

We really did have a wonderful time visiting your country. Everything that Miroslav did for us was outstanding!

We arranged a private tour with Panacomp Wonderland Travel Serbia. The tour price was 2975 Euros each (not including air). This included all breakfasts and dinners. Plus many mid-day activities included “snacks” (in Serbia this means a hearty lunch). The accommodations were fantastic. We stayed in few conventional hotels. Twice we stayed in operating monasteries.

We arrived in Belgrade around noon on Saturday June 10th. We were met by our tour guide Miroslav Djurcjanski who drove us to our hotel, the Moskva. The hotel was perfect. It is over 100 years old (The name has nothing to do with the Communist era.) but has been recently renovated. It is right in the center of downtown Belgrade. It seems to be THE place to stay. They have pictures of famous guests on the wall, and one of them is Richard Nixon. When we arrived, we found that they were having a classic car show on the street beside the hotel, and that street was closed to traffic, so it was ideal for walking around the area. We ate dinner in the open air section of the hotel restaurant by the sidewalk, and went to bed early.

The next day, after an excellent buffet breakfast, Miroslav took us to the Belgrade fortress. Belgrade is at the confluence of the Danube and Sava rivers, so that the fortress is protected on two sides by water. For that reason, there has been a fortress there since before the birth of Christ, and some of the existing fortifications were built by the Romans. We walked by the orthodox cathedral, and they were baptizing a six-year old boy, so we watched the ceremony. Then we had beer and rakija (more about rakija later) at the Question Mark pub across the street from the cathedral. This is the oldest pub in the city, having been operating under the same name for almost 200 years. The story is that the owners wanted to name it the Cathedral Pub, but the city government forbade it. So the owners put up a sign with just a question mark, and that sign is still there. We stopped at the Temple of St. Sava. The initial construction began in 1939 but was stopped by World War II and the Communist era. The exterior was completed in 2004. The crypt was completed in 2016, and it is covered with exquisite mosaics. The main interior is now being worked on. When finished this will be one of the largest orthodox churches in the world, with space for 10,000 worshippers. We had dinner in a seafood restaurant near the Danube. A group of young dancers in traditional costumes danced for us. We had local beer (which is quite good) with the dinner. We are particular about wine, but there is much less variation in beer, so we usually drink beer in an unfamiliar area.

Now, about rakija: it is the national drink of Serbia. It is a distilled liquor made from any kind of fruit. Plums, apricots, and grapes are the most popular. (Rakija made from grapes is called grappa in Italy.) Often it is flavored with herbs after distillation. Traditionally, in Serbia, it should be home-made. I asked Miroslav what people that live in the city do for home-made rakija. He said “They find a relative who lives in the country”.

The next day we left Belgrade and drove along the Danube to the ruins of a Roman town. Then we saw a spectacular narrow section of the Danube that was called the “iron gate”; the Golubac fortress that controlled road traffic along the side of the Danube; and a site where a stone-age society had lived for centuries, 9000 years ago. We also saw an open-pit coal mine that “feeds” an adjacent electrical power plant. It was awesome. The pit was about a ½-mile square with 6-8 huge machines 8-10 stories high and as long as a football field feeding the earth on top of the coal, and then the coal, into endless conveyer systems. We spent the night in a resort on the bank of the Danube, and had a nice dinner in the hotel restaurant.

On Tuesday, we drove to the Rajac winery complex. This appears to be a village of small stone houses. However each “house” is a winery and no one lives in the “village”. We had lunch at one winery along with white, rose, and red (which they call “black”) wine, all of which were very good. There was so much food that we couldn’t eat it all. Warm freshly baked bread, a salad made of pickled wild mushrooms, various kinds of home-made cheese, two types of cold smoked ham, and more. They also served us 21-year old cognac, which was also very good. At the same time, some locals came by to buy wine (in plastic gallon jugs). They ended up eating snacks too. Then we visited the ruins of a huge Roman fortified villa that was to be the retirement residence of a Roman emperor who unfortunately died before it was completed. At the Roman villa we had more food made by a Vlach (a Serbian minority related to Romanians) woman. She had made small cheese and herb pies as well as a jelly-roll-type dessert made with a plum sauce. Again, we couldn’t come close to eating it all.

