

Eastern Europe has emerged from hard times and welcomes visitors to experience its treasures.

Horse-drawn wagons trundled slowly through fields as farmers tossed basketball-size cabbages high onto growing heaps for sale at roadside stands. Old women garbed head-to-toe in black tended backyard pigs as my husband, Eric, and I swerved around a wooden donkey cart carrying a sun-burnished dad and two boys. They were scenes that would have looked familiar in Roman times.

Eastern Europe is an enigmatic place of traditional villages caught in time, yet it's also a place of renewed vigor, with modern wind turbines sprouting on barren plains and bustling cities rising after sobering late-20th-century struggles. In Romania, we learned that most of today's rural dwellers own a car as well as a horse and cart; nearly everyone—even kids as young as 6—has a cell phone; and Bill Gates opened a tech support center in Bucharest.

Any preconceptions we may have had were swiftly

Revolutionary Romania, Beguiling Bulgaria

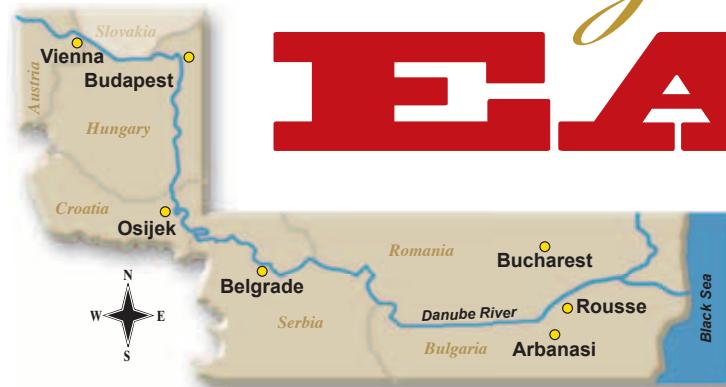
We began our journey in Bucharest, Romania, at Revolution Square, renamed following the 1989 revolution that overthrew the country's dictator, Nicolae Ceaucescu. Looking up at the massive, Soviet-style parliamentary buildings he erected that loom over the city, I found it amazing that individual citizens were brave enough to speak out for freedom.

This land has been much fought over throughout history, yet a sense of peace and tranquility was palpable as we toured the wildlife-rich Danube Delta; traveled back in time at Bucharest's visually stunning outdoor Village Museum; sipped Pinot Gris at Romania's largest winery, Murfatlar; and viewed spectacular Roman mosaics at the Museum of Natural History and Archaeology in the Black Sea port of Constanta.

It was heartening to see the history that's been preserved throughout Eastern Europe. In Bulgaria, Eric

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Rising in the EAST



dismantled as we traveled east to west, from Europe's largest and best-preserved delta—in Romania, where the fabled blue Danube fingers the Black Sea—through Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia and Hungary to the grand palaces of the erstwhile Hapsburg Empire in Vienna.

Along the way, I was repeatedly struck by the warmth and perseverance of the people, who shrug at the misfortunes of the past and look to the future, moving from war to peace, from poverty to prosperity. History unfurled before our eyes like a sepia-toned newsreel as we took in the sobering lessons of war and reconciliation.

and I were dumbfounded as we walked inside the entrance of the stooped, stone 16th-century Nativity Church in the cobbled hillside village of Arbanasi. As our eyes adjusted to the dim light, we saw thick-walled, vaulted rooms, every square inch painted with biblical scenes—more than 3,000 of them—embellished with gold-leaf frescoes. A vibrant wheel of life on one wall depicts life cycles from childhood to old age, with the oldest falling off the wheel to come face to face with a white angel and a dark angel.

In the Bulgarian river-port city of Rouse, we enjoyed two national specialties—lamb and chili-studded chicken stew—at the eatery Chiflika, where our dinner-time entertainment was the colorfully translated English menu—“sheep's head boneless,” anyone?—and a wedding, complete with white-swathed bride and family members dancing a lively line dance to flutes, bagpipes and drums.

After, we joined throngs of families, boys with arms



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Belgrade's Temple of St. Sava (left) is dedicated to the saint who founded the Serbian Orthodox Church; he was burned on the site by Ottoman Turks in 1595. Shoppers to the city, meanwhile, will find a blend of traditional greengrocers (below) and modern, upscale malls.



