is Tomas who is very nice and helpful, but doesn't speak English.

Its not heavy.. its my luggage.

About three days into the trip I realized my luggage was too bulky. I had brought 6 guidebooks which were heavy and took up too much room. I sat in the hotel lobby one evening and tore out pages of the places we'd visit. Passersby looked at me so strange -- as if I were dismembering a baby. When I asked the receptionist to throw out the books, he asked if he could keep them saying -- I know there is still good information in here--. Lajos told me that books are precious in this part of the world and no one would ever think of tearing them up. I still have a few books left -- mostly travelers tales and am enjoying reading them and will give them to Lajos at the end of the trip.

Now that I've been here 10 days I continue to find it amazing how clean and well organized these countries are. People queue, there is minimal litter, road signs are digital and everything seems high tech. My one regret is that internet is \$10 per hour!

We've visited enormous cave systems that Indiana Jones would love. My favorite being the Skocjan system which is a UNESCO site. We walked over three miles into the system over platforms and bridges seeing enormous stalactites and stalactmites.

Our hotels have been interesting. In Ljubljana and Starigrad (where I am now) they are 4-star with good amenities. Others are lodges, small family owned properties and B&Bs.

Of particular note, we went to Italy for lunch! The tiny city of Trieste is just a short beautiful ride over the mountains from Slovenia and a good day trip.

We are now at the main focus of our tip -- Croatia. It is beautiful -- small red tile roofed towns cascade into the Adriatic sea. We've visited the worlds smallest city - Hum, consisting of 26 people and three gift shops; we tromped thru Roman ruins in Pula and Rovinj; we've seen Byzantine frescoes in small fortress-churches. This is an amazing place.

Yesterday we visited what must be one of the greatest natural wonders of Europe -- Plitvice National Park with its enormous waterfalls. Numerous walking trails with various grades of steepness and difficulty take you thru the park. We did Route H which starts at the top of the mountain, winds thru three lakes and various waterfalls for 8 kms. Beautiful every step of the way.

Tomorrow we travel to Zadar and Sibenik and thru the area where Joes grandparents were from. Our guide offered to stop in the village so I can have a look around Kruseva.

These have been some surprises:

- wine is cheaper than coke and some times bottled water
- These people enjoy life -- the pace is slow here and everyone walks or rides bikes --you see very few fat people
- you wonder where everyone is as there is so much open space here.
- am taking special note of some places like Lake Bled, Plitvice, Split and Dubrovnik as I return in a few weeks with the Oberammergau group

Please continue to send good thoughts -- they help a lot!

Esther

September 21, 2010

Hi from Esther in Dubrovnik

Hi: I've just waived goodbye to the last of the group leaving for the airport and it is such a sense of loss. Spend 20 days with the same people and they seem like family. We've eaten every meal together, toured together, hiked together, been bemused together (there is still a bit of the Soviet mentality here) and helped each other in so many ways. We learned a lot about each other too -- the aforementioned young-at-heart woman turned out not to let anyone take her photo and the quiet man has been a career special ops military.

They really came thru for me the day we traveled near Zadar. Joes cousin David, who studied at the University of Zagreb and knows Croatia well, looked at my itinerary and said we might be within a few miles of Joe's grandparents birthplace -- a town called Kruseva. Lajos checked his GPS and found we were driving close by so, with the permission of the group, arranged a detour. The grandparents had left in the 1920s for a new life in America and never went back.

Our vans pulled into this teeny town and went right to the cemetery. Everyone spread out looking for names --Perica and Karmarko (grandmothers maiden name). Soon I heard "over here", "heres a name" "another" and "another". A man tending graves turned out to be Bustn Perica, probably a cousin! He also helped me pronounce our name -- sounds like Pur-eet-sia. It was a lovely moment.

After a busy day visiting the walled cities of Zadar and Sibenik, gorgeous towns filled with tourists and souvenir shops, we arrived at the favorite hotel of the trip - the Skradinski-buk in Skradin. It sits at the beginning of a long pedestrian area flanked by medieval churches at either end. The street winds around to a yacht harbor - reputed to be one of Bill Gates favorite spots. Its easy to see why. The town has just a few streets bordered by stone houses many of which have been turned into cafes and shops. And these weren't ordinary souvenir shops either, but hand-made and tasteful products which surprisingly made the town the shopping stop of the trip. From this vantage point we did day hikes to Krka Falls and a boat trip to the monastery at Visovac Island. Along the way we stopped at some beautiful (as described by our guide) sinkholes.

