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Snippets from the Balkans

By George Kun

Traveling through the Balkans can be a truly hedonistic experience, a sensory feast for the eyes, palate and ears. The beauty of the landscape, beaches, islands, mountains, forests, lakes, rivers is overwhelming. For the sea food lovers, the paradise is right there, because the mix of freshness, sophistication of the preparation and taste of the food is unparalleled. The region has some of the best vines in Europe, and that goes along with good music and singing, which is also a very common part of a local dining experience.





Both Croats and Montenegrins are hospitable people, easy to please and also easy to anger, which tend to go hand in hand. Being open minded is a helpful approach anywhere but in the Balkans it can make the difference between a joyful and a very miserable travel experience.

1) There is an abundance of cold water in Croatia, and in most public establishments like cafes, restaurants, beach showers, washrooms and even homes, one can get it from the faucet in two ways: by either turning on the cold water blue knob, or the hot water red knob. Your choice, same results.

2) Everybody smokes. That includes doctors, health workers, and public servants on duty. It's happening at all times, everywhere, including closed spaces like cars. If you are not a smoker, it can be tough. Asking anybody not to smoke or blow the smoke in your face is considered in poor taste, and impolite. Any interference with the smoking habit or routine can quickly deteriorate the cosy atmosphere of a get-together since the non-smoker is seen as the pretentious and annoying one. There does not seem to be any public awareness of the ravages of smoking, nor any trend or desire to curb it. It would go up in smokes, anyway.

3) Oh yeah... I almost forgot to write about napkins. Napkins are customarily not present on serving tables in restaurants and cafes, nor do they accompany a soft drink or coffee when brought by a waitress, or waiter. Strangely enough, sugar and a small square of chocolate will often be placed on the drink plate, but never a napkin. I found that asking for a napkin can be very irritating to the server in a cafe or restaurant, and if eventually brought, it will be done with visible resentment and even a smirk. It is not very different when having a meal at a local friend's house. You'll get a napkin if you ask for one, but not without a comment suggesting jokingly that you are a spoiled brat with weird western habits.

I successfully solved this minor inconvenience by always carrying napkins with me everywhere and using them as discreetly as possible. Once, just for entertainment purposes I asked a waitress in a café to sell me a napkin and she told me that they simply don't have and don't carry them because there are only drinks being served in the establishment, and not food. I nodded respectfully while wiping from my upper lip, some rich milk foam stuck there from the delicious latte I was drinking.

4) The food and wines are usually very tasty and the portions are rather large when you eat out, so there is seldom any good reason to complain. If you are a regular, or know the owner, or come with local friends it always helps in that the service is better, the servings are bigger and the quality is top. If you are a quiet and low key tourist, all the above attributes diminish, but rarely below "adequate".

On the other hand, if you are not a quiet and low key tourist, and dare to make negative comments about anything or outright complain, things can get very unpleasant or even dangerous. The concept of "the customer is always right" is totally alien to the catering personnel in the Balkans and the complainer will be usually rudely reprimanded or ignored. I witnessed a scene when a Dutch tourist complained about the wine (may have been too sweet, too warm, not the one ordered, who knows...) and the waiter asked him to stop talking nonsense and with a raised voice said: "This is a very good wine" and left. There was no opportunity for any accommodation, and the bill had to be paid in full. As I found out, no tip was left either but in Croatia tipping is generally very low anyway.

I never believed some of the extremely unsavoury stories I heard about retaliations by scolded cooks and waiters in some restaurants, until I got them first hand from some friends in the catering business. Most common are adding powerful laxatives to the food that would turn you literally into a washroom prisoner next day. Even worse, ceremonial lacing of the food with human bodily fluids, originating from both upper and lower "spouts" is not uncommon punishment for "unruly and nasty" guests.

5) Everybody drinks and drives. Beer is a very popular drink but wine is never missing from lunch or dinner and is an integral part of the meal. I have never seen after meal driving plans interfering with prior drinking, and people don't seem to drink less because of having to drive.

6) Driving habits and style on all roads and for all ages are truly mind boggling everywhere in the Balkans. Driving takes place on sidewalks, on very narrow "pedestrians only" streets, or a couple of inches from people sitting in outdoor cafes. I took these pictures of the horrified diners facing the young king of the sidewalks.



7) When pedestrians are crossing on a green light, most of the drivers show their courtesy by honking like crazy, making you aware that they are coming and letting you decide whether you should stop or run for your life.

8) A particularly hair raising and bone chilling habit on the abundant two lane roads is passing over the annoying cars in front of you and speeding on the oncoming lane, hoping that the bidirectional traffic really goes only one way. Strangely enough, this illusion rarely lasts more than a few seconds before you are ready for a guaranteed deadly head-on collision. The solution to this madness is always given by the cars in the correct lane, which allow you to re-enter it in the last split second before you die. This is not a specifically Balkan habit, but that's where I experienced it many, many times and I do not recommend driving in southern Europe for anyone with even minor incontinence. There are always safer means for traveling around in the Balkans, such as trains, buses or boats. Watching HD videos at home is also good and far cheaper.