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## Snippets from the Balkans

### Part 3

By George Kun

18) Montenegro, a former Yugoslavian region, now an independent country that adopted the € immediately after joining the EU, has become known for a rapidly and smartly growing tourist industry that can rely a lot on word of mouth, rather than fancy brochures and commercial advertising. This is, of course, helped by a very high concentration of breathtaking beauty, just about everywhere you go and look, all on a relatively small territory. For a budget-conscious visitor, the low cost of almost everything, such as of decent private accommodation close to the beach for 20 €, or a little bit further inland for 10€ is a major plus, compared to the pricier neighboring Croatia. I took the picture of a street advertisement and even visited the place. Very decent, simple but clean and comfortable. The price was real but the German model Gisele Bündchen was not included, as it turned out, in this shameless scheme of false advertising. Yes, Montenegro has lots of bargains and the only regional challenge is Albania, still underdeveloped, but slowly catching up.



It is amazing what a huge difference little things can make. The use of beach toilets and showers is free, unlike in Croatia, where they still charge you small change or sell you tokens, a real turn-off nuisance. The most praised bonus though, is the free parking in the beach parking lots. As a result, people park there and will very likely spend on food, at the nearby restaurants and food kiosks. Otherwise, they would just drive far enough, outside the paying zone, and eat their sandwiches, drink water from the bottles in the car and relieve themselves for free in the bushes or in the sea. Basic applied human psychology on minor bribing in exchange for major benefits does its magic.

It reminded me of the Canadian style "bribing", where in exchange for fat, sugary doughnuts and diluted coffee in paper cups, one can get crowds of people to shop in a store, or even worse, get the votes in any political election. In this apparently smart approach in attracting the tourist population, one can find some aberrations that can only be explained by greed, stupidity or both. In most supermarkets or even in small road-side food kiosks, one can buy a 1.5 l of bottled water for 0.50 €. One notable exception is the food kiosk by the main bus station where hordes of tourists descend to visit the Sveti Stefan Island.

This is a major attraction and visiting opportunities are scarce, since the actual island is very often closed to the general public for trivial reasons such a Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie's wedding or a birthday party for a Saudi prince, where oil is being served as an appetizer.

Going back to the bottled water, it was sold, or in my case offered for sale for "only" 7€. That was for a 0.5 l bottle. This is only 42 times more expensive than the price charged about 200 m further down the road. I would say the "greed" goes to the vendor, the "stupidity" to the customer.

I fretted over the business model of that deal until I finally got it. The "victims", first time visitors, were coming in organized tours, where free water was included, and the ones that run out of it and were thirsty, just dished out the money, not even bothering to ask the price, and quickly pocketed the change, not even bothering to count it. I witnessed that, and in a very uncharacteristic gesture, I crossed myself, with the eyes skywards.

Another aberration that I could not explain was the admission fees to the two symmetrical beaches on each side of the walking path leading to the island of Sveti Stefan.

The one on the south side charged 50 € admission, the other on the north side, was free and equally stunning. The free one, is below.



And here, below is the paying beach. It is neither better, nor prettier.



19) In Montenegro, buying merchandise in cash, very often gives you a 40% discount over buying the same thing with a credit card. Hard to believe, but it's true.

20) There are other unique things in the republic of Crna Gora or Montenegro, (both mean *Black Mountain*). For a number of reasons (geographical proximity, religious compatibility, strong business and practical sense, economical interests and promiscuity, Montenegro found itself a haven for the mob. Foreign, mainly Russian money laundering, shady business transactions, real estate fraud, luxury car fraudulent dealings, and many other illegal activities, are kept below the radar or done in complicity with corrupt authorities.

One aspect that is very visible to the public is the very high end real estate, in the form of upscale beach front condos, gigantic luxury mansions and estates, some completed and inhabited, others half built and abandoned, and a large amount of all those for sale. Sometimes, the prices are shockingly and dubiously low, priced for very quick sale. Not surprisingly, many qualified buyers are shying away from the suspiciously attractive deals because of uncertainty of the real estate legalities, such as the owner's real identity, undisclosed liens, title, security, stability and safety of the new ownership after the transaction is completed. Too many stories of laundered money, running out of money, crime associated with ownership changing hands, have discouraged people from going for the "bargain". Equally, the abundance of luxury yachts in the harbors and luxury cars in front of the estates is known to be associated with proceeds of crime.



And some yachts behind me, too...