The next day, our first stop was the Zica monastery, built in 1203-1217. It was heavily damaged during World War II, but it has been since rebuilt. From here we drove along the Ibar River Gorge. We stopped to look up at the Maglic Fortress. It is an intimidating structure (now abandoned) hundreds of feet up on top of a hill that controls the river gorge. Further into the mountains, past the gorge, is the Studenica Monastery complex. This is one of the best-known monasteries in Serbia. This complex has three churches inside a fortified wall. The largest and most important church is the Virgin Mary Church, built in 1183. It has frescoes that are considered classic examples of art from that era. During the Ottoman time the Turks repeatedly ransacked the complex, but it has been since renovated. We spent the night in one of the monastery rooms, and it was simple but very pleasant. We had supper and breakfast outside on the veranda. Meal service was like a restaurant with a very limited menu, but the food was good.

On Thursday, we first visited the Gradac monastery, and then drove up into the mountains and had coffee at a small restaurant near the top. Then we drove down to Nova Pavlica church, built at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Our last stop was at a convent in a small town outside Raska. During the war with Kosovo in 1999, nuns from Kosovo fled to Serbia. Six of those nuns now live and work here, and a large building was built to house them. The upper floor is divided into work rooms. Mother Minodoro met us and gave us chocolate cake and coffee. Then she showed us around and showed us what the nuns did. The nuns paint new icons or embroider church vestments using a computer driven sewing machine. Mother Midodoro taught herself how to operate this sewing machine. She has been doing embroidery for sixteen years and can produce exquisitely complex pieces. The nuns sell the artwork and embroidery to pay expenses. The photo below shows my wife Jeanne, Mother Minodoro and Miroslav. That night we ate in a traditional restaurant filled with antiques. The owner of the restaurant has built three rooms below the restaurant, and we spent the night in one of those rooms.



We then drove up into the hills into a national park. We spent the night at a small resort in the park, and had supper at the resort restaurant. We had slow-cooked beef and potatoes, plus hot fresh bread, local cheese, and the standard Serbian salad of tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, cheese with oil and vinegar dressing. Excellent! But no beer – we were migrating into the Muslim part of Serbia, and it was Ramadan.

The next day, we visited St. Peter Church, built around the 9<sup>th</sup> century on the site of a 4<sup>th</sup> century Roman church. Inside the church are frescoes from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Our next stop was Djurdjevi Stupovi (St. George) monastery, built in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century. Four monks live there now. We then drove to Novi Pazar (new market), which is mostly Muslim today. It is a bustling town. We stopped to have lemonade before going to the Strari Ras Museum, which is in a 19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman building. This small museum has a

nice collection of clothes, furniture, weapons, and implements from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Our last stop was Sopocani Monastery in which twelve monks live. The church was built by King Stefan Uros in 1263, and the narthex and tower were done by his grandson. The church was badly damaged by the Turks, however many of the frescoes survived. The colors are still brilliant even though they were exposed to the elements for two hundred years.

Saturday, we drove up into the mountains south of Novi Pazar on the road toward Kosovo. We visited Crna Reka ("Black River") monastery (see photo below) which is a cave church. The caves were occupied by monks as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The church was built into the cave in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There are four floors to this tiny church. Now there are only two monks. Today there is a new building where the monks live (on the right in the photo). On our way to Prijepolje, we stopped to see a couple who are friends with Miroslav. They have a small farm with six friendly cows. We walked across their field to see the river which is down at the bottom of a deep valley along the side of their property. We also saw some rare black vultures, which have been rescued from near extinction. We then had bread, cheese, meat, and tomatoes. (The wife complained to Miroslav that if he had given her more notice, she could have baked fresh bread.) We then drove to our final destination: Mileseva monastery. This monastery was built 1219-1235. The special feature of this monastery is the famous fresco of the White Angel on the grave of Christ (Google "White Angel Fresco"). Today the monastery is a convent of about a dozen nuns. We stayed the night there, and again, the room was simple (although quite roomy) but comfortable. Because the convent doesn't serve meals, we had trout at a nearby restaurant that breeds trout.



Because the convent doesn't offer breakfast, the next morning we drove into Novi Pazar and bought fresh warm cheese, meat, and potato pies with yogurt drinks at a bakery. The bakery had tables both inside and outside for people to sit and eat. Then we drove to the border with Montenegro. As we were driving between the borders we drove across a river to a small monastery, Kumanica, now a convent. The church is built in front of a large cave. Monks were here as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century. After we crossed the border into Montenegro, we followed the steep-walled Tara River gorge. The river split, and we followed the Moraca River to the monastery of the same name. The church was first built in 1252. There is also a small chapel next to the church that is filled with frescoes. We then drove through the mountains until we reached Ostrog monastery (see below). Originally it was a cave where St. Basil lived. Many pilgrims come here now to St. Basil's grave for healing, because St. Basil was known for his healing powers. We then drove to our hotel in Lovcen National Park. We had supper and breakfast in the hotel restaurant beside a small fast river. At supper we watched the cows (and heard their bells) as they returned, unattended, from the pastures. Dinner was slow-cooked lamb with fresh bread that looked like inflated pita bread, and salad.