So on to Mostar in Bosnia -- the epicenter of terrible fighting some years back. The old town is a UNESCO site and its stone bridge their famous symbol. Our group was divided into two hotel properties both walking distance from the historic area. I was with the group in a pretty B&B and my room had a balcony overlooking a garden and a section of old ruins --very picturesque.

I can remember seeing the destruction of Mostar on TV and our guide revived these memories by showing us a documentary. It brought tears to our eyes. Mostar is now a jewel in Bosnias crown -- completely rebuilt, with a welcoming attitude, with lots of cobblestone streets and beautiful alleyways to explore.

Can it get better than this?? Yes it can!!!-- our next stop (4 nights with the group and two on my own) is magnificent Dubrovnik. We are based in Mlini, a fisherman's village about 5 miles south of the medieval city. It is quiet, with a nice beach, and small cafes. Our hotel, the 1935 Mlini Hotel (listed as 3-star, but should be 2-star) is partners with the Astoria Hotel where we were supposed to stay, but guess what, they moved us! Lajos worked with the front desk to get us the better rooms and I ended up on the third (top) floor with a balcony and sea view! Rooms are dismal, though, very 1960s. It is closing at the end of the month -- hopefully for renovation.

From this base, we did day trips into the walled city, to various islands and had ample free time. Our transportation is water taxis so we also get mini-cruises each day.

If its Sunday -- it must be Montenegro

One more country to add to our list! We set out early for Montenegro --the teeny country next door. We toured yet another walled city --Kotor-- had lunch, then began a long driving trip thru and over the mountains (with not a straight road the whole day) to Lovan National Park to take in the magnificent views. Tho the day was more sightseeing than active, we enjoyed every minute. After dinner back in the magnificently lit old city we made our way back over the border to Croatia (the border guard smiled and waived us through), getting in around midnight.

Holy Doormouse!

Did I mention we visited a doormouse museum in Slovenia? We thought Lajos was kidding, but he wasn't. This teeny little rat-like rodent provided food, fur and probably entertainment for the Slovenian forest people for centuries. The museum displayed traps, how the creatures lived and, of course, numerous stuffed doormice in various poses. The last display was real live doormice. Who needs another T-shirt? We all did and our group bought up almost their whole stock.

So ends Part One of this adventure. I'm on my own for two days before continuing to Munich and the Passion Play at Oberammergau. That will be a much different trip (don't laugh)-- 44-people-in-a-bus, all wearing name tags and looking forward to the next photo op. Im going to sit in the back and keep my mouth shut!

I've given Lajos my books on early explorations in the area (remember I had cut up my guidebooks) as he shares my interest in this genre. He took me over to the hotel I'll be using in about 8 days to leave a bag with stuff I don't need (boots, walking stick,etc).

## An Aside

For those of us interested in good guides and good travel companies, let me mention that Lajos has his own company:

Green Eye Ecotours and Images which is based in Hungary. He guides his own trips specializing in nature themes. He also handles Eldertreks trips in Egypt, Ethiopia and Libya. He is a good person to know about. I will get the website address and send it if you are interested.

So keep those good thoughts coming!

Esther

Sept 30, 2010

Hello from Esther in Dubrovnik -- Last days in Mlini

Though I missed the group, my last two days in Mlini were idyllic.

I made friends with the three ladies who live in lovely stone houses near the hotel and sell their crochet items under a 300 year old Sycamore tree. (note to Joe: guess what - our Christmas tree this year will be all white crochet angels and butterflies!) When the strap broke on my carry-bag, they conferenced over how it should be repaired. I soon had a heavy-duty needle and thread and an offer to sew it up. The families of Lela, Maggie and Maria have lived in Mlini for generations. I have a feeling that this tree has provided shade for centuries.

Maria rents a three room apartment in her home just steps from the beach, but there is no view. 40 euro in low season, 60 euro in high season. I have her email address if you ever want it.

There are no Elephants here.

With two days to fill I signed myself up for an all day boat trip to the Elaphite Islands. And guess why I chose this trip? Sounds like Elephant! My main goal being to get rid of my sock line. I was sunburnt before our boat reached Dubrovnik and there were 8 hours to go. I thought of it as an all day cruise and the boat hugged Dubrovnik's outer wall for a bit (great photos!) then we set out for our first island. It was a great day visiting three islands and having free time to explore them.