Strangely enough, some of the roads leading to the super luxury mountain side retreats, are dangerously neglected and in a state of total disrepair. Hard to say whether this is for discouraging visitors or because of prematurely running out of the laundered money. There is even a village for Russian "business people" called Царское Село" or the Tsar's village, the big sign at the gates being in Russian, and so is everything else in that compound. Two of these Russian properties are shown below.





21) Traditionally, the price of gasoline in Europe used to be about double the price in Canada. Many cars in the Balkans and elsewhere in Europe, are now converted to an interchangeable dual fuel system (standard gasoline and LNG, liquefied natural gas). The LNG costs about half the price of the regular gasoline and thus is cheaper than in Canada and even USA.

22) The billing system in restaurants and cafes in the Balkans, is quite different from what we are used to in North America. The waiter would bring a bill for each and every new item ordered, and place it under the ubiquitous ashtray on every table. At the end of a meal, one can easily accumulate ten to twelve bills. When it comes to paying, the person who picks-up the tab, may need to engage into a strenuous mental addition exercise, and will get an approximate idea of the total cost. After that, the waiter would do the same, usually much faster and let you know how much it is. Unless there is a major discrepancy, the customer would pay, as told.

It is very unusual to share the bill, usually it is paid by one person, unless the bill is very high. It is assumed that the people around the table will take turns, over time, but in reality this only happens with closely knit groups that go out frequently, together. None of the "fumbling" with chipping in for your share, like in North America.

23) Eating out offers great opportunities for both mind boggling frustration and fun. My wife and I are great octopus salad lovers, and we found that Croatians are true experts in preparing and serving this delicious dish. After we tasted this salad at least 30 times in about 15 different restaurants and also homemade at friends' homes, we got a very good idea about the taste, portion size, octopus content and fair price for such a treat. One night we discovered a nice eatery

that we've never been before, right in the center of town, in Split. We looked around, inside and liked the atmosphere, setting, creative decor and the faces of the polite but fast moving waiters. We were quickly seated by a well-mannered host and soon thereafter a young, handsome and tall waiter come to take the order. We noticed on the menu that the Octopus Salad was pricier than we were used to, but we assumed that either the size or a fancier recipe would justify that.

We ordered one and soon our waiter brought us a plate with a nice red mound of diced tomatoes. I looked in disbelief, than took a fork and started gently poking through the tomatoes, until I isolated all five gloriously small pieces of octopus in that large mass of diced tomatoes. We were in good mood and decided to turn our complaint in a disguised entertainment show. I called the waiter to our table and asked him politely, with a simulated curiosity "why do they call in this restaurant a tomato salad, an octopus salad?" The waiter appeared to be puzzled and said: "But this is an octopus salad". I continued with "So why did the octopus run away? Can you catch it and bring it back?" "Sorry, Sir" he said, "but this is how the cook makes it, I just bring the food". "And you are sure you haven't spilled the octopus from the salad on your way from the kitchen to our table?" I added. He was all red in his face then turned his head slightly, looking down at the floor toward the kitchen as if checking for bits of lost octopus. I said, "We had many octopus salads in town, but all of them had more than triple this amount of octopus in them ".

He left and returned again, humble and embarrassed, and asked me what I really wanted him to do. I said: "Nothing really, just tell me honestly why is so little octopus in your salad?" He pondered my question and said: "Because octopus is really expensive".

I wasn't able to stop laughing really loud, and I found his candid opinion hysterically funny.

I added: "But you price it much higher than anybody else in town, and for sure this is not for the extra tomatoes". He looked at me speechless with a truly sheepish grin, and I felt almost sorry for him. I said "that's fine" and he left. We enjoyed a great meal with many tasty dishes, and frankly, even the tomatoes were very delicious.

When the waiter brought the bill, I noticed that they had not charged for the "Octopus Salad. I said "I don't see the charge for the "*Tomato Salad*", is this right?"

"Yes Sir, this is right" he said. I left him a nice tip and continued enjoying the night thinking how easily this "friendly" dialogue could have ended with a broken head (mine, of course) or peacefully , as it did. One never knows.

24) I noticed that in Croatia, the general lack of enthusiasm for the complicated "rule of law" makes life easier and simpler for everybody, including of course, the honest people too, who suffer elsewhere because of the "bad apples".

Many bicycle rental places embrace the "honours system" and rent bicycles with no ID, and no deposits. They just write down by hand whatever first name you tell them, and the time of rental. No particular identifiers on the bikes either, such as colors, logos, plates etc., just a small adhesive sticker with the name of the rental outlet for the renter to remember where to bring it back.

