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Snippets from the Balkans

Part 2

By George Kun

9) Croatia has recently joined the European Union, and while a few people make a strong intellectual and political effort to highlight potential advantages possibly in the future, by and large, the general population is quite unhappy about it. All in all the standard of living dropped quite a bit, unemployment is high, prices for food and services are up, and all is blamed on the EU system and restrictions. Even though the Kuna is still the official currency, most major transactions such as real estate, care sales, etc., happen in Euros. Croatia's admission into the EU was contingent upon the implementation of many new rules and regulations that are totally alien to the unruly and bartering spirit and traditions of the Balkans. One of them that I witnessed, in person, is the new strict regulation of the dispensing and sales of medication in the pharmacies. It's not possible to buy almost any drug over the counter, without a doctor's prescription. While walking in town, we bumped into an old friend, and stopped for a coffee. Uncharacteristically for people who sit down for a drink, our friend was in a rush to go to the pharmacy to pick-up some prescription medication. We went with him to the pharmacy, only to find out that they did not have the medication with the prescribed potency, only the double potency. He did try sheepishly to convince the pharmacist to sell him the one with double potency, with the intent to take only half tablets to match the prescribed dose. What he got, was an unpleasant lecture on the dangers and impropriety of his request, let alone its illegal nature. Unfortunately the doctor who prescribed the medications was no longer available since he was rushing to catch the 2:00 pm boat to the island of Šolta, to go to his cottage. We walked out quite disappointed but also pleasantly surprised at seeing some rule of law, not a common or popular thing in the Balkans. I saw from the side walk another easily recognizable pharmacy green cross sign, just about 20 meters away from the one we just walked out of and challenged my friend to a little statistical game to try exactly the same thing in the next pharmacy. He went for it, and we walked there, only to find out that they too, carried only the double dose version of his much needed medication. The only difference was that the pharmacist praised him for the idea of buying the double dose and taking only half the tablet, as something simple and practical under the circumstances. A win-win, and so much for the "stupid" rule of law.

10) Another highly unpopular EU inspired legal novelty was the concept of paying taxes. Any kind of taxes. The ordinary Croatians deeply loathe paying anything to the government, not so much because they can't be bothered with some boring explanation of fiscal discipline and how governments work, but because they have a deep mistrust of the government and the highly corrupt people that are part of it. In fact Croatians, in that way, are not very different from many other nations and countries. The latest crackdown on tax evasion is the legal requirement that receipts be issued by the service provider, for any kind of service (be it having a drink, a snack, using a beach umbrella, getting a massage or a meal in a restaurant). Moreover, the customer has to keep the receipt and show it upon request to the fiscal inspectors while still on premises. The inspectors are literally swarming the public service places and enforcing the penalties, which are quite severe. Until recently, payment for all those types of services was in cash, with no records of any kind, an open season for tax evasion. The new rules and their enforcement, hurt many small businesses and people are truly afraid of indulging in the old ways.

11) Croatians are fun loving people, and even though they like to squeeze as much profit as they can in small business transactions, their Slavic, laid back nature takes over sometimes in unexpected ways. All the major cities and resorts on the Adriatic coast, caught up surprisingly fast and well with tourist services in demand, such as Segway and Bike rentals and organized tours, and one of my favorites, the sea kayak rentals and trips. I took quite a few in Dubrovnik, the jewel of the Adriatic, and the trips included stopovers by a nice beach cave and touring around the island of Locrum.



Small tasty meals were served during the trip, mostly on the beach in front of the cave. At the end of the trip, the paddlers would be pampered with a nice glass of red wine, and getting a second one with a smile, if requested. I noticed for myself, that a big glass of water or lemon juice quenched my thirst much better than wine, and did not get me high, either. I did not mind getting high, but not then and there. I also found out that there was an unadvertised option to book the trip without the wine, making it 10 % cheaper. I booked my second trip without wine and when I got out of my kayak, the group leader, a nice, tall, well-tanned local fellow whom I raced on and off during the trip, approached me with a big glass of wine. I told him immediately that I booked my trip without the wine but he looked at me like I was some social extraterrestrial, and insisted that I have the wine anyway if I didn't want to offend him.



12) After the sea kayaking trip, while walking to my hotel, I was almost run over three times within a half an hour. First by a motorcycle slaloming on the sidewalk and a second time by a truck driving backwards on the sidewalk to get closer to a store he brought supplies for, a third time by a Citroen SUV, whose driver decided to park half way on the side walk, half way on the street, so as to protect his oversized left hand outer mirror from passing cars.

13) People in the Balkans like to talk a lot, mostly to other people. Sometimes to themselves too, long after everybody in the party stopped listening. The "show must go on" and the point has to be made, whether there is one, or not. This is particularly true when going out with friends and drinking is always part of the "fun". When it becomes boring, they easily switch to singing. Chances that all would chime in singing together is very high, and almost guaranteed even if drinks are not being consumed, which is, by the way, very rare.

