

**Travel
Dispatches**
from
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&
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Bratislava

Summer 2018



TO OUR READERS:

You will note that this trip to Bratislava took place in 2018. The dispatch has been sitting "in the can" for some time, due to various factors, not the least of which are the difficulties we have had finding a way to communicate after our website host shut down. However, the main reason is that, right after our time in Bratislava, while we were in Vienna, our trip was interrupted by some unexpected circumstances, and the writing was put on the back burner. For a long time!

But we loved our time in Bratislava and want to preserve that memory at the same time that we share it with you. Hope you enjoy the trip!



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We left magical Česky Krumlov on a morning bus back through the fertile Czech countryside. We arrived at Prague's huge and bustling train station, where talented young people enjoyed playing classical pieces on the piano. Public pianos, like this one, are common in European train stations and there's often a talented musician nearby to make use of it. We got some lunch



and caught our next train to a place that's seldom mentioned by US tourists. We're heading off the well-worn tourist trail again, to Bratislava, the home town of a friend of ours named Caroline.

It was a fine and sunny day to watch the landscape go by. Or even to take a short nap beside another of the many happy sunflower fields that we find all over Europe. We passed through





Brno, in the broad farmlands of the Moravian section of the Czech Republic. It was just a bit east of here, in the

strategic hills near a small town that was then called Austerlitz, where the Battle of the Three Emperors was fought. The date was December 2, 1805 (11 Frimaire An XIV on the new French Republican/Revolutionary Calendar) when Napoleon's Grand Armée defeated Emperor Alexander I of Russia, and the Holy Roman Emperor Francis II in what was known as his greatest victory, and which generated the often abused quote, "Never interrupt the enemy when he's in the middle of making a bad mistake." Napoleon fought more than 70 battles and lost only 8, including his final defeat at Waterloo in Belgium in 1815. Today, one of the larger train stations in Paris, the Gare d'Austerlitz, commemorates the battle, yet one more historic



event in the fraught evolution of modern Europe. And those reminders are a constant in our travels

here. Soon this slice of history was behind us and we arrived at the modest Bratislava station, with its exuberant welcome sign.



Again Carolyn had found us a nice apartment, just a block from the main plaza. We'll be right near the embassy of Monaco, although it's unlikely we'll be invited to any important receptions! And



we're only a couple of doors from the classical old concert hall, but sadly there's nothing playing in early July.

Our well-equipped apartment has a radio – an actual radio!! It's an older classic model that brings us the local jazz and blues station all day, when we stay in to get some reading and posting



done. They play Dave Brubeck, Vince Guaraldi, Al Jarreau, even James Brown and his Band of Renown – plus Slovak-language versions (I guess?!) of “Sweet Home Chicago,” “Hand Jive,” and other pieces. And we’re getting the news in Slovak these days, which somehow sounds better than news about the current corrupt US Congress in English.

We’ll make delicious daily breakfasts of good dark bread and local cheese, plus nuts and jams, as we listen to the birds in trees outside our window. We’ll drink our juice from shot glasses in the



cabinet. And our daily vitamins, in their neat little plastic cartons, are ever with us. By shopping in a nearby Billa

store (an Eastern European chain), we become more familiar with daily local life and save ourselves a bit of money. Kids on some kind of field trip are sitting with teachers on the steps outside the store.



We quickly find that un-glamorous and uncrowded Bratislava on the banks of the storied, if muddy, Danube, is what we’d hoped for after a couple of months traveling through lots of glorious places. This place has no overabundance of ‘must see’ monuments and palaces and museums. There’s just enough historical and interesting stuff to keep us busy, and charming streets to wander, but not enough to overwhelm us. A popular guidebook says, “...to be honest, more than a few of the museums are quite boring.” This sounds like our kind of place, since we’re kind of museumed-out by now.



We’ll see gorgeous buildings, and monuments to war heroes and Alexander Dubcek, with enough labels written in Slovak to challenge us. At least it’s a bit like Russian, in which we actually know a few words. There are art galleries with





stuff we can't afford (and couldn't carry anyway!), on an umbrella-covered street that's a delight to us and others.

