

*Emails from Viking River Cruise and*

*Romania/Hungary with Eldertreks*

*May 2 - June 2, 2012*

May 13, 2012

Ahhhh.... Lufthansa! I've always had a good experience flying this airline. They seem to separate their planes into smaller cabins and the first time I flew with them in the early 1990's (on those big, huge 747's), I was in a cabin with just 6 rows. With the leather seats and excellent service, I thought I was in business class!

Well, they are still good and now that I use my miles for business class (thank you to those who have helped me with this), they offer a superb experience. Configuration is 2-2-2 and as luck would have it, I had an empty next to me all the way from Chicago to Munich; then from Munich to Budapest!

I had signed up for Eldertreks' 19 day itinerary to Romania and Hungary that starts in Bucharest and ends in Budapest, then I noticed an itinerary for a Danube river cruise from Budapest to Bucharest. What a nice combination and a way to experience a different kind of trip. In all, I'm traveling for a month.

The Viking river trip just ended and was a hoot. With about 140 passengers, it was fully booked. I arranged for a single cabin (paid lots extra) and it took awhile to adjust to the teeny, tiny

accommodation. It was former crew quarters at the bottom of the ship (my porthole was at the water line), close to the engines and, as a result, the air conditioning never worked properly giving me a daily complimentary sauna.



The best part of the trip was meeting other passengers. There was a huge contingent from Hawaii and lots of people who were seasoned river cruisers. There was the usual sprinkling of interesting characters. There was always someone to talk to and you could sit at any table you wished for meals.

*What's not to enjoy on a leisurely cruise down the Danube! Wonderful food, interesting towns to visit and some nice traveling companions.*

I met two lovely ladies who had rooms next to me and we ended up enjoying each others company for a lot of the meals.

I call this part of Eastern Europe the “land of the squished spider” as that is what the cyrillic letter in the middle of the word for “ladies” looks like.

I enjoyed Budapest (Hungary), Belgrade (Serbia) and Bucharest (Romania) the most. Each is a vibrant, cultural city with interesting museums, nice pedestrian shopping areas and a cafe culture. Other stops were small towns along the Danube - Osijek (Croatia), that suffered lots during the war and still shows it, Vidin ( Bulgaria) not a whole lot to see here, and Russe (Bulgaria) for Veliko Tarnovo and Arabansai, small, charming towns I visited on a previous trip. As expected we were sometimes herded into shopping stops.

Lectures on board were excellent - often with local experts. I never made it to the 9pm entertainment or shows as by the time I got myself organized in my teeny, tiny little room, it was time to go to bed. I did make the Dracula lecture though - wouldn't have missed it!

What I enjoyed least was the bus situation for the land excursions. They were crowded and we traveled in “packs” of 50! Thankfully the ship issues “listening devices” so you can always hear the local guides, even if you can't see him/her. And this allows you to walk away from the crowd and explore a bit but still listen to the commentary.

Would I do another river cruise? Not for awhile. It wasn't boring and there was always something to do (excursions, lectures, meals and tea-time), but I enjoy being more active and seeing more off-the-beaten-track areas.

The river trip is over and I am now in Bucharest and staying at the Athenee Palace Hilton - beautifully situated in a historic square with the National Art Museum across the street. I don't plan on checking out until the last possible minute as I love my roomy corner room with its balcony and gleaming marble bathroom. This is the hotel that in communist days every room and every phone was bugged and most of the workers belonged to the KGB and spied on guests and each other. Hilton took it over in the 1980's, refurbished it beautifully and (hopefully) removed all the bugs.

I move to the nearby Capitol Hotel and join the Eldertreks group of 14 tomorrow. Am looking forward to it very much.

Keep sending those good thoughts my way and I'll do the same for you.

Esther

May 22, 2012

Hi: a travel update for you -- hope you enjoy it!

## **In Bucharest -- Show Me the Good Parts.....**

The concierge at the Hilton (where the river cruise ended) smiled when I asked how far the Capitol Hotel was. Not far, but because of my luggage, but he advised I would have to take a taxi. It cost 15 lev (\$5) and the driver grumbled all the way.

Want to experience pre-revolution Bucharest -- come to the Capitol Hotel. The facade is lovely belle-epoch style (built 1901), but step inside and be transported to 1955. Not the interestingly retro 1955, but the ugly one. Over-stuffed brown velour furniture, ash trays all around, surly, unhelpful service. But.... location, location, location. The hotel sits at the edge of the old city with its winding, cobblestone streets and some of the best architecture that Ceausescu didn't destroy.

The one saving grace is that one facade of the hotel faces a magnificent military building with its lovely fountain. Luckily I had one of those rooms, which softened the blow quite a bit.