I was really intrigued by the risks of running this business so laxly and had a chat with the owner on Marjan, a beautiful and very large recreational area on a big hill in Split. The owner told me that in the last 10 years, he lost only three bicycles to what might have been theft, but more likely abandonment by exhausted novice bikers, who took the bus...He was renting about 150 bikes a day. No need to harass customers and give himself more paperwork or headaches. I found that quite incredible, but very likely it was true.

25) Equally intriguing was the rental business for kayaks. No ID or deposit there either, because stealing a kayak was even more elaborate work than stealing a bicycle. Here the mindboggling aspect for me was the safety. Life jackets, while available, were totally optional, and if the novice and ignorant renter found that the life jacket was either too hot or too inconvenient or both, he was allowed to venture in the sea without one. No discount though for "no jacket" :-)

26) Beach life in the Balkans is an absolutely essential part of the hedonistic delights in that part of the world, blessed with long summers and mild winters. While sun tanning, walking on the beach, eating, drinking and playing sports or games is very common, swimming in the sea tops it all. The Dalmatian coast is one of the cleanest in the world, with deep blue transparent water and mostly calm sea, protected by many beautiful islands while the presence of the hordes of tourists literally invading the beaches of the Dalmatian coast in the summer is routine and expected, the local population is equally present and active on the beaches. After a typical work day, many people would head to the beaches straight from work and enjoy their time till dusk.

In time, people, be it tourists or locals learn the hard way that the beach life is far from just recreation. It also includes intense "business" activities for petty thieves, pickpockets and various schemers and crooks.

Those people are very creative, and always ahead of the last year's learning.

This summer, shoe and purse theft was conducted with new methods. Typically, a very cute looking and friendly girl aged 5, would approach a sunbathing couple and sweet-talk the woman into allowing her to try on and walk in her city shoes, particularly if they looked expensive. Most people carried to the beach both beach sandals and better shoes for going to the city, after the beach. Usually it was the man in the couple who got all excited about the prospect of having fun



by watching the little girl walking in the sand with his partner's grossly oversized shoes. The unsuspecting woman would agree most of the time, particularly with the man's support. The little girl would walk briefly until the repetitive fun would lose both appeal and focus, then quickly take them off and run away with the shoes, surprisingly fast and far, where her mother and coach would take over the loot.

An even more sinister scheme was practiced, when the woman's purse was stolen while all attention was focused on the "funny" girl walking with the funny big shoes. Usually in this scheme, the shoes would be returned, but by then the third party accomplice would be far away with the stolen purse.

27) Not unlike the beach life, the open fruit and vegetable market has its own peculiarities with ample manipulation opportunities. If one stares with appetite at a huge water melon in the fruit market, before even asking about the price, the vendor will cut a pyramid shaped wedge from the middle of the melon and serve the bright red taster off the tip of his sharp knife. Usually the wedge tastes sweet and juicy, and this along with the custom cutting the melon "for the customer only", leads invariably to two things: a) "melon sold" and b) melon overpriced. Again, for "that customer only".

28) As often in life, timing is everything and this is particularly true in the open food market. If one happens to be there around closing time in the afternoon, one will be harassed by all vendors to buy anything and everything, for a small fraction of the morning price. If one voluntarily buys some fruit or vegetables, they'll top it up with what's left on the counter for an extra small token cost.

The reason is simple. It is too much of a hassle to carry any produce back home, sometimes quite far away from the city. I verified this technique, by trying to return the "top-up" produce, with the excuse that it was too much to carry, and not wanting to pay the token extra cost either. Every time with no exception, the farmer vendor refused to take back anything, and did not care much about not being paid extra either.

29) Most of the food on the open market is fresh and tasty. Still lots of sensitive fruits and vegetables are chemically sprayed and treated against bugs and various pests. There is a wide spread myth, particularly among agriculturally ignorant foreigners that in the Balkans, on the open market, everything is 100% organic. The fresh taste and natural aromas of most of the fruits and vegetables helps perpetuate that myth.

I was looking at some heavenly large and beautiful peaches, when an English tourist couple addressed me with a comment like "We buy these peaches every day, they are 100 % organic and taste great". I nodded politely in acknowledgement then I asked the vendor in Croatian if the peaches were organic and non-sprayed. He replied quickly that it was impossible not to spray

the peaches, because they would be damaged by bugs and look ugly and unappetising in no time, so he, whomever tells me otherwise, is a crook.

I thanked him for his honesty, and while I bought some peaches from him, I also asked why those English people were talking nonsense. He said that he tried to explain the truth, but that his English was as bad as those people's Croatian, and since I bought the fruits from him, it did not really matter, anyway.