We'll spend the next few days exploring the core of the city and gain a greater understanding

of its historical genesis. Generally speaking, the city of Bratislava appears well-kept and reasonably prosperous, although that wealth is apparently not evenly spread throughout the country. According to a note in Wikipedia:

"In 2017, Bratislava was ranked as the third richest region of the European Union by GDP (PPP) per capita (after Hamburg and Luxembourg City). GDP at purchasing power parity is about three times higher than in other Slovak regions."



Here, as elsewhere, there's a stark divide between highly-productive cities and traditional rural areas.

Bratislava has

been a magnet for talented people from the countryside since it was known as Pressburg, an important and mostly-German hub in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After the two major wars of the 20th Century, and the expulsion of millions of German refugees, large areas of Eastern Europe were resettled by Slavic peoples in the 1950s and many of the place names were changed, along with their relative economic importance. Today Bratislava, with a population of less than 500,000, receives around 1 million tourists every year. Nearby Vienna, with a population of around 3 million, sees more than 8 million tourists per year.

So it's a nice town to relax in for a few days, to catch up on some writing, and to see things at our leisure. And we'll enjoy more than a few dinners out under warm summer skies in the pedestrian-friendly center city. Then we'll stop for a delicious ice cream before heading back to our comfortable apartment.



This is a city of culture, and posters for classical musical events and productions are common – alongside every kind of head-banger sounds you'd also like to hear.



And monumental graphic art is deployed freely to dress up some of the more bland facades around town.



A nice day finds us exploring the streets nearby, with their blend of buildings, old and new. Some are lushly shaded by beautiful trees, some entries are truly monumental, and workers are rebuilding some of the brick sidewalks. Then



there are poster boards advertising every kind of classical event, and enticing us to stop for lunch.



Soon we're at the doorway to

EuroVia, the huge and modern river-side mall near the city center. Many of the people entering with us look much like fashion models, as we remain happily comfortable in our frumpy and well-traveled clothes. Under the glass roof there's a Starbucks (of course), book stores, sculpture, a

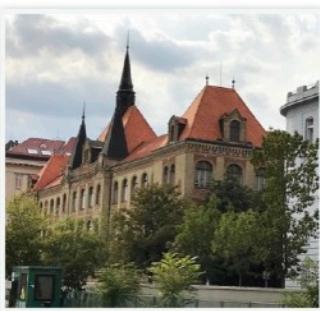


contingent of the local goth kids – and the first and only Bitcoin ATM we've ever seen. We have no idea how that all works and have no inclination to learn. If I put my card in, do I get some Bitcoins back? And what would I do with them?



On the river side of the mall, the parade of interesting people continues as we make our way past more of the city's classical architecture. Along the river bank we gaze at the broad and swiftly flowing Danube below and at some of the watercraft tied to the bollards. The city's famous, and famously ugly, 'UFO bridge' spans the river. Somewhere along here is where we'll board the

ferry in a few days and depart upstream for Vienna. We're told that the fabled 'Blue Danube,' is somewhere up beyond Vienna. Along here, the river is a sort of greenish brown.



We head back inland toward the old city center, past a poignant WWII monument. Everywhere in Europe such monuments are common, the memories are long and the wounds are still deep, whether it's a war that just ended or one from a hundred years ago. History tells us that war is a human constant, as well as our inability to learn any enduring lessons from it all.



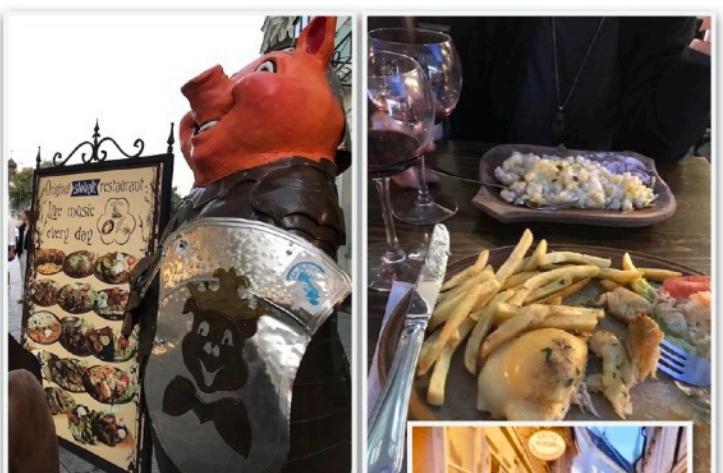
It's been a good long walk and now it's time to just hang out somewhere. We find an open plaza with a good jazz band and some available chairs. This is the kind of reward we get for wandering



from town to town. We settle in to enjoy some good tunes in the sweet main plaza, surrounded by colorful buildings and delectable shops, and to watch kids climbing onto a sculpture of a soldier from Napoleon's army.



