Cruising the Danube River:

Prior to the coronavirus, I made two trips with my former wife cruising the Danube River. As a young Army officer, I had spent two tours in Germany, in the early 60's and again in the early 70's. At the time almost all the countries we visited on these two trips were off limits to me since they were behind the Iron Curtain. Although I had travelled extensively through-out western Europe, I had no idea of what the east was like.

I will focus on the second trip as it covered a more diverse territory. So, let's start in Bucharest, the former capital of Wallachia and Romania since 1862. It is a beautiful city with broad tree-lined boulevards, well-kept parks and a mixture of architectural styles with Neo-Classical 19th century structures. One can still see the bullet scars on the buildings in the city left by the Romanian Revolution in 1989 when the brutal dictator Nicole Ceausescu was overthrown, tried, convicted of genocide and executed by firing squad along with his wife.

On a side-trip to Transylvania, we visited Bran Castle, built in 1377 and often referred to as Dracula's Castle. Prince Vlad Tepes, the 15th century ruler who became known as "Vlad the Impaler" for his practice of impaling his enemies used the castle as his headquarters as he fought off the Ottoman Turks who threatened the kingdom at the time. In 1920, the people of Brasov who owned the castle at the time offered it as a gift to Queen Maria of Romania who made it her residence and years later transformed it into the Royal Summer Residence. After the second world war, the Communists made it into a museum and the royal family was forced to leave the country. After the fall of the Soviet Union and years of legal proceedings, it is now back in the hands of its heirs and has become a big tourist attraction.

After three nights in a resort in Sinai located in the Carpathian Mountains, we were off to the Black Sea. The weather was beautiful as we arrived at Constanta, a Romanian seaport that is the oldest inhabited city in the country. There we saw Roman ruins dating back some 2500 years to when it was a Roman colony. This was an "aha" moment for me. I had never fully understood why my high school Latin teacher included Romanian as a romance language. It didn't seem to be in the right area. But then, look at a map and see how close the Black Sea is to the Mediterranean. Then I had another exciting experience, wading in the waters of the Black Sea on a beautiful, sunny day with a calm beach. What an experience for a kid who grew up in the arid Texas panhandle.

After boarding our river cruise ship, we transited the canal from the sea to the Danube river. (I have to digress: At this very moment as I sit at my computer writing, the "Blue Danube" by Johann Strauss II just began playing on my radio. What timing! Now back to my narrative). Our first stop was Vidin, Bulgaria where we visited Baba Vida, a medieval fortress that was the city's main defense in the Middle Ages. For several hours and through the night, we cruised the Iron Gates, a joint 1960's project between Yugoslavia and Romania that raised the level of the Danube and tamed the wild raging river with a series of hydroelectric dams. This led to our next stop in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia (and former capital of Yugoslavia). An interesting site we visited there was the Tito Memorial and tomb with exhibits honoring

Marshal Josip Broz Tito, the former ruler of Yugoslavia. I was amazed at the number of world leaders who attended his funeral as noted in the photographs on the wall

Continuing up river, we left the ship at Vukovar, Croatia, the site of the worst artillery shelling of the Croatian-Serbian war. Again, one could see the pockmarked buildings showing the scars of that war. We then travelled via motor coach to visit a couple of smaller towns before returning to the ship farther up river. Along the way, we stopped to take pictures of a stork standing in its next built atop a light pole.

Late on our last evening we reached Budapest, Hungary. The views of the Parliament Building dominating Pest on the east bank of the river and the Castle high on the hill in Buda overlooking the river from the west bank were beautifully lit-up at night. We could hardly wait to see it all by daylight.

The next morning, we toured the twin cities, Buda and Pest and visited Heroes' Square with equestrian statues of the ninth-century Magyar leaders who conquered the region. Then we crossed the Danube and visited Castle Hill, where the Royal Palace has been wonderfully restored after being destroyed during World War II. Across the river we saw the Parliament building in all its glory.

On our own time, most of us we went to the famous Covered Market, a huge enclosed two-level open market place where one can purchase souvenirs, Hungarian foods, T-shirts, jewelry , clothing and you name it. An amusing event took place as we waited for our group to assemble for transportation back to the boa. A little lady sidled up to me and whispered rather loudly: "The rumor is that you are on this trip with your ex-wife." I put on an air of indignance and replied very gruffly: "That's no rumor, It's a fact."

Unfortunately, our trip had to come to an end. Early the next morning we were transported to the airport for the return home.