The receptionist was strange. When I asked her which way to walk, she told me to go the corner and turn right. This led me into an area with derelict buildings, liquor stores, cheap discount stores and not very helpful looking people. I was terribly disappointed and returned to my room absolutely hating Bucharest. I later learned that if I had gone in any other direction, I would have come across the old quarter, interesting pedestrian areas or shopping areas. Do not ask for advice from this reception desk!

Having the next day free, I got on the computer and looked for an all day tour that would take me someplace far away, anyplace. Everything I found would later be included on my Eldertreks trip.... darn. But I ran across a group of free walking tours ([www.guided-bucharest.com](http://www.guided-bucharest.com)). I looked at the clock -- I was too late for their 7pm tour. Luckily the site had contact info, so I called hoping to engage a private guide for the next day. Smart move.

Alex picked me up at 10am for an extended walking tour. It was to last 4-5 hours and ended up lasting 8 hours as we stopped for snacks, lunch and to do some banking. There is nothing I like better than a walk-with-me-talk-with-me guide. He was excellent. We were in back alleys looking at medieval churches. These are small gems sometimes surrounded by ugly soviet-style office blocks, through every street and arcade in the old city some so off the beaten track that we were the only tourists, I heard stories parents told him about communism days ( Alex was about 25), and his thoughts for the future of Romania. It was a great day and gave me a much different impression of the city.

Just as I returned to my room, my phone rang. It was Lajos, our Eldertreks guide. Problems! Our orientation and welcome dinner was to be in an hour, but he was still 150 miles away having trouble with the vans. Can you arrange the dinner, making sure everyone has everything they want to eat and drink? He also asked me to do some other things as one participant wouldn't arrive until midnight. So I had to run downstairs, talk to the maitre'd, look over the menu (all in Romanian, of course, so I had no idea what it said), arrange the tables. Then I got myself ready and went downstairs.

## **My name is Esther -- I am not your guide.....**

My usual modus operandi on a group tour is not to say a whole lot for the first three days and just listen and observe. Now I was thrust into this unwanted role. I welcomed everyone, explained where





Lajos was, helped people with their food orders and thrust as many drinks upon them as they wanted. Even though I said I was not their guide and just a fellow participant (several times!), people started telling me about their medical problems, expectations for the trip and asked questions about the weather.

All was much better the next day when Lajos (guide) arrived and I could go off duty.

*Lajos Nemeth is our excellent guide. He is a biologist and a butterfly expert. During one of our nature walks, he shows us an interesting species of snake*

### **Transylvania 6-5000.....**

Romanians have a love-hate relationship with Bram Stoker. Yes, he put Transylvania on the literary and tourist map, but he also fictionalized one of their well-respected military heroes who saved Transylvania from the dreaded Turks. Cruel, ruthless ... but he did the job.

We spent three nights in Brasov the capitol of Transylvania - a fabulous, lively town with pedestrian areas and lots of museums, churches and things to do. We visited palaces, monasteries, including Bran Castle, where the book "Dracula" was set. We then moved to Odorheiu Secuiesc the center of the Saxon area of Romania and tromped around these lovely Churches and more fortresses.



*A lovely village in Transylvania*

We also visited Viscri (a UNESCO Heritage town), where Prince Charles has a home.

### **I can see the Ukraine From My Window.....**

We are now in Bucovina - about 50 miles from the Ukraine border. This is the land of medieval painted monasteries. They are magnificent, with frescoes both inside and out. Some display special colors which have never been duplicated. My favorite is Voronet Blue, made with lapis lazuli. We have an excellent local guide (he is mentioned in the Rough Guide as the best in the area) who tells us all about them in great detail. For most of us, the more the better. We visited three today and do



three more tomorrow. This location is pretty far from everything else we are doing so it entails long drives to and from. Though everything in Romania is pretty interesting, these are the true jewels of the country. When under communist rule, the government described them as medieval art museums and thankfully did not destroy them. They now function as they are supposed to, as Orthodox churches holding regular services.



*The gorgeous painted churches of Bucovina (UNESCO sites) are the main event in this part of Romania. They are probably the greatest collection of medieval religious art in Europe. Many of the churches are still consecrated and offer religious services on a regular basis.*





I'm enjoying the group - most are very well traveled and are good conversationists. All meals are included, so we are getting to know each other well.

I hope to send one more email -- probably from Budapest.

Meanwhile keep those good thoughts coming my way and I'll to the same for you!

Esther

June 2, 2012

Hi: the adventure is over and I'm on my way home so am happy to send you the final words of this trip to Romania and Hungary.