On my last morning I spent the last few hours walking around Mlini

Goodbye Lanterna Restaurant (great fish!)

Goodbye lady in the water taxi booth!

Goodbye fishermen!

Goodbye Lela, Maggie and Maria!

Goodbye internet cafe with the weird keyboard

I stuck a new memory card in my camera and left for Munich.

The airport transfer Lajos arranged was right on time. The plane to Zagreb (where I connected to Munich) was not. I was to have just over an hour between flights, and the first flight was 40 minutes late. Remember those old Avis commercials with OJ (in happier days) running thru the airport? That was me.

This is where all the good thoughts you've been sending came together. The cabin door shut behind me and as I buckled in the engines started. Made it! And so did my luggage!

Chris Edwards (note to Dave: a million thanks for finding this guy) waited for me at Munich Airport sign in hand, and took me to his big white stretch S500 Mercedes. The transfer to Garmish (first hotel of the tour) took almost two hours and Chris even gave me a drive-by tour of the downtown. In addition to airport transfer, he also offers Castle tours!

Soon I was a fluffy sunburnt traveler in the midst of pale-friendly-name badge wearing tourists and I looked just like them

Our German hotels were lovely (1 night at each) and we moved to a hotel about 5 blocks from the Oberammergau Theater and our big event, the Passion Play. It ran from 2:30 to 5pm, then a break for dinner, than back again from 8 to 11. It has a cast of hundreds, plus sheep, goats, camels, horses and doves. It is in German and we are given a thick book with the text in English so we can follow along. During the evening section, I shared my flashlight with the man next to me as it was too dark to follow along without it. Our group was in the 6th row just in from the aisle with a perfect sight line to the stage.

The reason I selected Collette Tours was for Oberammergau and Medjugorje - a Catholic pilgrimage place. It also visited some new places in Croatia - like Korcula, one of the many places Marco Polo was born. But it is basically a bus trip, with some long rides and lots of lunch and toilet stops

Gone are the picturesque backroads of the Eldertreks trip! No more picnic spots and butterfly stops and very little interaction with the guide. We drive on big highways and any views seen are a big plus.

I did enjoy the day at Lake Bled. Our first afternoon another girl and I walked to Villa Bled, President Titos home turned hotel. I sat at his desk and sent a quick email, then we snooped around and found the political murals the property is famous for. The next day, I walked 7km (about 5 miles) around the lake, stopping for lunch, fed the swans and talked with artists who had set up their wares.

Im Back!

Have now returned to wonderful Dubrovnik and in total have spent 10 days in this area. It would be easy to spend 10 more as there is so much to see with museums and islands to explore. Our group was moved from the Dubrovnik President Hotel with its private beach and sea view from every room, to its partner, The Vallemar. Everyone in our group got magnificent views of the parking lot! This comes as a great disappointment as the view is the main event here. I was able to pay the difference (actually very little) and move to a balcony room with a straight-on view. It has made all the difference!

We continue to be a huge group (45 people) jostling each other while umbrella toting local guides show us around. There was a bit of duplication with the Eldertreks trip, but enough new information to make it interesting. Today I took the water taxi to Catvat just for a change of pace. Tonight is the requisite dinner with local music and dancing girls. Two more days and this "highlights" trip is over. Then Im looking forward to a day of museum hopping in Zagreb.

Keep those good thoughts coming -- I have another close connection in Frankfurt!

Esther

October 3, 2010

Last Day in Zagreb

Well, its been a quick five weeks and I have to admit that Croatia is truly a lovely place. People really enjoy life here, with their beautiful public art, museums, great market, outdoor cafes, and good local public transportation that takes you anyplace you want to go.

We've spent a good amount of time on our Italian bus, and now the trip is over. As I've mentioned, the main event for me was the Passion Play at Oberammergau and everything else .. especially returning to Dubrovnik... was icing on the cake.

I've spent an extra day in Zagreb, where our tour ended this morning and what a day it has been. I visited the Sunday-only antiques market.. can show you the earrings I bought.. just ask, then THREE museums, a funicular ride .. the shortest one in the world -- 57 seconds--followed by lunch at a sidewalk cafe in the main square where I ran into Larry and Carol from the trip who were also staying an extra day. We decided to visit the cemetery which is considered a sculpture park, and ended the day at a public market. There is a yoga class at the hotel at 7,30, but Im too pooped to make it! (note to Preeth.. will do it on my own-I promise!)