We drove up the mountain to the Njegos Mausoleum. This mausoleum was built in 1970 for Petar II Petrovic Njegos (a famous Montenegrin poet and philosopher 1813-1851). From the parking lot we climbed 461 steps to the top. The views are spectacular. We then drove down to an old smoke house to have ham, cheese, bread, and beer. The place was built in 1881 and is still owned and operated by the same family. This area specializes in prosciutto ham. There is a big Italian influence in that area. "Montenegro" is Italian for "Black Mountain". The official name of that country is Crna Gora ("Black Mountain" in their Slavic language.) Then we drove down to Centinje, the old capital of Montenegro. We went through the palace of King Nicholas I, which is now a museum. We then drove down to Kotor Bay and our hotel. Our hotel "Splendido" (named after a famous sailing ship from Montenegro) was right on the bay. That first night, we walked to a nearby seafood restaurant for supper.

We started the next day with a tour of the old town of Kotor. Our tour began at the main gate built in 1555 when the town was under Venetian rule. Kotor's fortifications were started in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and by the 14<sup>th</sup> century the fort reached up the mountain to an elevation of 260m above sea level. It is still primarily intact. There are fourteen churches and monasteries in the old town, ranging in age from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some are catholic and some orthodox. There are nine palaces built between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many were owned by wealthy sailing merchants, because Kotor was a major seaport. It has a wonderful protected bay and good access to the interior of the Balkans. Today most of these palaces are museums, gift shops, government buildings, or schools. In the afternoon we took a boat ride to see Our Lady of the Rocks church. It was built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century on an island where, according to legend, an image of the Madonna was found. That night, we ate in the hotel, and the hotel set up a table for us right at the water's edge on the dock.

Wednesday, we left the hotel, driving up into Orijen National Park, and stopped at Black Lake in Durmitor National Park. Our next stop was to see Hussein Pasha Mosque in Pljevlja. Our map noted "No Tourists" by the mosque, but the man responsible for the mosque seemed happy to see us, and he and Miroslav had a good time chatting. This mosque was built in 1569 and is beautiful inside. Just beyond Pljevlja we crossed back into Serbia. We were still in the mountains but they had changed. In Montenegro, they were limestone and nearly barren. Now they were covered with trees. We stopped at the town of Zlatidor, which is a ski resort. From here it was a short drive to our next "hotel". The owner rents out small cabins. Our cabin was built 100 years ago by the owner's grandfather. It had two bedrooms, kitchen, and bath. We had supper and breakfast there with the owner and Miroslav, and the food was wonderful. Supper was Serbian salad, zucchini moussaka, slow-cooked veal and sour cream, and for desert: lemon custard

with wild strawberries (and rakija). Breakfast was hot home-made fritters, yogurt, and home-made cheese, two kinds of home-made jelly, coffee, and caymak (a butter-like spread).

After breakfast we stopped at a small village, Terzica, that had twelve small houses built through the years by one family. This family makes traditional costumes which they sell to dancers. The boy and girl of the family (about 20 years old and quite proficient in English) are part of a dance team. After seeing all the houses, we had a "snack" of baked potato with caymak, fried breaded sweet red peppers, salad, and plum rakija. As we continued through the mountains back toward Belgrade, we stopped in a small town, Topola. There is a large church there which was built by Peter Karadjerdje in 1910. The interior is entirely covered with mosaics that are copies of ancient frescoes from churches in Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo.

After we checked back into the Moskva Hotel in Belgrade, we went to the Black Turtle, Miroslav's favorite pub. The tour had scheduled a "farewell dinner", but we had to get up very early to catch a 6:00 AM flight, plus after the "snacks", we weren't very hungry. We had craft beer, salad, and fried cheese, which was delicious and just the amount of food that we wanted.

The next day we flew home, and got back late afternoon with no problems.

I would encourage anyone to go to Serbia. It is beautiful, historic, safe, clean (you can drink the water), and they like Americans. When Miroslav would say something about "Americanos" doors opened. Plus prices are half of prices in Italy and Germany. And if you go, our tour and guide could not have been better.

Dave and Jeanne, June 2017