In all fairness to the Balkan people who like to talk a lot, they equally like to listen a lot. This is particularly true when you decide to answer their questions truthfully. This is really not a difficult task, because one learns that the questions are always the same. They would invariably touch topics like: *Do you have a house or an apartment? How big it is? How many square meters? How big is the backyard? Can you grow your own plants? How about a terrace? What kind of car do you drive? How big is the engine? How much does the car cost in Canada in Euros? How much was the trip to Croatia in Euros, How much money do you make? Is your daughter really married to that guy or just living with him? How often do you go to church? Is your name Canadian or are you Jewish?* The questioning time usually tries my patience and that's where the subjects get changed.

14) I think it is fair to say that the Balkan people usually dislike foreigners. Probably at the core of this sentiment is envy, since they are perceived as having a higher standard of living. The "tourist" specimen from the wider spectrum of foreigners is particularly irritating to the local population since they are perceived as indulging in too much sin such as: constantly complaining and bitching about lack of civilization, and driving up prices for both the real estate and tourist accommodation rentals. The distinction between "our people" and foreigners is very clear and strong anywhere that money changes hands. Typically, when friends accompany you to a restaurant, they would say to the waiter that "oni su naši ljudi", meaning "these are our people". The expectation is that you would get better service and food, larger portions and not be cheated on the bill. Often, if you have a decent mastery of the language, even with a slight accent, the friends would encourage you to "pričaj po naški" meaning "speak our language" to secure better service.

15) If you are a tourist, keeping a low profile with no flashy jewelry or clothing is good, common sense advice, applicable almost anywhere in the world. Still, shabby, cheap clothing will not protect you from beach theft if they see or hear that you are a foreigner. They would steal your pants anyway, not because they are fancy, but because they may have in the pockets valuable documents or money. It happened to me and I had to take a cab back home with just a towel around my wet "Speedo" swimsuit. The friends that took my picture coming out of the sea, did not realize that I would have to go home like that. Well, not exactly, my shirt was miraculously left on the beach.



16) I am not particularly keen on any kitschy souvenirs, particularly the ones with local Balkan ethnic symbols or artwork, if it's made in China. And most, of course, are. I treated myself with a lovely red Croatian sun hat, in the style of a "Tilley" hat, except that it had a Croatian red and white checkered band all around the brim, and a nice Croatian coat of arms in the front. Little did I know how inappropriate and potentially dangerous such a proud display of national symbols can be. My local friend, told me smilingly but tactfully, that these hats are worn only by tourists, and could make me a target for pickpockets who would spot me from a distance. Still worse, the display of any ethnic symbol be it Croat, Serbian or Bosnian Muslim, could trigger unwanted, negative attention. The psychological wounds and tensions from the war, are still lingering among the population of the Balkans. I listened, and I am glad I did. I feel very safe with it, back home in Canada, where running into someone who has the faintest idea about what it is, is very low. Even if they know, it's unlikely they would want to cause any trouble.

17) Like any small nation, Croats too, need and like heroes. Heroes that put the nation on the map, or keep them on the map. Heroes that trigger the admiration and respect of the foreigners, once they hear about them and understand and remember their role and importance for the nation. Naturally, the highest ranking heroes are the ones who made a great contribution to the progress of the world, and are recognized and praised internationally.

One of these people is Nikola Tesla, a real great inventor, a technical genius and visionary, whose achievements are absolutely mind boggling.

Like any genius from a small nation, he needed to work outside his country and get the funding, sponsorship and work environment only available in the USA or other

technologically advanced and rich countries. He ended up getting everything necessary to bring his brilliant projects to fruition and advance some of his most spectacular and controversial science-fiction dreams. He worked closely with another great inventor, Thomas Alva Edison, who happened to be an excellent businessman as well, which Nikola Tesla was not. Arguably, some of Nicola's inventions were appropriated by Edison, who become very rich, on top of being famous. Tesla, less fortunate financially towards the end of his life, stayed nevertheless famous, and maintained an aura of mystery about his life and an enormous fascination with his inventions.

A small museum was built in his memory, in the very picturesque village of Smiljan, his birthplace in today's Croatia. The museum is rather modest, due to grossly inadequate funding, mostly foreign. A nonstop projection of a documentary about Tesla's life and work uses antiquated equipment with granular images and poor sound, which is a real embarrassment. On the flip side, there is a powerful feeling of his ghostly presence everywhere, inspiring awe and humility in the brain of the regular visitor, if patient enough to read the graphic wall panels documenting his life and work. One original exhibit is a chest of fine Plexiglas drawers with Tesla's brilliant thoughts, famous words, vision on life, future and so on, all etched bilingually into the panels. One can pull the drawers, one at a time and delight in the extraordinary wisdom and brilliance of his words.

The only "problem" is that Nikola Tesla was the son of a Serbian Christian Orthodox Priest, and the lovely little church where he preached, is still on the property, along with the museum, the house and the horse stables.

Today's Serbia considers Tesla as one of "theirs", and for complex political, economic and touristic reasons, this creates friction and some strange consequences.

I bought a wooden key chain with the young, handsome Tesla's face on it but could not get a "T shirt" for reasons that I naively believed to be "out of stock".

I was lucky enough to have an enlightening chat with a young student girl working in the Souvenir Shop, who explained to me, that they simply don't carry "T shirts" or any similar wearable memorabilia, because they might cause irritation within the local Croatian population, who still hold indiscriminate nationalistic views and do not want to promote the image of someone who is famous, born there but not considered "one of them". And that was that.