Tomorrow is an easy day, I just have to get myself to the airport, then in 14 hours, I'm home. If all goes well, I have one and a half hours at Frankfurt airport -- so its an easy transfer.

Thank you for following along with me on this trip and sending those good thoughts!

Esther

October 6, 2010

And finally.....

I'll be you thought you were done reading about Croatia -- not just yet!

Remember I mentioned I did two different types of trips: 19 days with Eldertreks with a group of 12, very personalized, visiting small villages, driving back roads and hiking ; then 10 day highlights trip on a Collette bus tour with 45 people where the main event was Oberammergau (the only way I could get a ticket). These were very different types of trips but I knew what I was doing.

These are a few summary thoughts.

- Food in Croatia and Slovenia: very mediterranean and delicious- lots of fresh fish, seafood and salads and great desserts. Not one person on either trip got sick and the water is safe to drink.

• Accommodation : on the Eldertreks trip we stayed in family owned hotels and B&B's - my favorites being

1. Most charming local hotel -- Hotel Skradinski Buk in Skrodin which sits on a pedestrian street in a lovely village frequented by yachtsman. Rooms were OK, but the location, views and cafes were superb

2. Cutest: Pension Botticelli in Mostor, Bosnia. It had only five rooms and was steps from the old city. Every room had a small balcony or terrace overlooking the property's own subterranean archaeological site.

3. Best location: Mlini Hotel - a water-taxi ride from Dubrovnik. The rooms were icky (it was a 2-star place), but the balcony with the sea view was fabulous.

4. Worst hotels overall: probably any of the hotel on the Collette (bus) Trip. Because of the size of the group we stayed in cookie-cutter type of hotels. Also they put any singles in the teeniest of rooms.

I enjoy hotel reviews on tripadvisor.com so look for notes - I post as Pinky Parker (my maiden name)

• Best City: Dubrovnik, Dubrovnik, Dubrovnik! It also gets my votes for Best Cafes, Best Urban Trekking, Most Fun to Get To, Most Interesting History and Best Lemon Gelato.

Let me know when you are ready -- I have about 300 photos of the city to show you!

• Best Architecture - Ljubliana (capital of Slovenia) for its Baroque style buildings. After World War II, architect Joseph Plečnik redesigned the city to include bridges, river walks, public art, parks and pedestrian areas. It is visually a magnificent place.

• Best Cultural Attraction: the Passion Play at Oberammergau. Did I ever think I could sit through 6 hrs of a performance in German? Thankfully, I know the story! Though it is an amateur performance, it is magnificent complete with intermittent tableaux of bible scenes (so this is where "Pageant of the Masters" got the idea!). It had everything: grand music, huge sets, powerful themes and a cast of hundreds, Of special note, the flight attendant on my Lufthansa flight on September 1st played Mary Magdalene in the performance I saw on September 24th!

• Best Hiking: Plitvice National Park with its 16 lakes, thick primary forest and well-marked walking trails. Between my two visits I completed "Route H" - a total of a 7 hour walk!



- Best Look/See shopping: Sunday Antique Market in Zagreb. If you like communist era memorabilia, costume jewelry, books, antique linens and old furniture, don't miss this market next time in Zagreb. And you can bargain to the death.
- Best Personal Moment: visiting Krusheva, where Joe's great grand parents emigrated from and having my travel companions help me find names on tombstones
- Weirdest Borders and back roads: zipping in/out of Bosnia Herzegovina on its irregular border with Croatia. There were times we didn't even know we had crossed into another country.
- Best Border Crossing: when returning from Medugorgie, Bosnia to Croatia at the official border crossing, our bus driver told the guard we were Italian pilgrims on pilgrimage. We were waived thru!

Some of you have asked for information about the Eldertreks guide: His name is

Lajos Nemeth-Boka and his company is GreenEye Ecotours & Images, based in Hungary. He guides Eldertreks trips in Romania, Egypt, Jordan and Ethiopia. In addition his own company offers trips also. After talking with him, I would love to visit Romania "before it changes" as he said this is the last place in Europe where there is still authentic village life.

So there you have it -- Croatia and Slovenia are great places to visit. Thanks again for following along with me.

Esther