Now we're hungry and looking for some local food. We decide to take a chance on 'Original Slovak Restaurant,' fully realizing it's a tourist trap. With any luck, we'll score a heaping plate of Slovak home cooking, which we can guess will prominently feature pork and potatoes, and maybe some greens. And when it arrives it's not gourmet, but it's not bad, especially with a glass or two of good Slovak wine.



After dinner we pass a cheerful and tempting sign on our way back to the apartment, but it's late and we've had enough good wine already to last us well into the nighttime. Maybe another day.



A day outing to the Kamzík Tower seems like a fine way to spend some outdoors time in the nearby forest. This old Soviet-style radio tower looms in the distance above the city and has beckoned us onward for a visit. A short ride on the Kamzík bus gets us past much of the uphill slog, and drops us at the end of the line. From here it's a matter of figuring out which upward pathway leads to the Tower, and which go to the various ski runs and lifts. We're surprised at just how close the center of the city is to the outdoors, and it's all so easily accessible by a cheap ride on a city bus.



We pass a sign indicating we're on the Jakubská cesta - západ, the 'Lesser Slovakia Way,' via Trnava and Bratislava up the Danube to Vienna. It's an eastern European section of the Camino de Santiago (Le Chemin de St Jacques de Compostelle, in French), also known as 'The Way,' that ends at the pilgrimage church at Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camino_de_Santiago)

From Vienna, The Way leads westward to Salzburg and Innsbruck to join the Via Jacobi through Bern and Geneva, and connect with the Via



Tolosane in France. We've seen many of these trail markers in northern Spain and Portugal, and in southern France. We were surprised to see the marker here, but recognized the distinctive yellow color and the scallop shell design.

The scallop shells were originally collected on the Spanish coast and brought home as souvenirs by those who had made the trek all the way to the end. Later they became a symbol for pilgrims, to be used as a drinking cup or eating bowl on the pilgrimage. They're still a popular souvenir item, for sale these days at the Compostela shrine. (see James Michener's classic Iberia for more on 'The Way of St James'; also see "The Way," a 2010 movie starring Martin Sheen and Emilio Estevez)

The Kamzík Tower finally appeared through the trees and we knew this was the right pathway. We huff our way uphill to the elevator in the base of the Tower and settle in at a table to order a couple of beverages and enjoy the broad vista over the city and countryside below. A glance at the daily menu indicates that dining here may be an adventure. We can make out words like 'šalát,' 'dressing,' 'sous-vide (kind of),' and 'paprika,' but the rest is a mystery. Anyway, it's only mid-afternoon and we're not ready for dinner yet.



We scan over the city below and that oddly distinctive 'UFO bridge' over the Danube. Just to the right of the bridge sits the large red-roofed hrad, (castle) on the hill overlooking the old city.