### Romania!

When I traveled with Lajos Nemeth (guide) on the Croatia trip, he advised traveling to Romania before it changes. He said this the last place to see the old Europe and he was right. Travel ten minutes out of any city and you are in the countryside. Farmers pull their produce and wares by horse-wagon, you see colorful gypsies on the road, and most traffic jams are caused by herds sheep or cows led by shepherds.



*Horse shoes are still made by hand, and local crafts are available everywhere in Romania.*



My favorite places in Romania were:

1. Brasov, a gorgeous and walkable UNESCO city full of historic homes, small museums and large pedestrian areas
2. Bucovina for its magnificent painted monasteries all tended by sweet-faced nuns who have made it their life's work to care for these medieval works of art
3. Rimetea - a quirky little town that was the center for our hikes. Our group was split up and stayed in 3 different pensions in private homes as the town has no hotel. There was only one wi-fi signal in the whole town (came from the museum whose satellite dishes looked like they were trying to contact mars) and the best place to catch it was outside the towns only bar

We spent two weeks in Romania and there are still places to see. But the itinerary called for us to travel overland to Hungary, visiting castles, fortresses and parks along the way.



*Each family in the Saxon town of Viscri, had a small room within the town citadel. In case of invasion, this was where the family could safely stay. In later years, these rooms became family storage areas.*





*On our way to Budapest, we stopped at a farm for a horse-riding demonstration on magnificent Hungarian horses. The cowboys wear special shoes that help them stay on the horses' flanks.*

## **Budapest! .....**

What a City! It is beautiful, it is vibrant filled with great shopping, good hotels and wonderful restaurants. The thing to do here is to visit a "spa" as the city has about 110 thermal springs. One member of our group, Louise, had stayed at the Gellert Hotel and Spa previously and led a group of 6 of us on an off-the-itinerary adventure. It is an amazing place. The Gellert Hotel is about 100 years old and the grand dame of spa culture. It has 7 pools of various temperatures including a wave pool. Some pools are co-ed and others are single sex. The decor is turn-of-the-century elegant. I must admit that the women-only section was like walking in to a bad B movie as it is swim-suit optional. But it was an experience! The six of us returned to the hotel pruned and relaxed. ([www.gellertbath.com](http://www.gellertbath.com))

## **The Poet from Paraguay**

There was so little free time on this trip that if you wanted to do something on your own, you had to give up a group activity. That is exactly what I did on Day 18. I was tired of long drives and the activity a trip to a National Park was two hours away. I stayed in Budapest and bought a ticket on the Hop-On-Hop-Off bus. It was a good decision.

This Hop-on bus is the city's best bargain. Cost is \$20 for two days and it even includes a one hour boat ride. It stops at 14 places of interest and they kind of run on time. I used the bus as a taxi to get to museums, take the boat ride (can't get enough of this lovely Danube!) and to make some shopping stops.

Not knowing exactly where the bus stopped, I asked a couple sitting on a bench. Yes this was the stop. We exchanged pleasantries. After a bit they started talking to each other..... in Spanish! I chimed in and we had a great conversation. We ran into each other off and on for the next two days. We shared information on what we were seeing and doing and in our conversations I learned she is Renee Ferrer, a multi-published Paraguayan novelist and poet whose works have been translated into French and Italian!

### **“99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall....”**

What I enjoyed least about the trip was the van rides. Eldertreks uses two 8 passenger vans for “flexibility”. But we rarely needed to be “flexible”. They were not that comfortable, and if you were sitting in the back seat you could not see in front of you due to the high headrests. The only good seat was the front seat by the driver and the middle seat in the next row. With 13 people (some who never grasped how to rotate), these seats were hard to come by. And there were some VERY long drives. Bucovina (home of the fabulous painted monasteries) is remote which is one of the reasons they survived the communist era. So... if you are thinking of an Eldertreks trip, inquire as to the mode of transportation. The two vans might be good for 10 people (5 in each vehicle, leaving an empty space in-between seats), but any more and you would want a bus.

### **Can You Hear Me Now???**

Romania and Hungary are very well connected there is free wi-fi everywhere and where there isn't, there is an ethernet connection. I bought an ethernet cable for \$1 though any hotel would loan one. I carried an international phone to call Joe, but it was much easier to email.

So its been a month of contrasts. From the leisurely Viking River Cruise down the Danube to the tromp around Romania and Hungary; from staying in 5-star hotels to no-star pensions where no one speaks English, from being in a group of 150 people, to just 13 -- its been a lovely adventure.

In the next few days I'll post hotel reviews on [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com)

Thanks so much for reading these emails and for following along. Please keep me posted on your own adventures as you know that I like nothing more than reading, talking about, thinking about, planning or dreaming about travel!

All the best

Esther

(I must tell you that this email is being brought to you from 38,000 feet in the air as the man across the aisle gave me the password for 60 min of free in-flight wi-fi !)