

**September 2014**

## **Snippets from the Balkans**

### **Part 4**

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30) Once again, documenting myself for the trip to the Balkans, paid off, as it did for any trip, anywhere. Croatia is a relatively small country but has an exceptional variety of natural attractions. While the regular tourists are visiting Croatia mostly for its beaches, there is much more to the country. The mountains and lakes are equally spectacular and one can get a good sense of these treasures of wild and pristine beauty by visiting the National Parks such as Krka, Paklenica, Plitvicke Jezera, Velebit, Mljet and others. A major problem for the visitors who did not do any prior home work is that they may miss out on full enjoyment since most of the parks are poorly equipped with detailed brochures at the Visitors Centre even in full season.

Complementing this deficiency, the personnel are often rude or not very knowledgeable.

The marking of the trails and the signs for reaching some top attractions may be confusing for the inexperienced hiker. Fortunately, even if you get lost, it's still beautiful. On longer trails, there is nobody to whom to ask questions, and conversely, nobody to bother you for breaking the code of behaviour or the rules of the parks. Some people are happy with that but since most of the visitors are true nature lovers, major troubles are rare.

31) A surprising outcome of this nonchalant and, at times, irresponsible "live and let live" principle is the total absence of "life guards" on public beaches. Hard to tell how much is cost saving and how much is life philosophy supporting.

32) The Balkan Paradox could be described and defined in many ways because it has so many facets. One is the very high youth unemployment versus the perception of a comfortable, fun filled and relaxed projected image of this category. The Balkan youth, particularly in Croatia, fills the streets, bars, clubs and restaurants at all times. This young unemployed generation looks healthy, fit, physically attractive and very well dressed in modern fashionable and often expensive clothing. The girls enhance their image with impeccable makeup.

Granted, the lack of gainful employment creates lots of free, available time, and yes, the consumption of food and drinks may be kept low and inexpensive in many entertainment establishments, and yes, some of the flashy and really

expensive clothing may be obtained by morally questionable means, but still, it can't be the case for everybody, and as such it remains a paradox.

I found that most cities and even villages have a main square, or a main street designed for people watching. Places like the "Stradun" in Dubrovnik, or the "Riva" in Split are notoriously attractive and well designed with chic boutiques and outdoor cafes everywhere. They also serve as the socializing heart of the town where the locals would meet or see most of their friends, if they hang around long enough. There is a well-established routine for the dynamics of the place. People who want to meet friends, usually sit and drink at a table, and carefully watch the passersby.



People who don't really want to meet anybody, and use the venue as a true high fashion "catwalk" to turn heads, be admired, photographed, or followed, walk fast enough not to be stopped but slow enough to be duly noticed. Those people are mostly young very attractive women, or jewelry overloaded older women or very flamboyantly dressed gay men. The one common behavioral characteristic they all share is holding their heads high and pretending not to see anybody.



In the summer, the cities and resorts, particularly the ones along the Dalmatian Coast are bustling with colorful street life, entertainment of all kind, arts, music festivals and also folklore and history inspired pageantry. The Roman Emperor Diocletian's festival in Split is one of the most interesting.





During the summer, one will find on the streets and historic squares or "piazas", many talented musicians and bands, mostly local but some from abroad, too. They would play often during the day but especially during the evenings, when people of all ages and walks of life would listen and spontaneously engage in dancing, with abandon.





33) On my trips throughout Croatia, I visited Poreč, the jewel of Istria, a truly unique place. It's built on a scenic peninsula, with a hilltop church, winding narrow cobblestone streets lined with art galleries and exhibitions.

A Salvador Dali exhibition was open at that time.

High end artisanal souvenir shops, boutique style fashion shops, small cafes, restaurants and fairy tale, small villas with dense bright flower growths on the picturesque balconies all added to the town's unique charm. The seaside walk and promenade is long, wide and offers great views of the neighboring small islands, where one can visit and reach by boat, through many organized, inexpensive trips.

On this walk I entered a nice main street fashion boutique where I was greeted by a smiling pretty girl who asked me in Croatian, how she could help me. She spoke with a really thick Russian accent that I found very amusing. Since I did not plan to do any shopping I quickly turned to investigative communication, and I got her full cooperation, since I spoke to her in Russian.

I was more curious about how she got to work there than poking through high fashion rags.

I found out that she was Russian from Ukraine, worked for a minimal wage, lived outside town with five other girls in a two bedroom old apartment and had one day off in a month. Most important, she loved the place both inside and outside, because the boutique was chic, the customers nice and rich, the surroundings heavenly, and the night life excellent. She looked genuinely happy and was dressed like a model. I asked her how she got along with the other roommates and if her earnings were enough to enjoy the life, particularly the night life.

She sized me up with a piercing look, then said with a seductive smile: " I don't see my roommates too much, nor do I have many expenses. I am invited all the time for dinners on the nice yachts in the harbor and I am getting breakfast there too, before going to work. I successfully refrained from the spontaneous idiotic urge to ask sarcastically about the yacht program between dinner and breakfast. Instead, I asked about local competition. What about young Croatian girls who need jobs?

She said: "I have many local Croatian, unemployed friends and that's how I keep improving my Croatian. Most of them don't really want to work, they complain that the jobs in the stores are much too poorly paid". "So how do they get by?" I asked. She replied "I really don't know and I don't ask, but I meet many of them at dinner, on the yachts..." I thanked her and left. I stopped at three more boutiques, and said "Good Day" in Russian, and all the store keepers greeted me back in perfect Russian, no Croatian accents...

34) Almost anywhere you walk on the streets of the towns, cities and villages in the Balkans, you see colorful laundry hanging to dry on racks outside the windows, or on long ropes, stretched between buildings, sometimes even crossing the streets. They use a simple system of pulleys to stretch and retrieve the laundry. The combination of warm climate, small apartments and low budgets explain the lack of electric dryers in most places. I saw however, intimate lingerie hanging above gorgeous and aromatic flowers, and I'm sure no dryer freshener sheets sold in the North American stores would be able to compete.