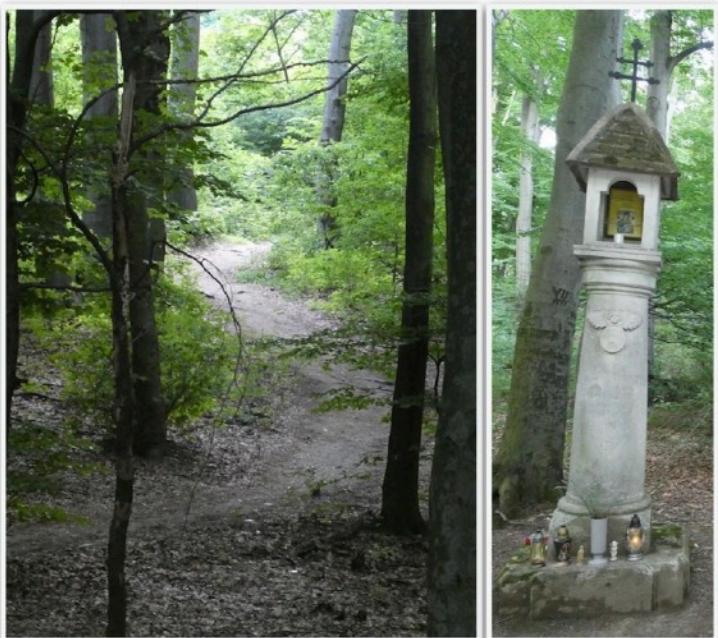


The inverted pyramid of the Slovak Radio Building is a particularly recognizable feature in the city. It was completed in 1983; it's 80 meters tall; it contains a 522-seat concert hall with a large concert organ; and it's been listed as one of the 30 ugliest buildings in the world. (Listed #23 by The Telegraph: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/lists/ugliest-buildings-in-the-world/slovak-radio-building/>) That alone ought to be a good-enough reason to visit Bratislava.

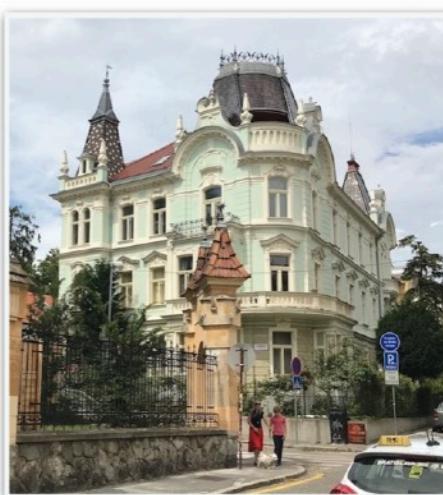
Off toward the western horizon the broad Danube stretches upstream through misty hills toward the fabled city of Vienna, our next stop. **A trip to the bathroom is an unexpected delight** as the view from the urinals is expansive, and even the toilets are furnished with a porthole so you don't miss anything – including anyone who may happen to be walking by and might choose to peer in at you sitting there.



We enjoy the hike back downhill through the woodlands past a few roadside memorials without taking the bus, and without running afoul of several hearty bikers chuffing up the roadway.



Our way back down into the city takes us through winding hillside streets, passing beautiful old homes, artistic grillwork and doorways, and backyard gardens. And a polished brass sign by the doorway of the Russian Consulate.





It's been a good afternoon hike and now we'll look forward to another fine evening at dinner under the stars. We'll be on a quiet street and surrounded by a wide range of languages we don't speak or understand. And that's a great place for world travelers to be.



As most castles go, the Bratislavski Hrad is a fortress on a commanding hilltop overlooking the world below. Heroic statues stand at the doorway.

We've been to a few castles and feel no real need to see another vast collection of ancient objects, but the views to the river and city are worth the effort. A forest of wind generators stands in the distance beyond the city's edge, as most of Europe moves closer to a green energy economy. And there are many fine spots for contemplation on battlements and walkways. A cobblestone pathway winds down the hillside past a nicely-crooked house and several good



Bratislava's Hrad (castle) has been brooding on the hill above us for several days now and it's time we went up to see it. The hike looks doable but our knees aren't as good as they used to be, so we decide to hop the bus that stops there. We can walk down later.



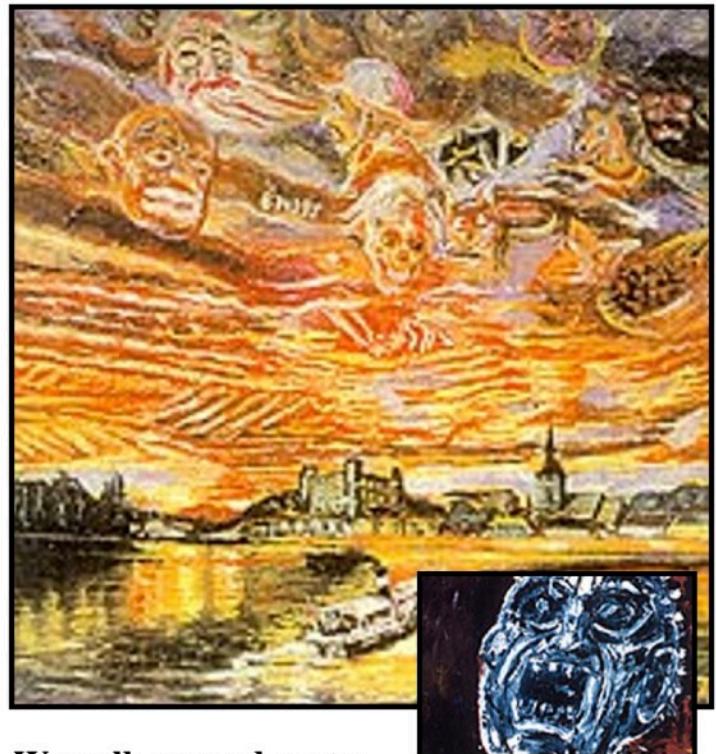
bistros, back through the remains of the old Jewish Quarter, under an intrusive Soviet-built expressway, and into the heart of the city.