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flung over each others' shoulders and girls holding hands to stroll the tree-shaded promenades of the ribbon-like city park, the Danube flowing peacefully alongside.

Under Serbia's Spell

As we entered Serbia's capital, Belgrade, it was impossible to miss the heart of the city's mangled buildings, destroyed during the 1999 NATO bombing that sought to unseat then-president Slobodan Milosevic. He was finally deposed during huge public demonstrations in October 2000.

Our guide, who called himself Sir John because “My name is too hard to pronounce, so this is what my London friends call me,” told us about his personal involvement in history: “Milosevic lost the election, but for some reason, he didn't understand. So we decided to help,” he said. “One million people faced 80,000 police, and no one was killed.”

Music greets visitors to Romania's prestigious, award-winning Murfatlar Vineyard (above) near Constanta, while in Bucharest, visitors can drink in views of more than 50 authentic buildings and traditional interiors representative of the country's history at the Village Museum (below).



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The magnificent, hilltop Temple of St. Sava is, in its own way, a memorial to peace—it's being built, stone by stone, by the contributions of individuals who offer their gold heirlooms to be melted down to create the church's icons. "We'd been waiting 500 years to build this church; we are not building the church, it is building us," said Sir John.

Nearby, at the Ethnographic Museum, regional folk costumes that would once have been commonly seen in the Sunday pews are a visual treat; rich embroidery and silver medallions embellish elaborate, deep-scarlet dresses and cloaks.

Eric and I joined the parade walking streets every bit as chic as those in any European capital, with elegant 19th-century facades housing upscale shops, cafes and bakeries. In a green market, I held up a small cluster of wine grapes and gestured, "How much?" The walnut-faced elder shook her head with a smile, urging me to take them.



In Budapest, the capital of Hungary, I floated blissfully in soothing mineral water in a humid, elaborately tiled chamber at the famous Gellért Thermal Baths. Later, in the city's cobblestoned historic district atop Castle Hill, I was enchanted by the iconic raven that tops the steeple of the Gothic, 14th-century Matthias Church. And at Hero's Square, at the statue portraying the seven horseback-mounted Magyar chieftains who led the Hungarians to their promised land, we chuckled to see the site taken over by teens on unicycles trying out their latest tricks.

The next day, in Vienna, home to Johann Strauss and the Spanish Riding School's famous white Lipizzaner stallions, it seemed that entire mountains of snow-white marble were sculpted into myriad grand monuments and elegant buildings during the Hapsburg Empire. Yet it was the mountains of whipped cream atop our apple strudel and chocolate-almond torte at the renowned bakery Demel that drew my attention momentarily as Eric and I shared our impressions of

Hungary's famous Castle Hill District (left) is found in the Buda portion of the three cities collectively known as Budapest. In Vienna, Demel bakery (below) has been delighting customers with tortes, tea scones and candied violets since 1786.



From Croatia on to Austria

In the market town of Osijek, Croatia, where many churches bear machine-gun divots from past armed struggles, we asked our guide, Biljana, whether people are happy now that the former Yugoslav Republic is divided. "Today, we have 22 national minorities," she said. "But we live in peace—life is too short to hate."

There's peace aplenty at the Kopacki Rit Nature Reserve, where a riverboat cruise through tunnels of willows offered glimpses of the vivid turquoise-and-orange common kingfisher. The surrounding countryside yielded many painterly scenes en route to our destination—the winery Obiteljska Vinarija Josic. Fields of sunflowers turned their faces toward the late-afternoon sun, and strings of chili peppers strung along porch eaves blazed crimson in the slanting rays.

this small part of the globe that holds such a broad cross-section of people and histories, all now striding peacefully into the future.

Planning Your Trip

The Danube River flows through much of Eastern Europe, making a riverboat cruise an enjoyable, convenient way to visit this region; itineraries from Bucharest to Vienna typically take 10 days. Contact AAA travel partners Azamara Club Cruises at www.azamarclubcruises.com and Uniworld River Cruises at www.uniworld.com to learn more about Danube River cruises. Then visit your local AAA Travel agent or AAA.com/travel for assistance.

H&A

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