Bratislava's old center city is a great place to wander in the evening. There's a quiet party atmosphere in the air and there's plenty to see. As in most European cities, there

are many reminders of the horrors faced by Jews at the hands of the Nazis and their

blind followers. Adolf Frankl, the artist, managed to survive the camps and later documented his experiences in "Visions from the Inferno." The tortured faces of the dead surely still swirl in the sky above his beloved city of Bratislava.



We walk onward, past a Mexican restaurant (we don't stop), and then past the bronze statue of Schone Naci, a genial top-hatted gentleman who was a well-known fixture here in the 18th Century. A Croatian lady in a colorful red-white hat (the Croatian national colors) is sitting at a cafe and is focused intently on one of the final games of the World Cup. Sadly, the valiant Croatian team finally lost, but it was an amazing effort.



After all that, another wonderful dinner is in store, at a corner bistro as the world passes by our table.



On our way back to bed we pass another curious bronze statue, known as 'The Watcher.' This guy peeks out from a manhole at the crowd going by, and a young lady strikes a pose to get her picture with him.



In the apartment we enjoy some quiet moments, a few cookies and chocolates, and a nightcap of good Troyanska Sloviva that we bought at a nearby store.



A fine and quiet Sunday morning beckons us out for a leisurely stroll to experience the city at rest. And it seems like the best time to search out the nearby 'Blue Church.' It's part of a gorgeous Nouveau confection that includes a caramel-colored school. The church remains well-tended, and well-attended – it's very popular for weddings.





The leafy streets around the church draw us onward past an interesting wine bar, a poster for poor lost 'Andy,' and sparrows pecking at gravel in a park near a statue-fountain of nude young boys chasing geese.



A EuroR/V passes us at a corner as we check out the trolley fare machine. We wander onward, past a 'Donuteria' that sells the 'Best Donuts in Town.' And then there's the Korean Embassy. It says so right on the plaque out front. Or something like that. We guess. Our Slovak is a bit rusty. Also, our Korean.

We finally stop for coffee and a delicious late breakfast at a cafe named for Ludovit Stur, a Slovak poet, philosopher and patriot, and the guy they also named the street for. And it's a good place to stop and watch the trams and the rest of the world go trotting by.



After breakfast we go onward in search of a small nightlight to illuminate dark corners of various rental apartments for late-night bathroom visits. The large central department store has a bit of everything, including a wide array of electrical extensions and supplies. And we spot a rack of plug-into-the-computer LED lights that will do the job well – and they only cost €1.99 each.



The place also has a massive Lego selection that would keep any grandson happy, and a Desigual shop where a granddaughter can help grandma pick out some great clothes.



But this is our last day in town and we're on a mission, almost a forced march, to see as much of this interesting city as we can before departure. We wish we'd seen the poster for Jazz Night at the Luna Bar earlier in our visit. It looks like the kind of place we'd love to hang out in. And we pass through an artistic section of the city, with



discarded art pieces on the sidewalk, wishing we'd planned to stay longer. Somehow I bet we'd learn to speak enough Slovak to get by here.



And then we find a well-stocked bookstore

(Danielle Steele! In Slovak!) plus more leafy passages for lingering, and a sign for the Three Musketeer Restaurant. Now who could resist that – if given the time?



But we have plans for a very nice final dinner, at an interesting Georgian restaurant far from Tbilisi, on a quiet pedestrian street back in the city center. So as the evening falls, we'll raise our glasses – and our forks – to an excellent side trip to the often-overlooked city of Bratislava. And we'll follow up with a visit to the very popular Luculus ice cream shop and a stroll beneath the trees back to our fine little apartment.



Next up: a cheap ferry ride upstream on the broad Danube to the fabled city of Vienna.

— PRW